

## Raymond Williams, Cultural Materialism and the Break-Up of Britain

*Keywords 5, Autumn 2007.*

To Raymond Williams, the nation-state was fundamentally an institution of cultural modernity and imperialism. In his major work, *The Country and the City* (1973), he attempted an examination of the connections that exist between the capitalist order and the nation state. Beginning with a look at the genre of country house writing, Williams was interested in how this writing both reflected the power of a late feudal aristocracy and actively contributed to augmenting its power. The idealisation of one particular class was accompanied by a mystification of national interest and national identity.

Williams pursued this analysis across a long historical period, from early modernity into the twentieth century. He explored the structural congruence that existed between the process of nation building in Britain and empire building overseas. In the last instance, he extended the metaphor of the country house, suggesting that, throughout the period of imperialism, the Western world has become something like an enormous country estate. It draws resources and labour from its (third world) hinterland, while also blinding itself to the injustices and violence on which this process is founded.

While writing *The Country and the City*, Williams was also at work on a detective novel, *The Volunteers* (1978). In what follows I shall offer a reading of *The Volunteers*, tied to a survey of *The Country and the City*. I wish to extrapolate the extent to which the tradition of country house writing which Williams analyses can be taken as a measure of the shifting imperial system. This is elevated in the work of Williams to a post-imperial theorising of that global process.

I shall then look at the transition that has occurred in country house writing since 1997, the year of devolution in Scotland and Wales. Historically, this transition is related to the end of imperial power overseas during the 1950s and 60s. The fact that Williams himself did not survive to witness the moment of devolution in no way weakens the impact of his writing. I shall argue that his work anticipates the moment of devolution and the break-up of the British state in important ways, with the result that Williams is a major figure in our understanding of British postcolonial cultures today.

## Writing, Nation and Empire

Williams began *The Country and the City* by looking at the practice of country house writing as it was inaugurated during the Elizabethan period. The cultural practice at work was one in which instituted poets and artisans were commissioned to produce specific pieces of work for specific landed patrons – usually aristocratic men. Within the context of Elizabethan England, and its nascent morality of virtue and improvement, to eulogise the country house was also taken somehow as eulogising the master. The house was well-kept because the master was a shrewd manager. The dinner hall was a place of great feasting and hospitality because the master was generous and giving. The parks and estates were beautifully maintained because the master was understood to be a kind of minor god, carefully controlling the natural order of his own little Eden. According to Williams, ‘what we find ... is an idealisation of feudal and immediately post-feudal values: of an order based on settled and reciprocal social and economic relations of an avowedly total kind.’<sup>1</sup>

It is a practice of mystification: the servants, labourers and outcasts on whom the entire system depends are entirely written out of the poems so that the only people who appear to matter are the aristocratic lords of the manner. This social order is related by the country house and estate metaphor to the natural landscape and thus presented as timeless, unchanging, natural. It is a mystification at work in the interest of the ruling landed class. As Williams says, ‘it is then important that the poems coincide, in time, with a period in which another order – that of capitalist agriculture – was being successfully pioneered.’<sup>2</sup> The best-known examples Williams gives of these poems are Ben Jonson’s *To Penshurst*, Thomas Carew’s *To Saxham*, and Andrew Marvell’s *Upon Appleton House*. Social and moral economy is mystified within these poems in order to ratify and support the class structure of the patrons.

The second stage of Williams’s analysis in *The Country and the City* is to explore the connection between a mystified social capitalist order and an equally mystified concept of national identity and national interest. During the period Williams analysed in *The Country and the City*, the mystifying of the social order was achieved in part by the entrenched tradition of country house writing. This is

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (1973; London: Hogarth, 1985), p.35.

<sup>2</sup> Williams, *The Country and the City*, p.35.

particularly evident in the case of Tudor country house writing. The poems were powerful primarily because the landlords who commissioned them were powerful figures, commanding the capacity to dictate literary tastes along with more direct rules on how to govern the estates. At the same time, that authority was also in part derived from the idealisation performed in the poetry.

The magnificence of the country estates was taken to be a measure of the virtue and morality of the landowners, and, by a final extension, of the virtue and morality of the nation itself. As Peter de Bolla has written of *The Country and the City*, it shows the enlightenment and imperial attempt to create ‘a specifically national heritage’ through appeal to the virtue and morality of the system and associated invocation of a supposedly natural order.<sup>3</sup> A growing interest in the English landscape was accompanied by an emotive appeal to the supposedly common origins of those who peopled that landscape, in an eternal and immutable social order, to create a hegemonic sense of united national identity.

If the literary texts analysed by Williams played a material part in augmenting the power of the country house system domestically, this process became even more strongly the case during the period of empire. Literary study was mobilised throughout the British empire to perform its ideological work. This had been the case since the moment at which the colonial project was inaugurated: the Elizabethan period. As Ania Loomba writes of the Tudor dynasty’s most tenacious myth maker, ‘Shakespeare lived and wrote at a time when English mercantile and colonial enterprise were just germinating ... the meaning of Shakespeare’s plays were both derived from and used to establish colonial authority.’<sup>4</sup> Cultural materialism as Raymond Williams developed it in *The Country and the City* offers an insight into the connections that exist between nation building during the Tudor period, and the growth of empire overseas. It also provides a materialist reading of the part played by literature in those processes. The third stage of analysis in *The Country and the City* draws attention to the relation between domestic national culture in formation, and the role played by the colonies in that process:

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<sup>3</sup> Peter de Bolla, ‘Antipictorialism in the English Landscape Tradition: A Second Look at *The Country and the City*’ in *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams*, ed. Christopher Prendergast (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p.182.

