

## Introduction: Williams and Modernity

Cultural materialism is the name Raymond Williams gave to a series of theoretical and methodological perspectives that he worked out for the critical analysis of culture. He suggested that there is an important relationship between what is happening in a society, and the content of the cultural forms produced by that society. Moreover, the central proposition of cultural materialism is that this relationship is not merely reflexive or post-dated. Cultural forms and especially literature do not just reflect other events in society. The creation of these things is also a material part of the make-up of the society.

The text in which Williams most succinctly propounded the central themes of cultural materialism was *The Country and The City* (1973). As an example of how writing plays an active part in social and historical processes, that study shows us how English literature became involved with a putative national tradition throughout the period of modernisation, from about 1550 (the early modern period) to about 1880 (the period of high nationalism and imperialism).

Williams in *The Country and The City* looks at the tradition of country house writing, and probes its role in idealising the social order of early capitalist Britain. He showed that texts such as Shakespeare's *The Tempest* or *Henry V*, or Jonson's *To Penshurst* are related to the political and social order of the day. By performing certain ideological and symbolic work, they contribute directly to its creation, and play a specific part in the dissemination of a poetics of nationhood.

Williams demonstrated that the relationship between writing and social order was dialectical. Events in the society give rise to their depiction in poetry; at the same time, the idealisation that occurs in poetry strengthens and helps to cement the social order. This was true not only of the period in which the unified British nation-state was being created, but also of the period of empire. In other words, *The Country and The City* draws an implicit connection between the processes of nation-building at home and of empire-building overseas. Implicitly then, the break-up of empire might be related to an accompanying break-up of the nation-state itself.

Raymond Williams's thinking about nationhood is best understood within the context of a range of theorising on that subject that took place on the political left during the 1970s. We know that Williams had read Michael Hechter's important study *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536–1960* (1975) by the end of that decade.[i] Similarly, he had read Tom Nairn's seminal text *The Break-Up of Britain* (1977) by the time of the 1979 referenda in Scotland and Wales.[ii] We know moreover that Williams was interested in probing the dialectical relationship that exists between writing and political change. Looking back over the course of Williams's career with these facts in mind, it becomes apparent that examining the relationship between writing and the break-up of Britain was a consistent and important strand in Williams's thinking.

Other strands of course were there from the beginning. As a socialist political activist, Williams was interested in electoral reform; the education system; the relationship between technology and culture; and above all, the ongoing need to resist the inequalities thrown up by capitalist society. Patrick Brantlinger has described his early work *Culture and Society* (1958), along with Richard Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* (1957) and E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working*

*Classes* (1961), as the ‘founding texts’ of British left-wing cultural analysis.[iii] Previous studies such as Andrew Milner’s *Cultural Materialism* and Anthony Easthope’s *Literary into Cultural Studies* have dealt with these important aspects of Williams’s work in detail.[iv] The present study is the first to concentrate solely on the relationship between writing and the break-up of Britain as it was implicitly expounded in Williams’s work.

Williams began his career with a fascination in the experience of cultural, political and economic modernity. This led him into an examination of the historical process of modernisation in general, and the modernisation of the nation-state in particular. This involved complex analysis of the interplay between the practices of nation-building, capitalism and imperialism. The goal of his historical analysis was to develop a sense of how the nation, and in particular the national interest, can be rethought. Williams emphasised the fact that nationhood had originally been imagined into existence in part through its literature and cultural forms. Accordingly, to produce a different kind of literature is to imagine a different kind of nation.

Late in his career, Williams began advocating political self-rule in Scotland and Wales, and – crucially – in the English regions. He envisaged this to be part of the long revolution towards finding democratic processes. Cultural materialism is a theory capable of explaining the part played by cultural forms in contributing to such historical developments. In order to understand precisely how the theory can be used to shed light on the process of political break-up in Britain, it is necessary to go back to the beginning of Williams’s thinking on the subject, and examine the ways in which Williams understands the history of the British state.

### Williams, Nation-State and Modernity

To Williams, the nation-state was fundamentally an organ of cultural and political modernity. He suggested that the development from *nation* to *state* is analogous with the whole history of modernity. This draws in all sorts of related histories, from the development of technologies of transport and communication, to the experience of rapid urbanisation; and from the development of political and economic institutions to modernist cultural forms such as the newspaper, the novel, and the cinema. Modernisation is the term by which Williams understands these and a myriad other developments. Their sum-total is the modern nation-state.

The term *nation* implies a people, rather than a state. The organisation of a nation of people into a political *state* was heavily dependent on two factors: the developing technologies of transport and communication; and an element of consciously willed political association – usually carried out by a ruling or powerful elite. Williams draws attention to this drift when he writes:

*A nation* once was unproblematic, with its strong connections with the fact of birth, the fact that a nation was a group of people who shared a *native* land. This meaning was overridden but never destroyed, by the development of the *nation-state*, in which what really matters is not common birth or the sharing of native land, but a specific independent kind of political organisation.[v]

The process of consciously constructing the institution of the state occurred between the early modern period (around 1550) and the late nineteenth century (the period of high imperialism). Throughout that time, an ever greater number of people were being brought within the domain of the organised nation-state.

The work of mediation between impersonal apparatus and scattered population naturally became more complex as the borders of the nation-state and the empire were expanded. Indeed, the slow emergence of modernity through the development of the nation-state can be understood as the coupling of *nation* and *state*. Initially, the people constituted a national body, separate from any concept of a political *state*. It was only the gradual development of a range of centralised political institutions that led to a marriage between these two concepts, bringing a varied population into the fold of the new *nation-state*.