<sup>4</sup> Ania Loomba and Martin Okrin (eds.), *Post-Colonial Shakespeares* (London: Methuen, 1998), p.1.

In *Wuthering Heights*, in *Great Expectations*, in *Alton Locke* and in many other novels of the period there is a way out from the struggle within English society to these distant lands; a way out that is not only the escape to a new land but as in some of the real history an acquisition of fortune to return and re-enter the struggle at a higher point ... The lands of the Empire were an idyllic retreat, an escape from debt or shame, or an opportunity for making a fortune.<sup>5</sup>

It is as though the colonies are the training ground for a domestic culture in formation. The metaphor of empire as 'idyllic retreat' extends the country house metaphor Williams had already detected in the poetics of nation building. Williams suggests that, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the imperial project was partly legitimised by its country house literature.

Implicit in this conclusion is the idea that, if literary texts have a material role in societal processes, then to produce and disseminate different kinds of texts is to take a step towards altering the structure of society. At the fourth stage of analysis in *The Country and the City*, Williams turns from national and imperial processes to postcolonial history. He is aware of the pressures towards political change inside late colonial societies, primarily as a result of his reading of the canonical late colonial authors: E. M. Forster, George Orwell, Joyce Cary.<sup>6</sup> 'But,' he writes, 'we have only to go across to the Indian and African and West Indian writers to get a different and necessary perspective.'<sup>7</sup>

Williams suggests that this perspective on colonial history can be gleaned in the work of writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, Wilson Harris, R. K. Narayan, Chinua Achebe, Han Suyin and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. These writers challenge the model of country house dominance over hinterland/ colony. This can be seen particularly clearly in George Lamming's novel *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) and V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* (published in 1960, the same year as Williams's own novel, *Border Country*).<sup>8</sup> Lamming and Naipaul render the metaphor of the country house all too literal, in dramatising the historical struggles of colonised peoples to gain effective political control over their own estates, their own country houses.

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<sup>5</sup> Williams, *The Country and the City*, p.281.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, *The Country and the City*, p.285.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, *The Country and the City*, p.285.

<sup>8</sup> Tony Pinkney has shown that *Border Country* is structured in such a way as to open a perspective from a very local Welsh community onto much broader postcolonial historical processes. See his *Raymond Williams* (Bridgend: Seren, 1991) pp.3, 74-7.

The literature Williams discusses at the end of *The Country and the City* does not simply follow, as it were passively, from the formal decolonising process. It also makes a crucial contribution to raising the critical anti-colonial consciousness of the colonised peoples and therefore plays a crucial active part in bringing that process about. By challenging the metaphor of country house dominance *in* their literature, Lamming, Naipaul, Soyin, Anand and Ngugi all contribute in their various ways to making change happen *outside* it.

*The Country and the City* relates the process of nation building in the early modern period to that of empire building throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The material role played by literature in imagining these large-scale communities into existence is comparable in each case. Likewise, the potential of literature to participate in changing those structures and re-imagining the community is equally prevalent. The important conjunction Williams makes is between nation building and imperialism: ‘As we gain perspective from the long history of the literature of country and city, we see how much, at different times and in different places, it is a connecting process, in what has to be seen ultimately as a common history’ (CC, p.288). If the history of nation is related to the formation of empire, then in the last instance, the break-up of empire must be related to the break-up of nation.

### **Anti-Imperialism and *The Volunteers***

The conjunction between formal decolonisation overseas and political separatism domestically is raised in Williams’s novel, *The Volunteers*. *The Volunteers* was published in 1978, and set in a then futuristic late twentieth-century Britain, under the control of an extreme nationalist government. Lewis Redfern, an investigative journalist for the Insatel broadcasting corporation, is assigned to investigate the shooting and wounding of the Secretary of State for Wales, Edmund Buxton, during a state visit to the Museum of Welsh Life at Saint Fagan’s, outside Cardiff. Buxton has been involved in a government decision taken only a few months earlier, to use military force to break a strike at a steel works in Pontyriw. This decision has directly resulted in the death of a worker, Gareth Powell, and thus provokes great resentment against Buxton.

*The Volunteers* brings into relief two distinct events and explores the relation between them. Lewis Redfern's attempt to discover the relation between the breaking of the strike and the Buxton shooting forms the basis of the investigation plot. Suspecting a connection between resentment against Buxton over the death of Gareth Powell at Pontyrhiw and the symbolic shooting at Saint Fagan's, Lewis tries to trace anyone else present at both events. Media photographs enable him to trace Bill Chaney and Rosa Brant.<sup>9</sup> Rosa Brant turns out to be the sister of Sarah Brant, the young second wife of a politician, Mark Evans. Evans has previously served in the same cabinet as Buxton and is trying to make a populist political come back as an opponent of the repressive Buxton government. Finally it transpires that Evans has been recruited to join the same radical organisation, the Volunteers, as Rosa.

Lewis discovers that Rosa's supposed alibi for the Buxton shooting, a camping trip to Ireland, has been manufactured.<sup>10</sup> He discovers also that Mark Evans's son, David, has joined the radical underground organisation, the Volunteers, to try to resist the compromised sell-out of the political class. Rosa and her lover Bill Chaney are the ones who shot and wounded Buxton, aided by David Evans.

The mystery itself rapidly becomes redundant, empty of suspense because effortlessly solved. How can Williams think himself out of this impasse? From this point on, he uses the investigation plot to launch all sorts of wider and more complex questions which outflank the basic mystery plot altogether. For the question that most continually obtrudes into our reading is not, Who shot Buxton? Rather, it is, Who is Lewis? Although this character is the first-person narrator of the novel, we know surprisingly little about him. As his sympathy for the Welsh working classes and the subversive organisation the Volunteers deepens, we are bound to ask ourselves why this should be. Indeed, the novel insists on this question: 'For what, in the end, did I care about the Trust...?' muses Lewis.<sup>11</sup> "What is it you want?" Gareth Powell's widow asks him when he comes asking questions.<sup>12</sup> When Lewis finally learns that Mark Evans is working for the Volunteers and struggles to decide whether his loyalties lie with the capitalist establishment or this group of radical opponents, he asks Evans, "Why should I [help the Volunteers]?"<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Volunteers* (1978; London: Hogarth, 1985), p.53.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, *The Volunteers*, p.104.

<sup>11</sup> Williams, *The Volunteers*, p.142.

<sup>12</sup> Williams, *The Volunteers*, p.142.

<sup>13</sup> Williams, *The Volunteers*, p.178.

As Lewis Redfern's investigation gathers momentum, there are hints that final understanding will be directly related to his personal affiliations. The whole dilemma facing him is that, as an employee of Insatel, his job is to expose the Volunteers. His employer Friedmann is explicit about this. The Buxton affair ceases to be an interesting news story within a couple of days, he explains, "but the Volunteers now, that's business."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the possibility that former cabinet minister Mark Evans might be involved with the Volunteers seems like the biggest media coup of all. Hence Friedmann's instructions, "You zoom in on Evans. You go all out to break him."<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, having discovered that Evans is working for a political cause with which Lewis too sympathises, Lewis himself is reluctant to carry out this 'breaking.' If Lewis is really to endanger his career in this way (and after all, he does end up resigning from Insatel), we feel certain he must have a bigger reason for sympathising with Mark Evans.

Evans provides a clue as to why Lewis might withhold rather than publish. Lewis accuses him of involvement with the Volunteers and in the Buxton shooting. Evans seems unperturbed by this. He does not deny involvement because he does not regret it. He believes in the rightness of striking out against the oppressive nationalist state. This constitutes something of an anti-climax to Lewis Redfern's investigation. Moreover, Williams throws the real mystery back onto Lewis himself. The ostensibly guilty Evans fires a particular parting shot at Lewis:

'Just one thing before you go,' he said as we walked down the stairs. 'You research a lot of people. At least it's called research. It's an interesting process. We even tried it on you.'  
'Don't rely on my past,' I said, irritably.  
'No,' he said, laughing. 'There was never any danger of that. But it's interesting. It's especially interesting when the present connects.'  
We had got to the door.  
'I'm not the problem,' I said stubbornly.<sup>16</sup>

The idea that Lewis could have a reliable past is presented as laughable. This seems ironic, given that it is Evans and not Lewis who has been shown to be a member of a terrorist organisation. Williams uses a technique to disadvantage the reader here. For

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<sup>14</sup> Williams, *The Volunteers*, p.144.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, *The Volunteers*, p.145.

<sup>16</sup> Williams, *The Volunteers*, pp.163-64.

though it is clear that Evans and Lewis are meant to understand each other, we as readers do not know what they are talking about. We cannot know what it is in Lewis's past that Evans is referring to - or how it connects to the present. Had the Volunteers considered Lewis a possible ally? A possible enemy? A possible target? There is an appearance of knowledge and answers, but it is continually frustrated. Lewis's personal involvement with the matter under investigation is both pointed up and continually deferred. Despite his assertion that 'I am not the problem,' for us as readers, Lewis *has* become the real object of the mystery, rather than the terrorist he is investigating.

The counter-research which the Volunteers have carried out on Lewis offers some conclusions. David tells Lewis:

'Your father was killed as a soldier in Kenya. As a national service soldier. But in one of the very worst of the last colonial wars.'  
I didn't answer for some moments. I avoided looking at him.  
'He had no choice where he was sent.'  
'Of course, Lewis. Imperialism killed him, whichever uniform he happened to be wearing. But you didn't think so. You told no one but Megan. You seemed bitterly ashamed.'  
'Angry.'  
'No, anger is public. You told none of your comrades. You wanted none of them to know. You let it fester under your exceptional activism. You divided yourself.'<sup>17</sup>

The clues click into place at last. Why does Lewis side with the Volunteers against the Buxton government? He hates the entire military-industrial construction of society for which that government stands. He hates it because it killed his father in Kenya. Yet he is also deeply ashamed by it, for his father died, fighting needlessly on its behalf. The Mau Mau uprising against British rule in Kenya in the 1950s was one of the most violent guerrilla wars of the whole colonial period. The imperial order tried to dig in and hold onto its own power and authority in the face of global dissolution, and Lewis's father was part of the digging. Lewis had earlier been a student radical, working against imperialism and social injustice. The death of his father fighting on behalf of that system seems to have made Lewis's own position untenable. As a defence mechanism he has 'divided' himself, becoming part radical investigator, part establishment lackey. That is why he has sympathised with the Volunteers all along, while at the same time working for an organisation hell-bent on their annihilation.