Raymond Williams draws attention to a further term capable of implying both *people* and *state*. This term is *society*, and it was a crucial one throughout Williams's career. Williams points out that the word retained the dual meanings of people in general, and a specific form of political organisation, until the end of the eighteenth century:

If you look through an eighteenth-century writer... and see how he uses the word 'society,' you'll find that in one paragraph he will mean what we would now have to express as 'company' or simply 'being with other people...' He will in the next paragraph be likely to use 'society' to mean... the systematic set of political and general arrangements by which a given people live: society as a social *system*. And this simultaneous use of the same term for quite different meanings has a piece of history in it which may be crucially relevant in the attempt to think nationalist politics in our own generation. (*RH*, p.112).

Until comparatively recently the ideas of a people and of a political organisation were coterminous. The term *society* retained these twin implications until well into the eighteenth century. It was only the process of modernisation as it was enabled by ever-expanding technologies of transport and communication that would bring different peoples into the fold of the nation-state and so separate the immediacy of control that had previously existed between individual or small-scale groups of people and their leaders. The change in meaning of the term *nation*, from a local group of people to a large-scale political organisation, was a recent change. As a result, Williams believed that the nation-state was an organ of cultural and political modernity.

Throughout the period from 1550 to 1850, there were relatively few opponents to the formation of a nation-state as such. Recent historians have examined the ways in which the modern British nation-state was constructed in such a way as to invite loyalty and attachment through the promise of social and cultural cohesion. Eric Hobsbawm for example has shown that all of Britain's supposedly national traditions were invented during the nineteenth century specifically to generate this feeling of loyalty.[vi] Linda Colley's study *Britons* similarly explores how the nation-state was forged on the basis of a contract between political machinery and general population. According to this contract, the people of the nation would give their consent to the process of state-building in exchange for certain intangible features of nationhood: a feeling of belonging, the

pageantry of monarchy, religious festivals, holiday entertainments, and so on.[vii]

Unlike Hobsbawm, and later Colley, Raymond Williams did not devote much attention to the precise history of the political machinery of Britain's nation-state. This is not because he was not interested in that history, but because he was interested in how other histories inter-weaved with it to create the modern British nation. Williams, for example, was aware that the ideological aspect of nation building coincided with the creation of new means of communication and transport. These appeared to offer people unbounded possibilities for social and physical mobility, while also meeting the need for relationship on a broader scale than had previously been possible. Such a situation was naturally conducive to the reification of the nation-state as the primary form of social and political organisation. Since Williams was interested in how cultural forms relate to political and historical processes, he tended to concentrate more on these cultural and technological histories than on the history of the political state apparatus as such. He concentrated on the ways in which political apparatus, cultural forms and technological developments interacted in the generation of the modern nation-state.

The concept of nationhood possessed the minds of the majority of British people. This was so to the extent that the residual eighteenth-century concept of society, as totally separate from state apparatus, collapsed and disappeared. How was it possible for this to happen? How could the very people who had most to lose by the political organisation of a centralised state evince such enthusiasm for it?

Williams believed that one answer to this might relate to the new conditions of urbanisation that developed with the industrial revolution. He notes that 'by 1881 a majority of the British people were living in towns of 20,000 or more inhabitants. London had passed the million mark early in the nineteenth century; by mid-century its population was over two and a half million and by 1900 over six million. The new industrial cities were developing at often even more explosive rates.'[viii] The conditions of living in these new, crowded conurbations, coupled with the hitherto unfamiliar experience of encountering dozens of strangers on a daily basis, created a need for new cultural forms, to enable people to understand the new ways in which they related to one another. This in turn impacted on the kinds of cultural experiences in which the new urban population engaged, as Williams notes:

Within these unprecedented conditions, old oral forms, such as the sermon, were extended and developed; and relatively new oral forms – the outdoor and indoor political meeting, now often of vast size, and the popular lecture series – became central elements of urban culture. (*WCS*, p.124).

If the archetypal nineteenth-century experience was one of a crowd, then this was reflected in the cultural forms of the time. The popular lecture and sermon, and above all the political rally, were kinds of cultural experience that incorporated a far greater number of people than had previously been the case. It was also the period during which modern large-scale spectator sports began to take off: 'Again, from mid-century, organised sport, especially football and horse-racing, developed within the new urban culture.' (*WCS*, p.125).

Such activities contributed to a situation where many more people could attend or participate in

the same cultural activity than previously. These developments alone, however, do not explain how new cultural forms could enable a diverse body of people to conceive of themselves as part of a wider nation-state. Indeed, the drift away from earlier versions of the nation, identified by social relationships at a purely local level, was dependent on the replacement of this experience of assembly. The new large-scale concept of the nation-state rested on opportunities for people to participate in common cultural experience *without* the need for such mass meetings.