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<sup>17</sup> Williams, *The Volunteers*, p.195.



I stated above that one of the anti-colonial writers Raymond Williams most positively evaluates in *The Country and the City* is Kenyan novelist Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. Ngugi's political activities in opposition to continuing imperial oppression in Kenya, the contribution of his novels to that activism, and his own refusal to separate his activities into the demarcated spheres of *politics* and *letters*, distinctly parallel Williams's own work in Wales. It is interesting then to go to the work of Ngugi himself, to see this process of colonial split-subject formation at work.

Ngugi has written of his education and development in colonial Kenya in the 1950s. He was educated by a teacher who had been discharged from the Royal Air Force, in an English colonial school. The reading material he was given included the imperial boy's own adventures of *Captain Biggles* – a childhood hero of Ngugi's. Yet a crisis of loyalties occurred for Ngugi when the Mau Mau uprising against colonial rule broke out, and when his brother joined the revolutionaries. The Mau Mau fighters were defeated by the Royal Air Force, dropping bombs on the mountain strongholds of the revolutionaries. Ngugi's own brother and comrades were being bombed by people like his school teacher, and like his boyhood hero Captain Biggles. Thus, Ngugi concludes, his education in late colonial Kenya was 'a drama of contradictions', which rendered his unquestioning obedience to the imperial order impossible.<sup>18</sup>

The colonial split subjectivity that Williams portrays in Lewis Redfern in *The Volunteers* enables us to open a post-imperial perspective on Britain itself. As with Ngugi, this is done by suggesting a comparability between colonial processes at home and in Kenya. In *The Country and the City* Williams makes the conjunction in more depth:

In Britain itself, within the home islands, the colonial process itself is so far back that it is in effect unrecorded, though there are late consequences of it in the rural literature of Scotland and Wales and especially of Ireland. It has become part of the long settlement which is idealised as Old England or the natural economy: the product of centuries of successive penetration and domination. What is important in this modern literature of the colonial peoples is that we can see the history happening, see it being made, from the base of an England which, within our own literature, has been so differently described.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedom* (London: Heinemann, 1993), p.138.

<sup>19</sup> Williams, *The Country and the City*, p.285.

Williams's positive evaluation of anti-colonial literature is two-fold. First, it gives us a perspective on colonial history that would otherwise be completely unrecorded. Second, it then enables us to relate the construction of the British empire to the construction of the British state. This forces us to ask what happens to the state when the empire disintegrates.

*The Country and the City* illuminates the climax of *The Volunteers* by making these conjunctions. During the final section of *The Country and the City*, Williams extends his metaphor of the country house dominating its impoverished hinterland, to describe the relations between Europe and its colonies, first world and third. He then goes on to discuss resistance to the colonial system:

Out of these country areas there eventually came, through blood and struggle, movements for political independence. At various stages, to protect such an order, young officers from the country-houses led other Englishmen, and the expropriated Irish and Scots and Welsh, to the colonial battles in which so many died. It is a strange fate.<sup>20</sup>

Out of the country houses of ruling class England, imperial military officers were sent to police the imperial order overseas, with some dying in the process. This is exactly the fate of Lewis's father in *The Volunteers*. Out of a disjointed series of clues as to Lewis's identity, suddenly there is coherence. His distrust of country estate owning Mark Evans, his interest in the shooting of Buxton inside the grounds of a country house / seat of power, can both be traced to this filial relation to the imperial system.

This understanding retrospectively underwrites the whole plot of *The Volunteers*, showing it to be a profoundly anti-imperialist work. Williams is in no doubt that the Welsh and Scots and Irish who died fighting on behalf of the imperial system were 'expropriated', forced into fighting. His novel thus implicitly questions that whole enforced kind of nationalism, and instead puts that unitary identity in question.

The conjunction Williams makes in *The Volunteers* is between the decolonising process overseas and the gradual break up of the British Union itself. For, although there are differences, Williams is clear that these processes are related.

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<sup>20</sup> Williams, *The Country and the City*, p.283.

In the novel, after Lewis gives testimony at the Pontyrhiw tribunal, he drives to the steel works where Gareth Powell was shot, and sees bullet marks still on the walls:

We stopped and looked at the gate of the depot. It was still shut. The fading chalk bullet-marks were still on the walls along the street. A street in Pontyrhiw. A dirt road in Kenya. I must have gone silent looking at them ...<sup>21</sup>

Imperial violence in Kenya is juxtaposed directly with radical authoritarian violence back in Wales. This extraordinary and moving moment retrospectively informs the whole construction of *The Volunteers*. As in previous novels by Williams, the investigation plot provides not answers, but questions. For, at this moment, we have left the Buxton-Powell mystery behind altogether. We are invited to ask much bigger questions: What is identity? What is nationality? What is loyalty? Williams's opposition to the imperial social order suddenly reveals the break up of the empire and the break up of the union to be part of the same process.