Raymond Williams suggested that one of the ways in which this began to occur was through the social extension of drama. Drama had residual associations with organised religion and worship, and consequently was rooted in earlier, pre-modern conceptions of society, where it had been religion – coupled with the social structure of a rural aristocracy – that had provided the main elements of social cohesion. At the same time, the technical improvements that transformed drama during the industrial revolution also affected its social reach. The new transport networks and comparable advances in commercial activity meant that the touring theatre company and the provincial playhouse became far more prominent elements of British culture. Thus, drama provided a bridge between older medieval concepts of community and the experience of modernisation. As Raymond Williams puts it:

It was in the sixteenth century that drama changed, as a social process, from an occasional to a regular provision. The performance of plays at set times of year, usually as part of a religious festival, came to be replaced by a repertory of productions in new kinds of theatre. In England, for example, the first commercial theatres were built in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, significantly at the approaches to the City of London, to catch a passing as well as a resident trade. Their physical structure followed precedents in performances in the courtyards of inns. Thus the transition from the occasional drama to regular drama was directly associated with a more mobile, trading society. (*WCS*, pp.185–86)

This new drama enabled greater numbers of people over ever increasing distances to engage in the same cultural experiences and to communicate those experiences with each other in new ways. Yet since the social provision of drama was still primarily dependent on the conscious assembly of people in one place at a time, it was not able to unify the nation synchronically.

Two developments became crucial to this process of unification: the new technologies of rail transport, and the emerging cultural form of the modern daily newspaper. The railways, for example, were significant not simply because of their capacity to disseminate commercial freight and merchandise, but also because of the related cultural developments. As Williams points out, the new railway stations became places for meeting and for exchanging news and ideas. They also became mini-markets, and this perhaps was the crucial breakthrough, for it was in the new railway stations that the new cultural forms of the newspaper and the novel were primarily sold. The trains themselves carried these new cultural products around the country, creating a potential for simultaneous communion in cultural experience which far surpassed anything that had preceded it:

it was in the bookstalls at the new stations, notably those of W.H. Smith, that the public

could be reached in a new way. The cheap Parlour Library, and then the Railway Library, poured through this new outlet: the yellow-backs, with glossy covers, illustrated in colour, and carrying advertising on their backs.[ix]

Of course, it was not only the transport of books and newspapers, but also the very opportunity for rapid long-distance travel that created a new sense of social relationship. Williams writes:

there is almost certainly... a crucial differential between urban and rural people, and – within the urban – between London and other cities. Distribution methods, which would flatten these differentials, were not radically changed until the mid-century establishment of the railway network. (WCS, p.123).

The emergence of a national rail network combined the modern technologies of transport with the post-enlightenment need to imagine human relationships on a secular basis. It did not only transport people and goods, but also ideas. Williams's point is that the nation-wide railway system did not simply emerge as a result of the new nineteenth-century sense of the British nation; it also played an active part in generating that sense.

He made a similar point about modern newspapers. The newspaper emerged from the eighteenth century as a local organ, capable of holding together a local community on a relatively small scale by enabling its readers to share communicative experiences. But then technical improvements in print and distribution combined with a commercial spirit began to consolidate local initiatives into nation-wide ventures. The new mass newspapers met the urgent contemporary need to explore the radically new kinds of urban experience that the industrial revolution had generated. Williams notes that 'steam printing of *The Times* began in 1814, and speed of production was steadily raised by mechanical improvements. The eventual combination of rapid steam production with the new, fast distribution system made available by the developing railway network, produced the conditions for major expansion.' (WCS, p.127).

The expansions that began to occur were two-fold. Firstly, the areas covered by a 'local' newspaper became greater and greater, as a result of new methods of transport and distribution. Subsequently, the local newspapers of the eighteenth century began to be bought up by fewer and fewer commercial blocks, so that even while the diversity of actual local newspapers remained, the overall number of newspaper proprietors decreased:

In the second half of the nineteenth century the ownership and control of newspapers moved, in the majority of cases, from small and often local family businesses to a more concentrated corporate stage, in which whole strings of newspapers and magazines were owned by a few powerful individuals or groups. (WCS, p.181).

The result of this increasing centralisation, coupled with increased combine ownership, would eventually be registered in the form of the national daily newspaper, or simply the 'nationals.' In this way, modern cultural forms and modern technologies each contributed directly to the growth of the new concept of the modern nation. The cultural materialist interpretation tells us that not only political institutions and technological innovations, but also cultural forms, have an important impact on the production and constitution of a society.

Raymond Williams was interested in showing how the histories of these different formative social features related to each other. He showed that cultural and technological developments are themselves in the last instance political developments, capable of playing a material part in the creation of a social order. Because it arose on the back of new forms of political institution, and because it was partly enabled by new technological and cultural forms, the nation-state was fundamentally an institution of cultural and political modernity. It therefore follows that to enter a historical period when these developments have either been concluded, or have lost much of their importance, is to enter a period when the national imagination too is up for renegotiation.

### Benedict Anderson and the Imagined Community

If these ideas of Williams seem rather abstract and theoretical, then they are perhaps better understood through recourse to the work of one of Williams's younger contemporaries. Benedict Anderson's study *Imagined Communities* (1982) explored in much more detail the ways in which the history of writing in general – and of print media in particular – overlapped with and informed the history of the nation-state. According to Anderson's argument, it was the technologies of printing and distribution that enabled the nation-state to imagine itself into existence as such.

Anderson argues that a nation is an imagined community, in the sense that it is a large-scale socially cohesive entity of which its members may feel themselves to be a part even though they might not, indeed probably will not, meet, encounter or learn of the existence of the majority of other members. He defines the nation as an imagined community in the following way:

It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion... it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.[x]

Anderson characterises the nation as invoking a feeling of comradeship in the absence of any direct experience of one's comrades. The nation is an imagined community because its members assume the existence of each other without direct knowledge of such existence. Central to this conception of a nation is a materialist analysis of the means of representation that enable such large-scale imagining. The earlier systems of religion, and of intra-continental ruling dynasties, had prepared the way for the modern nation. But Anderson suggests that even more than these, one factor was crucial in its imagining-into-being, namely print capitalism. As Anderson puts it:

economic change, 'discoveries' (social and scientific), and the development of increasingly rapid communications, drove a harsh wedge between cosmology and history. No surprise then that the search was on... for a new way of linking fraternity, power and time meaningfully together. Nothing perhaps more precipitated this search, nor made it more fruitful, than print-capitalism, which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways.[xi]

The nation-state could not have been imagined without the mobilisation within the mind of a sufficient number of people of a concept of *nation*. This is where the fuller relations in which writing is also involved have additionally to be considered. To reach so many people, print products depended on such material processes as transportation, distribution and communication. In the full sense then, the history of the nation-state is analogous with the history of writing only insofar as the history of writing is itself understood as intersecting with other histories: those of the development of roads, railways, and shipping, to name but the most obvious. Without these, there could be no widespread distribution of writing and hence no imagined community. The nation became imagined into being as a sufficient body of writing reached a sufficient number of people to enable such a cognitive association to occur. To understand this process materially we need to understand both the active properties of the writing at the level of content, and the fuller material relations in which it is involved.

Like Raymond Williams, Anderson suggests that the two forms by means of which print capitalism would contribute most directly to the national imagination were the modern novel and the modern newspaper. The former, for example, addresses itself to a precise community of readers: a general 'we.' The members of this group can presume each other to exist without ever having met or heard of each other. Indeed, this is the central premise of the nineteenth-century novel of personal confession. The convention of addressing the 'dear reader' became a dominant one in the nineteenth-century novel. The narrator speaks as an 'I' who assumes fellowship and membership of a general 'we' – a national collective of people unfamiliar to each other, yet sharing certain cultural knowledge and rituals.

As an example of how the 'I'/We' novel enables its readers to form themselves into an imagined community, Anderson gives more detailed analysis of José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi's novel, *El Periquillo Sarniento* (*The Itching Parrot*, 1816). The novel was written shortly before Mexican independence from Spain. Indeed, Anderson describes it as 'evidently the first Latin American work in this genre.' [xii] Although it was written prior to Mexican independence, the Mexican nation is already present, in embryonic form, within the structure of the novel:

we see the 'national imagination' at work in the movement of a solitary hero through a sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside. This picaresque *tour d'horison* – hospitals, prisons, remote villages, monasteries, Indians, Negroes – is nonetheless not a *tour du monde*. The horizon is clearly bounded: it is that of colonial Mexico. Nothing assures us of this sociological solidity more than the succession of plurals. For they conjure up a social space full of *comparable* prisons, none in itself of any unique importance, but all representative (in their simultaneous, separate existence) of the oppressiveness of *this* colony. [xiii]

In this way, the novel operates as the locus for the unfolding of a precise relationship between writer and readers. The general typification of prisons, hospitals and so on militates against an insistence on the differential identities of each reader, and instead focuses on the realisation of shared experience. In this way, the novel imagines the Mexican community into existence. The technologies of print, transport and distribution would only serve to augment this bond, by bringing the novel to every corner of the territory that would subsequently become identified as that of the Mexican nation.



Another novel Anderson considers is *Black Semarang*, published serially by Indonesian Mas Marco Kartodikromo in 1924. There, the relationship between writer and a textually implied body of readers is cemented by the repeated use of 'our' and 'us', with the effect that again, the Indonesian national community was imagined into being before it became a geo-political reality. It is not only the appeal to solidarity, or the invocation of common places, persons and experiences, that create this sense of communion.

Raymond Williams drew implicitly on Anderson's notion of the imagined reader when he reviewed an essay on the Welsh poet R. S. Thomas by Tony Bianchi. Bianchi showed that as a result of the enthusiastic attempts made by his readers to claim Thomas as the nationalist spokesman of a Welsh poetic tradition, Thomas has been 'reconstructed in the image of his audience.' This bond between writer and imagined readers creates in turn a special kind of imagined community.[xiv] In his review of Bianchi's analysis, Raymond Williams suggested that this creation of an imagined community gave rise to the first seeds of political change in 'history, society and ... nationalist politics.' (WSW, pp. 35–36)

Williams and Anderson each suggest that fiction can be used to cultivate a symbolic bond between members of a theoretical readership, and that this bond can be elevated onto a national scale. If this is true of the novel, it is even more true of the modern daily newspaper. As Anderson says, 'in this perspective, the newspaper is merely an *extreme form* of the book.'<sup>xv</sup> For not only does the paper mobilise familiar political, linguistic and cultural landscapes for common consumption, it is also read *simultaneously* by the majority of its readers on a daily basis. Consumption of the morning or evening daily national newspaper thus becomes elevated to the status of a kind of common ritual, capable of unifying the populace in unspoken – but communicative – congress across the land, just as the earlier rituals of religion had contributed to the prior imagined community of the church:

We know that particular morning and evening editions will overwhelmingly be consumed between this hour and that, only on this day, not that... The significance of this mass ceremony... is paradoxical. It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. Furthermore, this ceremony is incessantly repeated at daily or half-daily intervals throughout the calendar. What more vivid figure for the secular, historically clocked, imagined community can be envisioned? [xvi]

The modern novel and the modern newspaper then were two of the main tools by which print capitalism contributed to the production of a national imagination. It is a matter of great significance that both of these examples are popular cultural forms, reproduced and disseminated in great numbers. Anderson does not discuss the minority literature of the intellectual elite, or even the reading habits of the bourgeoisie. Moreover, the examples of popular novels he discusses are all drawn from the colonial world, rather than from the metropolitan nations of Europe, and he shows how these novels play a direct and formative part in the anti-colonial imagination.