By imagining a Wales struggling for self-rule as early as 1978, Williams attempted to raise the levels of Welsh self-consciousness to a sufficiently high level for self-rule to become a reality in the 1979 devolution referendum. The 'no' vote in 1979 followed by the eventual 'yes' in 1997 shows that, all the time, this critical consciousness was on the rise. Devolution itself is an ongoing process, rather than an accomplished fact. As a result of his prescience into that process, Williams is a major figure in our understanding of postcolonial British cultures.

### **Cultural Materialism: The Welsh Example**

In January 2006, the Welsh Assembly Government launched the Library of Wales book series. This initiative can be seen as a process of cultural reclamation. Twentieth century Welsh writing quickly becomes unfashionable and out of print.

The ostensible goal of the Library of Wales is to make some of the writing produced in Wales over the last century available again. The first five titles included Raymond

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<sup>21</sup> Williams, *The Volunteers*, p.207.

Williams's novel, *Border Country* and a much earlier pair of working class novels from South Wales, Lewis Jones's *Cwmardy* (1937) and *We Live* (1939).<sup>22</sup>

The Library of Wales gives us a chance to rediscover or re-evaluate the tradition of Welsh industrial fiction that flowered in the 1930s – a tradition to which Raymond Williams as novelist consciously belonged. This rediscovery has only been possible because, since 1997, Wales has had some self-rule and hence the capacity to develop such projects in a way that it did not earlier.

On the other hand, it is also in a real sense true that Wales only has self-rule partly because writers like Williams spent time and effort exploring and asserting their identity and culture. This exploration resulted in an increase in the cultural confidence of a notoriously unconfident Wales. The drift can be seen by comparing the two referenda of 1979 and 1997. In 1979 the Welsh electorate overwhelmingly rejected the principle of self-rule. The narrow margin by which Wales then embraced devolution eighteen years later represented a 'huge shift' in Welsh opinion.<sup>23</sup>

Clearly the real claim for the power of literature is a modest one: the two referenda are not caused only by the reading of novels, and may in fact owe a greater debt to more direct political campaigning. Yet the demarcation between the overtly political and the cultural spheres is not so clearly drawn, if we get rid of the idea of literature as an idealist realm, and explore its material properties. This is particularly clear in the case of Williams, who was for a time member of the Welsh political party, Plaid Cymru.<sup>24</sup> Thus he was a political activist within Wales on the one hand, Welsh novelist on the other, while all the time refusing to draw such a strict line between the two spheres.

The argument I wish to make here is an historical one. The growth of cultural self-confidence in the peripheral nations of Britain gives rise to the conditions in which it becomes possible to work for political self-determination. The achievement of political self-determination in turn makes it possible for Wales to foster its own cultural development – as in the Library of Wales. There is no straightforward cause and effect relationship between literature and social change. Each contributes to the

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<sup>22</sup> Williams, *Border Country* (Carmarthen: Parthian, 2006); Jones *Cwmardy* and *We Live* (Carmarthen: Parthian, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> See Tom Nairn, *After Britain* (London: Granta, 2001), p.82.

<sup>24</sup> Williams explained in an interview with Philip Cooke that he was a member of Plaid Cymru for 'a year or two' during the 1970s, and only left because he found it 'difficult to discharge my obligations living at a distance from Wales.' See Williams, *Who Speaks for Wales?*, ed. Daniel Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), p.206.

other. Raymond Williams declared these twin elements of his work for Welsh consciousness when he wrote:

The central point about Scottish and Welsh nationalism is perhaps this: that in Scotland and Wales we are beginning to find ways of expressing two kinds of impulse that are in fact very widely experienced throughout British society. First, we are trying to declare an identity, to discover in fact what we really have in common, in a world which is full of false identities... And second, but related to this, we are trying to discover political processes by which people really can govern themselves – that is, to determine the use of their own energies and resources – as distinct from being governed by an increasingly centralised, increasingly remote and also increasingly penetrating system: the system that those who run it, for their own interests, have decided to call “Unity.”<sup>25</sup>

The process of discovering an identity, we might say, is in part the work of fiction and cultural production. The demand for politically separatist institutions then belongs to the more strictly political sphere. Yet Williams does not draw such a tight demarcation between the two. Instead, he makes an argument about the relation of culture and politics that is openly dialectical and mutually determining. Separatist political institutions create the conditions under which it becomes possible for Scotland and Wales to support their own cultural production: their own writers, dramatists and artists. At the same time, it is also partly because those cultural figures have the courage and confidence to explore their own identity with differential regard to the British whole that the nations in question develop the self-confidence required to demand political institutions of representation. In a way, therefore, Williams *was* campaigning for Welsh devolution while sitting at his desk writing novels. These contributed somewhat to the general rise in Welsh consciousness during the period 1979-97.