Anderson draws attention to the tendency of emerging nations to figure themselves as new. This was the case, for example, in post-revolutionary France and America. There was even an attempt

in France to restart the calendar at Year One in the aftermath of the revolution, in order to enshrine this sense of novelty in the post-revolutionary nation's sense of itself.

However, modernity would not allow this. Already by 1789, Anderson points out, not only newspapers but also mass-produced watches, calendars, clocks, diaries and written records of all kinds existed. These militated against the cancellation of anterior time since the technologies of reproduction meant that the established measures of time were ineradicable. The plan to restart French history with Year One (for revolution) failed, because the French people already knew that the year was 1789.[xvii]

This gives rise to what Anderson calls the temporal paradox of nationhood. Emerging nations naturally figured themselves as new until discovering that they were unable to do so. As a result, they sought instead to figure themselves as historical entities, on the basis of established history and antiquity. History itself became a new academic discipline in Berlin and Paris in the 1820s, and in America a little later. In the new national historiographies, 1776 in America and 1789 in France ceased to be seen as new beginnings. Rather, these modern moments of national self-recognition represented the rediscovery of ancient or mythic kinds of community which had already existed. Nationhood was thus legitimated by this invocation of the ancient past, rather than on the basis of novelty.

Anderson gives a detailed example of this process in the work of August Renan. In a famous paper entitled 'What is a Nation?' Renan had averred that the formation of a nation requires that certain things – conflicts, wars, disputes – be forgotten. Anderson quotes Renan's suggestion that the emergence of a unified French nation during the early modern period relied on a general forgetting of the Saint Barthélemy massacres of 1572, or the Midi massacres of the thirteenth century. If the nation is conceived as consisting in deep, horizontal comradeship, then memory of these things seems to detract from the emotional appeal of national unity. Yet in reminding the French people to forget such things, Renan assumed that everyone within the national community remembered what they were.[xviii]

To solve this apparent paradox, Anderson suggests, a precise kind of writing emerged in the new historiography of the nineteenth century. This took the form of a retrospective re-writing, wherein, for example, the thirteenth-century massacres cease to be figured as violent conflict between Avignon and the Catalans, and the sixteenth-century conflicts cease to be figured as bitter fights between Catholics and Protestants. These conflicts instead are retrospectively re-written as inter-fratricidal conflicts *between Frenchmen*. Out of this arises a common (national) history. Anderson refers to the kind of historiography he finds in Renan – and throughout the nineteenth century – as the 'reassuring use of fratricide.' [xix] It removes the specific differentials from a violent history and creates instead this harmonious whole.

Anderson detects similar examples in American history (including the Civil War), and the Norman conquest of Britain. In the novels of Fenimore Cooper, for instance, or Melville, or even Mark Twain, conflicts between early settlers and native Americans, or again between established settlers and Negro slaves, are not figured as violent inter-racial conflicts. They are instead figured as aspects of the shared experience of early Americans, each trying to survive in a hostile environment.

Raymond Williams picks up on the Norman example when he draws attention to the irony whereby modern British history is often taught as though it began ‘somewhere around 1066, when a Norman-Frenchman replaced a Norse-Saxon monarch.’ (*T2000*, p.193) Again, in such histories, William the Conqueror ceases to be figured as a violent alien invader and is presented instead as the original *English* – and later British – monarch. This erases a sense of difference or disunity from history and legitimates an historic sense of British nationhood through invocation of an early imaged unity. As Anderson puts it, the actual record of war and violence on which the nation is founded must be forgotten as such, and then remembered differently, as part of ‘our own’ history.[xx] This myth of unity can itself only be perpetuated in narrative, and this underlines the extent to which the modern nation-state is articulated not only by its political institutions, but also by its cultural forms: newspapers, novels, school textbook histories.

Benedict Anderson’s notion of the *imagined community* helps us to understand what Raymond Williams means by cultural materialism. Each writer emphasises the materially active part played by cultural forms such as writing in the generation of a social order. Implicit in this is the idea that to generate a new narrative of identity is to contribute to the formation of a new or alternative version of the nation.

### **Tom Nairn and the Capitalist State**

To a certain degree, a new perspective on national self-definition in Ireland, Scotland and Wales was provided by Michael Hechter’s *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536–1960* in 1975. Hechter ceased to see these peripheral nations as part of a putatively united British state, and instead developed a historical framework where these separate nations could be understood as colonies of ruling-class England. As such, they had importantly different histories, or importantly different perspectives on the common history.

In *The Break-Up of Britain*, Tom Nairn provides more detailed analysis of those different perspectives on the common history. Nairn argues that a key date in the history of the British state is the revolution of 1688. This ended the system of rule by absolute monarchy and gave rise to a period of bourgeois consolidation of the machinery of economic and political control. In other words, the 1688 revolution enabled the state apparatus of monarchy to continue, while also inviting the population to forget the worst excesses of the monarchy’s past. Two distinct elements, potentially violent revolution followed by bureaucratic consolidation, produced the British nation-state as an organ of political modernity while also retaining a common history on which a sense of national community could be founded.