The relationship that exists between cultural production and social processes is a dialectical one. This can be gauged by examining the complex historical sequence in which these cultural emergences have occurred. On the face of it, it seems as though The Library of Wales (2006) was launched *after* political change had occurred (in 1997). This would suggest that cultural production is passively dependent on anterior political change, which it then reflects in a secondary manner. On the other hand, not only had a relative step towards devolution already been taken much earlier on, with the holding of a referendum in 1979, but some of the literature – the Lewis Jones novels - had also been published at an earlier period, in the 1930s. The question as to

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<sup>25</sup> Williams, *Who Speaks for Wales?*, p.188.

which came first, the Library or the Assembly, is then a very much more complex one that it may first appear.

The Welsh case is a particularly clear example of a more general materialist theory of culture. On the one hand, it has become possible to revalue Welsh writing of the 1930s (and since) because the Assembly exists to finance such projects. On the other hand, the fact that the Assembly itself exists is in part due to things like the writing. Cultural forms do not only reflect society. They play an active part in societal processes. Literature is both cause and effect of political change. Political change is both cause and effect of the kind of writing produced.

### **Devolving *Frankenstein***

When devolution was realised in Wales in the referendum of 1997, the large swing that had been required to overturn the defeat of 1979 was in part due to the raising of Welsh confidence that comes about through an exploration of Welsh culture and identity in writing, in film, and in other cultural forms.<sup>26</sup> Williams himself had been involved in this work, so that, although he did not survive to witness the moment of devolution, in some senses his lifetime *was* that moment. Thus it is perhaps no coincidence that at roughly the moment of devolution, the Library of Wales has brought Williams's own novel, *Border Country*, back into print. Williams, that is to say, *is* still present during the process of devolution – in his writing, which was a contribution to that process.

Williams was aware that all nations are at root imagined communities. The correlative of this is that the break-up of the nation is also largely an imagined event – hence the utility of considering that event through a fully historical reading of the literature which imagines it into existence. In Britain, this is most evident in relation to devolution in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Recent literature from these nations has emphasised a lack of united British-ness. In many cases, such as Alasdair

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<sup>26</sup> See Jane Aaron and M. Wynn Thomas, 'Pulling You Through Changes: Welsh Writing in English Before, Between and After Two Referenda', *Welsh Writing in English*, ed. M. Wynn Thomas (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003). Aaron and Thomas discuss the impact of writing, film and popular music on Welsh self-confidence.

Gray's novel *Poor Things* (1992), the literature imagined the break-up into being before the actual moment of devolution.<sup>27</sup>

*Poor Things* is an explicit re-writing of the Gothic classic *Frankenstein*, set in Victorian Glasgow. Interestingly, around the moment of devolution, we also find a re-worked Welsh *Frankenstein*, appearing in Malcolm Pryce's 2003 novel, *Last Tango in Aberystwyth*. Gray and Pryce have submitted *Frankenstein* to a process of devolution. Historically, this would not have been possible at an earlier date, because the literary consciousness of Scotland and Wales was too deeply submerged within the British mainstream.<sup>28</sup> With the increase of Scottish and Welsh confidence came a complicating of the ways in which the literature produced within those nations related to the British whole, because the ways in which the nations themselves related to one another were changing.

Since 1997, English literature has been devolved just as much as political power and representation has been devolved from Westminster to Edinburgh and Cardiff.<sup>29</sup> The general historical movement is one away from a direct and traceable repetition of English literary trends inside Scotland and Wales, towards a greater willingness to explore different forms. Alasdair Gray and Malcolm Pryce are not simply imitators of a literary aesthetic prescribed from literary London; they are typical of a later generation of writers in Scotland and Wales.<sup>30</sup> Although full analysis of a range of Scottish and Welsh writers falls outside the scope of this paper, it seems reasonable to suggest that what many recent writers in Scotland and Wales have in common is that their historic imagination is able to subvert the imagined harmony of an earlier period. This in turn can be read in tandem with the process of undoing to which the United Kingdom has more recently become subject. Since devolution has to be understood as an ongoing process rather than an accomplished fact, it can be said that this writing plays a part in the continuing process.

Cultural materialism is the term Raymond Williams used to describe this relationship between writing and historical change. Williams himself had advocated

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<sup>27</sup> Gray, *Poor Things* (London : Bloomsbury, 1992).

<sup>28</sup> One of the few commentators to relate the work of Williams to the growth of Welsh confidence generally is J.P. Ward. See his *Raymond Williams* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1981), pp.9,73.

<sup>29</sup> I have taken this phrase from Robert Crawford's *Devolving English Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> Ian Bell discusses the relationship between recent Scottish writing and nationalist politics in his *Peripheral Visions: Images of nationhood in Contemporary British Fiction* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995), p.3.

nationalism in Wales. This was not out of abstract chauvinism or ethnic pride, but out of a strong sense of the need for democracy: finding the means by which people can direct their own lives. The question has then to be seen less as a matter of how English imperial institutions frustrate national aspirations in the peripheral areas of Scotland and Wales, and more a matter of how the ruling class version of nationhood hinders effective democracy at every level, including within England itself. Williams himself draws attention to the problem, and a potential solution:

A friend from the north of England said to me recently that the Welsh and Scots were lucky to have these available national self-definitions, to help them find their way out of the dominance of English ruling-class minority culture. In the north, he said, we who are English are in the same sense denied; what the world knows as English is not our life and feelings, and yet we don't, like the Welsh or the Scots, have this simple thing, this national difference, to pit against it.<sup>31</sup>