Nairn argues that arising out of these developments in the 1680s, the British state was the first national state formation to come into existence anywhere in the world. Because of this, he suggests, the historic trajectory of state formation in Britain cannot be considered typical of the formation of nation-states in general: ‘[t]he multi-national state-form that has ruled there from 1688 to the present time could not be *typical* of general modern development simply because it initiated so much of it.’[xxi]

In other words, to Nairn, the British state is the prototypical institution of cultural and political modernity, a blueprint to be copied by other constitutions and other formations in other states.

Arising out of the transition from feudalism to modernity, the British state could not be fully modern itself. It is, Nairn goes on to argue, a unique blend of the feudal with the two key factors of modernisation: the bourgeois capitalist class and the nascent forces of industrialisation. This blend makes it unlike the other European nations, which sought to copy the blueprint provided by the British state without precisely being able to replicate it, lacking the historical combination of archaism and modernity:

Because it was first, the English – later British – experience remained distinct. Because they came second, into a world where the English Revolution had already succeeded and expanded, later bourgeois societies could not repeat this early development. Their study and imitation engendered something quite different: the truly modern doctrine of the abstract or ‘impersonal’ state which, because of its abstract nature, could be imitated in subsequent history. [xxii]

This sets up an interesting question about the temporal placing of modernity. To Nairn, the British state was the first-born child of modernisation. Because of this fact, it was unable to slough off its traces of the pre-modern world in which it remained rooted. The paradox then presented is not that the process of modernisation was completed in Britain before it arrived in other nations. It is not that Britain’s period of modernisation has already been concluded. The problem is on the contrary, that Britain’s constitution remains not modern enough. This paradoxical definition of the temporal location of modernity would provoke Raymond Williams, in one of his last ever public lectures, to ask ‘When was modernism?’ [xxiii]

Tom Nairn uses the term ‘priority’ to describe this situation whereby Britain became the first nation to arrive into the modern world, and as a result was unable to develop along the same lines as other nations which sought to imitate it. He says of the British constitution:

Although a developmental oddity belonging to the era of transition from absolutism to capitalist modernity, its anomalous character was first crystallised and then protected by priority. As the road-making state into modern times, it inevitably retained much from the medieval territory it left behind: a cluster of deep-laid archaisms still central to English society and the British state. Yet the developmental position encouraged the secular retention of these traits, and a constant return to them as the special mystique of the British Constitution and way of life. Once the road-system had been built up, for other peoples as well as the English, the latter were never compelled to reform themselves along the lines which the English Revolution had made possible. They had acquired such great advantages from leading the way – above all in the shape of empire – that for over two centuries it was easier to consolidate or re-exploit this primary role than to break with it. [xxiv]

The concept of priority has two meanings here. Firstly it refers to that process whereby the British state became the first modern state in the world. Related to this, it refers to the conscious policies adopted by that state: a logic of economic priority. This is where the history of the British state intersects with the history of its empire, revealing a mutually constitutive relationship. As Nairn points out, the primary affluence created by the British empire meant that for more than two centuries, there was little pressure to reform the state apparatus. This gave rise to the ‘special

mystique' of the unwritten British constitution. It justifies seemingly archaic elements of British political life such as the wearing of gowns and wigs in Parliament, national ceremonies such as the State opening of Parliament, and the anomalous longevity of an unreformed upper chamber. Raymond Williams would, following Walter Bagehot, refer to these as the 'theatrical elements of the constitution.' (*RH*, p.259).

This mystique of Britishness, coupled with the economic prosperity generated by imperial practices, forestalled and deflected some of the pressure to reform the British political state until long after the revolutions of the 1600s, which might otherwise have gained momentum. In other words, Nairn argues that those revolutions provided other peoples with a blueprint to copy, and actually enabled them to go even further in their political reforms than had been possible in the initial revolutions in Britain. Thus 1789 in France was a copy of 1688 in England, but able to go much further than England because having got there first, England was still at the transitional stage away from absolutism and feudalism.

The British state apparatus that emerged from 1688 was nowhere near as radical as that of Paris in the 1790s. The settlement following the "Great Revolution" was moderate, capable of treading the middle ground between a feudal aristocratic culture and the demand for much more general social reform. This blend enabled the capitalist bourgeoisie to prosper by dominating the apparatus of state. This was done through the alliance of the landowners with members of the industrial bourgeoisie, *against* the proletariat. Thus the bourgeois revolution of 1688 was not much of a revolution at all. Nairn, like Anderson, concludes that the abolition of the monarchy in 1649 had far greater potential for democratic revolution. The effects of *that* revolution, however, were vitiated by the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. Nairn argues that Britain has been in need of a second political revolution ever since:

There was no second political revolution, so that the more radical tendencies of the bourgeoisie were diverted and absorbed into the dense machinery of civil hegemony. As this happened the new working class was also diverted and repressed: the defeat of early nineteenth-century radicalism forced it into a curious kind of social and political *apartheid*. This condition was almost the opposite of the active intervention from below which figured in so many modern revolutions; so, therefore, was the mythology, or underlying political consciousness, which it generated.[xxv]

This is different from the nationalisms discussed by Benedict Anderson, where nationalist revolution comes from 'below.' Anderson's idea of nationalism is that it implies that power comes from a popular base in the people who thereby seek to control themselves. In the context of nineteenth-century Britain, this was generally absent. We know from the work of Hobsbawm and Colley that the masses – where they were mobilised at all – were mobilised from above, rather than by themselves. Britain's nationalism accordingly had to be based on conservative myths of the organic society.

The 1640s had absorbed the radical end of the bourgeoisie into civil society, and the nineteenth century saw a weakening of the potential for working-class revolt, culminating in the defeat of Chartism in the 1840s. The working class itself was then absorbed into the political and economic order of Britain's civil society. This was achieved via a consciously generated emphasis on the

public sphere, and on the traditions, customs and cultural practices that the public could hold in common. It is for this reason that Raymond Williams emphasises the importance of modern communal or widely disseminated cultural forms such as the theatre, sport, newspapers and the new practice of long-distance travel in the development of the modern nation.

The priority attached to maintaining the cohesion of civil society continued into the twentieth century. Meanwhile, the need for the second revolution to which Nairn draws attention became latent rather than manifest. On the other hand, that need would never entirely disappear, either. For more than half of the twentieth century, the affluence generated by empire coupled with the continued functioning of civil society would ensure a measure of social cohesion and forestall in advance further pressure for social, economic and democratic reform.

With the end of empire came two related developments. Firstly, the public national rituals associated with empire – coronations, anniversaries, national holidays of all kinds – were no longer available to play their part in the generation of social cohesion. More importantly, the removal of the imperial hinterlands which for so long had provided the economic affluence conducive to civil cohesion revealed tangible differences in material standards of living and in access to real political power between increasing numbers of British people.

The latent need for a second revolution which for so long had been bought off by a combination of civic cohesion and economic prosperity finally emerged into the open again in the 1970s, in the form of trade union militancy across the country, racial antagonisms, and Scottish and Welsh opposition to the unitary British state. Thus, nationalism in Scotland and Wales was in part generated by the wider push towards socialist democracy, in opposition to the capitalist state.

Nairn concludes that there are thus two tenable views of the unitary state: 'If one does not recognise that it is moribund... then naturally Scottish and Welsh nationalism will appear as destructive forces – as a basically irrational turning back towards forgotten centuries, as involution at the expense of progress. Whether conservative or socialist, belief in a continuing unitary state of the British Isles entails viewing these movements as a threat.' [xxvi] On the other hand, if we take the view that the state had never fulfilled its offer to bring Britain into the modern world by providing for the first time a proper measure of democracy and equality to all the peoples of Britain, then these movements appear in another light. As Nairn says:

if one perceives the United Kingdom as an *ancien régime* with no particular title to survival or endless allegiance, then the breakaway movements may appear in a different light. The phrase 'We must preserve the unity of the United Kingdom' is currently intoned like a litany by most leaders of British public life. Its magic properties are obviously derived from the cults of Constitution and Sovereignty. Merely to refuse this sacrament allows the observer to begin, at least, to acknowledge some positive side in the cause of the smaller nations.[xxvii]

The positive side that Nairn detects in the nationalisms of Scotland and Wales is aligned to the activity of trade unions and labour militancy that also erupted in the English industrial regions during the same period. It is not a matter of abstract chauvinism, but of advancing the cause of functioning democracy. The history of the British state tells us that the moderate revolution of

1688 failed to end a kind of political absolutism. Nations where this has been the case have taken the first step towards modern social democracy, without being able to cross the threshold into it. Such nations are left at the gateway to modernity, and this is how Nairn understands the whole history of the British state. It is a state whose modernity is both already concluded, and yet to arrive.

When the crisis of a global recession emerged in the 1960s, this became manifest in the form of popular anti-imperial revolutions. These took the form of nationalisms of various kinds around the world, because nationalism was the only available historical precedent for revolution. Thus there was suddenly an emergence of – for example – revolutionary Cubans; republican Irishmen; and a host of nation-bound revolutionary proletariats in Angola, Mozambique, Korea, Vietnam and others.

Nairn understands the emergence of socialist nationalisms in Scotland and Wales in this context. Crisis in capitalist society generates – or exacerbates – the need for revolution. The only existing historical model for revolution is the nationalist model. Thus revolutionary nationalisms arise to face the crises thrown up by capitalist society. This accounts for the socialist character of nationalist movements in Scotland and Wales. In each case, an emerging nation imagines its people into a national formation, and narrative plays a central part in that imagination. We would thus expect new nationalist movements in Scotland and Wales to be accompanied by new kinds of narrative in those nations.

### **Unofficial Narrative: Williams and Bhabha**

Raymond Williams, Tom Nairn and Benedict Anderson are all interested in how the concept of a nation-state as the fundamental unit of political relationship achieved hegemony. The nation-state was imagined into being as an organ of its ruling class, for the benefit of expanding power and control over the working classes at home and over colonised societies abroad. Literature plays a part in making this power relation possible. To produce a kind of writing that disputes this imperial construction of the nation is thus to play a material part in undermining the unitary make-up of the nation itself.

In a more recent study entitled *Nation and Narration*, Homi K. Bhabha has sought to complicate Benedict Anderson's notion of the *imagined community*, which he perceived as too deterministic. Indeed, in Anderson's account, the creation of the nation-state and hence of a social order can seem like something of a *fait accompli*. Bhabha also seeks to draw attention to the ethnic and gendered constituents of the modern nation-state, which are rather absent from the work of Nairn.

Bhabha draws on the field of language and semiotics. He uses the French feminist semiotic writer Julia Kristeva to show that all language is multi-accentual.[xxviii] The language in which any given narrative is created is always amenable to multi-accentual interpretation: all words mean different things in different contexts. If any piece of narrative can be interpreted in a number of different ways, this must be true of the narratives on which modern nation-states are founded. This enables Bhabha to argue that the very narratives that drum up hegemonic attachment to the nation-state can also be used to rupture connections to that state and so negate the hegemony of the ruling

political order.