Williams becomes aware of a problem faced by certain English people, wanting the same democratic institutions as the nationalist movements in Scotland and Wales, yet lacking the easy definition of nationhood. He suggests that this lack of national element should free those regions from an emotional burden, and allow them to get more directly to the heart of the real problems. The emotional pull of nationhood can be a barrier to the deeper issues of social class, and an alien and unequal social order. Lacking the national element, then, the English regions should be able to address these problems more – rather than less – directly than in Scotland and Wales. As Williams puts it in his late essay, 'Are We Becoming More Divided?', 'this means, among other things, that a nationalist movement isn't the only way, often isn't the way at all, to work for these things.'<sup>32</sup>

Questioning the unitary make-up of the British state is not merely a matter of devolution in Scotland and Wales. It is a matter of finding what Williams elsewhere calls 'specific and varying political units' for the different people on the island of Britain to represent themselves and control their own lives.<sup>33</sup> It is not quite clear what Williams has in mind when he uses the abstraction 'specific and variable.' On the surface it seems to refer to the inadequacy of the current system of 'all-purpose

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<sup>31</sup> Williams, *Who Speaks for Wales?*, p.10. This friend is Fred Inglis, who recounts the same incident in his biography *Raymond Williams* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.258.

<sup>32</sup> Williams, *Who Speaks for Wales?*, p.189.

<sup>33</sup> Williams, *Towards 2000* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1983), p.125.



representation,<sup>34</sup> and hints at its replacement with a more supple alternative. Yet it is not clear what such an alternative system might look like. I am arguing that the great advantage of considering the renegotiation of British identity that occurs in contemporary and postmodernist fiction is that it gives us a sense of some of the different 'specific and variable' means by which people explore their identity. Cultural materialism tells us that literary products are not simply passive reflections on a set of anterior social relations. They also contribute actively to the formation of new relations.

### **The Break-Up of Britain**

So far I have concentrated on an historical narrative, charting the relation between literature and society from late modernism, through the break-up of the empire and beyond into the period of devolution and self-rule in the different nations of Britain. I must stress, however, that I am not proposing a teleological narrative in which devolution could be staged as the logical end-point of empire. The imaginative break-up of the union that I am exploring in fiction is not simply a literary history of devolution. It also registers the break-down of national consensus and belonging along several other sets of co-ordinates. These include Celtic difference but are not limited to it. Other examples of such terrains include regional identity, feminism, and racial difference. These terrains of renegotiation can all be explored in the fiction that implicitly puts the deeper questions to the unitary state.

The break-up of Britain, then, is not solely a matter of devolution in Scotland and Wales. The danger in suggesting otherwise would be that it would invoke a linear history and strictly teleological mode of temporality where, implicitly, devolution would become synonymous with postmodernism in a manner that would leave England itself trailing in its wake. By emphasising the non-synchronous aspect of postmodernist literary creation I have avoided this distorted position.

Thus postmodernist fiction throws up an opportunity for explorations of the concept of Englishness quite as much as it offers the post-devolution nations of

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<sup>34</sup> Williams, *Towards 2000*, p.125.

Britain an opportunity to develop their own voices.<sup>35</sup> There is an exploration of outdated class-bound notions of Englishness in Graham Swift's 1995 novel, *Last Orders*, and a parody of the stereotypical cultural artefacts of England in Julian Barnes's *England, England* (1998).<sup>36</sup> From the feminist perspective, A.S. Byatt's *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978) is a satire of the pageantry of monarchic culture. Shena Mackay's *Heligoland* (2003) retreats from the public sphere altogether, and withdraws into a smaller, private community. Andrea Levy's 2004 novel, *Small Island*, juxtaposes national myths of military heroism with a plot that is distinctly unheroic.

The Levy novel is worth pausing over for it hints at another important way in which the British identity has been renegotiated in postmodernist fiction – through the lens of specific ethnic communities. Williams has been accused of paying too little regard to the institutionalised racism experienced on a daily basis by members of Britain's ethnic sub-cultures.<sup>37</sup> In 'The Culture of Nations' Williams draws attention to a deeper theoretical problem:

[T]he most active legal (and communal) defence of dislocated and exposed groups and minorities is essential. But it is a serious misunderstanding, when full social relations are in question, to suppose that the problems of social identity are resolved by formal definitions. For unevenly and at times precariously, but always through long experience substantially, an effective awareness of social identity depends on actual and sustained social relationships. To reduce social identity to formal legal definitions, at the level of the state, is to collude with the alienated superficialities of 'the nation' which are the limited functional terms of the modern ruling class.<sup>38</sup>

In one sense Williams could be said to be too keen to overlook the hard-won recognition and legal equality gained by members of Britain's immigrant population in the years after 1945. Yet his point is not that legal equality is not important. It is rather that a legal definition of identity alone is not enough to provide mature cultural expression and growth. In this sense, the purely 'passport' sense of Britishness is of

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<sup>35</sup> Paul Gilroy discusses the need for the political break-up of the British state to be accompanied by a new definition of Englishness in *After Empire* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.105.