An example Bhabha elsewhere gives of this process is the work of the British-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie. Bhabha suggests that in his novel *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie portrays the life of the sub-cultural community of a group of working-class Indian immigrants and their second and third generation offspring in East London at around the time of the Brixton race riots of the 1980s. The characters are mostly from low-income backgrounds, so that they are losers of the get-rich-quick ethos that characterised Britain in the 1980s. In the novel, this is made explicit when some of the characters gather to burn effigies of their nemesis, Margaret Thatcher. The strength of the novel, Bhabha suggests, is that it shows how matters of class, race and national interest intersect in complicated and sometimes contradictory ways. Moreover, in writing the novel, Rushdie gives fictional realisation to the kind of working-class Indian community that had previously made little impact on the novel tradition in Britain. This is not, Bhabha points out, because such communities had not previously existed, but because they lacked access to the means of representation. Bhabha suggests that by writing a novel about a community of people previously excluded from the literary record, and explicitly in opposition to the dominant political tones of the period, Rushdie enables us to imagine 'how newness enters the world.' [xxix]

In 'Nation and Narration,' Bhabha explores the possibility of using writing to imagine new forms of national identity. He shows that this need not necessarily take the form of counter-nationalisms in Scotland and Wales; and that the British identity can also be renegotiated on grounds of race and gender. Bhabha explores these different kinds of cultural emergence by invoking Raymond Williams's vocabulary of *dominant*, *residual* and *emergent* cultural practices.

Williams had developed this critical vocabulary in *Marxism and Literature*, arising out of his interest in both Marxism and semiotics. What Williams calls the *dominant* cultural forms in any society are those cultural forms or products which are related to ruling-class hegemony. In modern societies dominant forms are typically tied in to large-scale institutions of broadcasting and cultural production, and perpetuate the images of society that these institutions implicitly ratify.[xxx] *Residual* cultural forms are not only archaic or out-dated elements of a culture. The term also refers to those elements of the dominant which have become less visibly active in the daily life of a society, while at the same time retaining a latent power of their own. Examples Williams gives of residual elements in British society are rural communities, the established church, and the monarchy (*ML*, p.122). It is only *emergent* practices that can operate as truly oppositional forms, able to contest social and political processes. The emergence in the nineteenth century of the radical popular press is an important example (*ML*, p.124).

This sense of how emergent forms can be used to contest or dispute the make-up of a social order is a necessary corrective to the too exclusive emphasis that would otherwise be placed on the role of the ruling class. Bhabha and Williams show that the nation is never as straightforwardly unified as its official narratives would suggest. Alternative nationalisms in Scotland and Wales, the creation of ethnic sub-cultures, dissemination of class consciousness and understanding of how gender plays a constitutive role in kinds of cultural and political experience are all ways in which the possibility for narrating a different kind of nation are now being explored.

These cultural and political emergences taken together comprise the process that Tom Nairn



describes as ‘the break-up of Britain.’ Nairn’s study of that title is an attempt to understand dominant, emergent and residual cultural practices in contemporary Britain. The unitary British state of which Nairn’s account remains the most thorough-going critique has been *the* dominant cultural form in Britain for centuries. It might be in the process of becoming residual. If this is so, it is only because certain other formations which would seek to supersede it are in the process of emerging. Clearly, the historical processes at work involve a complex interplay between dominant, emergent and residual forms. Maintaining a sense of how Williams developed this critical vocabulary within the context of a range of left-wing political theorising on the subject of nationhood, therefore, it is to those processes and formations that we must now turn.

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[i] Williams mentions Hechter’s work in his 1983 essay ‘Wales and England,’ recently reprinted in the anthology *Who Speaks for Wales?* ed. Daniel Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), p. 25.

[ii] Williams refers to *The Break-Up of Britain in Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London: New Left Books, 1979), p. 381, cited hereafter as PL.

[iii] Patrick Brantlinger, *Crusoe’s Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 36.

[iv] Andrew Milner, *Cultural Materialism* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne Press, 1993), p. 48, and Anthony Easthope, *Literary into Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 67.

[v] Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope* ed. Robin Gable (London: Verso, 1988), p. 111. Cited hereafter as RH.

[vi] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 1–14.

[vii] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London: Yale University Press, 2005).

[viii] Raymond Williams, *What I Came to Say* (London: Radius, 1990), p. 124. Cited hereafter as WCS.

[ix] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 190. Cited hereafter as LR.

[x] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 6–7.

[xi] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 36.

[xii] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 29.

[xiii] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 30. Emphasis in original.

[xiv] Quoted in Raymond Williams, *WSW*, p. 35.

[xv] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 34.

[xvi] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 35.

[xvii] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 194.

[xviii] Quoted in Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 200.

[xix] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 199–201.

[xx] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 206.

[xxi] Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain* (London: Verso, 1981), p. 15.

[xxii] Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain*, p. 17.

[xxiii] Williams, *The Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 31. Cited hereafter as PM.

[xxiv] Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain*, pp. 64–65.

[xxv] Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain*, p. 41.

[xxvi] Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain*, p. 73.

[xxvii] *Ibid.*

[xxviii] Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 3–4 and p. 305.

[xxix] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), ch. 9.

[xxx] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 1977), p. 121. Cited hereafter as ML.