<sup>36</sup> On Swift's ironic critique of outmoded versions of Englishness, see Emma Parker, 'No Man's Land: Masculinity and Englishness in Graham Swift's *Last Orders*', in *Posting the Male: Masculinities in Post-War and Contemporary British Literature*, ed. Berthold Schoene (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp.90-103. Tom Nairn discusses the Julian Barnes novel in *After Britain*, p.85.

<sup>37</sup> See Francis Mulhern, 'Towards 2000, or News From You-Know-Where' in *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Terry Eagleton (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), pp.87-90.

<sup>38</sup> Williams, *Towards 2000*, p.195.

vital legal importance in guaranteeing freedom and equality to members of Britain's ethnic minorities, while at the same time also being inadequate to answer any of the hard questions about democracy.

The problem can be more intuitively seen in Salman Rushdie's 1988 novel, *The Satanic Verses*. It is a great irony of Rushdie's novel that the Islamic controversy which surrounded its publication has deflected attention from the main thrust of its satire. *The Satanic Verses* is a committed satire on the lives and treatment of London's racial and ethnic communities during the Thatcher era, culminating in the Brixton race riots. The main protagonists, Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta, are Indian actors who have come to Britain because they admire its civilised culture, and reject their own. In other words, they are archetypal postcolonial split subjects – like Lewis Redfern in Raymond Williams's novel, *The Volunteers*.

Allowing for the well-documented innovation of Rushdie's magical realism, there is a surprising congruence between Rushdie's novel and Williams's interests. Upon entry to Britain, Saladin is immediately seized by Inspector Stein's immigration police and beaten up. As Williams may have predicted, the discovery among the police that Saladin is in fact a British citizen and not an illegal immigrant does not solve his problems:

Stein said: 'Better check him out.' Three and a half minutes later the Black Maria came to a halt and three immigration officers, five constables and one police driver held a crisis conference – *here's a pretty effing pickle* – and Chamcha noted that in their new mood all nine had begun to look alike, rendered equal and identical by their tension and fear. Nor was it long before he understood that the call to the Police National Computer, which had promptly identified him as a British citizen first class, had not improved his situation, but had placed him, if anything, in greater danger than before.<sup>39</sup>

A British passport is not the answer to Saladin's problems: it causes the police to fear recriminations for beating him. They thus beat him further and leave him abandoned. As Williams may have foreseen, Saladin then seeks a more substantive identity than its merely 'passport' version, by taking refuge at the Shaandaar Café, run by Mr and Mrs Sufyan, and home to a number of other racial outsiders in Margaret Thatcher's prosperous 80s London. A sub-cultural community is formed in this way, with Mrs Sufyan as its matriarch:

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<sup>39</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Vintage, 1998), pp.163-64.

And what was it that made them a living in this Vilayet of her exile, this Yuké of her sex-obsessed husband's vindictiveness? What? His book learning? His *Gitanjali*, *Eclogues*, or that play *Othello* that he explained was really Attallah or Attaullah except the writer couldn't spell, what sort of writer was that, anyway? <sup>40</sup>

The answer to this rhetorical question is that it is the cooking of Mrs Sufyan that keeps the business going financially. Moreover, at a much deeper cultural level it is also this process that keeps the sub-cultural community together in the face of disintegration – which culminates in Rushdie's dramatisation of the Brixton riots. It is significant that Rushdie's *Yuké* recalls Williams: 'that which should be spelled as it so barbarously sounds - the United Kingdom, the *Yookay*.'<sup>41</sup> *The Satanic Verses* performs in fiction what Williams attempted in *The Volunteers* and theorised in a more coherent way in his non-fiction, namely, a critique of the limiting and residually imperial construction of the United Kingdom, and a deeper exploration of precise local communities. This exploration could also be found in such novels as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (1999), Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and Andrea Levy's *Small Island*. The main shift is away from providing final answers and mastery, and towards an aesthetic of incomplete-ness, where the protagonists themselves are invariably shown to be the real object of the mystery. This forces us to ask: what is identity?; what is belonging? It is a technique that was already at work in *The Volunteers*, but without the formal innovation that I am characterising as postmodernist and which only became possible under subsequent historical conditions.

*The Satanic Verses* and *Small Island* both resemble *The Volunteers* at a strictly thematic level. Both deploy narrative techniques that I have been describing as postmodernist: parody, subversion, irony, and a deep-rooted commitment to questioning different forms of identity politics.<sup>42</sup> The fictional break-up of Britain affords a new opportunity, beyond the entrenched modes of the past, for an active re-imagining of the present.

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<sup>40</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p.248.

<sup>41</sup> Williams, *Towards 2000*, p.182.

<sup>42</sup> For a theoretical discussion of these techniques see Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2002) pp.44-59. Is Hutcheon's title a refrain of Raymond Williams's *The Politics of Modernism*?

I have argued that Raymond Williams can be understood as an early postcolonial writer, in the very particular sense that he anticipates the moment of devolution and the political break-up of Britain. His own novels have then to be understood as part of a much more general process of questioning the received unitary identity of Britain, which occurs along all sorts of other co-ordinates. The general movement is away from analysis of the cultural consciousness of *late* modern Britain, and the break-up of its empire. It is a movement towards analysis of *post*-modern Britain, and the break-up of the kingdom.