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Raymond Williams and Education: History, Culture, Democracy
by Ian Menter, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, 205 pp.,
£28.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-3501-8539-5

Book review by Nick Sorensen, Bath Spa University

Raymond Williams is widely regarded as one of the key intellectual figures of the 20th century. He made substantial contributions to cultural theory, the way we understand language and the development of the New Left. In his non-fiction writing he gave attention to drama and the theatre, literature, film and television and socialism. Additionally he embraced fictional writing for the insights it gave into human life and social relations, most importantly the novels that form his 'Welsh trilogy'. Much of his life was spent as a teacher and all of his work is infused with a pedagogical intent. Yet, in spite of all this, little attention has been given to the significance of his work with regard to education and it is this lacuna that is addressed by Ian Menter.

'Raymond Williams and Education: History, Culture, Democracy' is informed by Menter's life long fascination with Williams's work, stimulated by the similarities in the biographies of Williams and his own father. Menter, drawing upon the full range of writing and thought, provides a detailed analysis of how Williams has informed the way we understand education and how his analytical tools have helped shape educational studies in the United Kingdom and internationally.

Menter's argument for the significance of Williams's contribution to education is based on four points: first, that he was a teacher through and through, engaging intellectually with others, seeing knowledge and understanding as key elements in the realisation of humanity; second, that he directly addressed issues of educational provision, exposing the deep contradictions in universal education, not least upon lines of social class; third, the development of analytical methods that became known as cultural materialism and, finally, as a key founder of cultural studies through his analysis of literature, drama, film and television.

These themes are critically explored and developed in eight chapters beginning with an exploration of the relationship between biography and identity and how Williams's own educational experiences shaped the person that he became. Immediately we are brought into an understanding of Williams's individual way of thinking. For him education is 'ordinary' in the sense that it gives ordinary members of society its full common meanings, and the skills to engage with them in the light of their personal and common experience. Furthermore all personal experience is seen as educational. Chapter 2 looks at the importance of fiction and the ways in which his own novels reveal his understanding of education both as a process and as a set of institutions.

A key text with regard to education is the seminal account of the development of education in Britain in *The Long Revolution* (2011) showing how competing forces have shaped the curriculum. This text is looked at in detail in chapter 3 while chapter 4 outlines the significance of adult education. Together, chapters 5 and 6 consider the contributions Williams made to the way that we understand culture and the methods that he developed for its analysis. The latter chapter demonstrates the ways in which Williams promoted the idea of the democratisation of culture and the development of cultural studies as a field of academic endeavour. Chapter 7 outlines his theoretical legacy giving attention to the key concepts of 'structures of feeling', 'cultural materialism' and 'base and super-structure'. The book concludes with a review of the main ideas that have been discussed in earlier chapters by drawing attention to the three words that supplement the books title: history, culture and democracy.

Raymond Williams was undoubtedly the product of a particular time (post-war Britain recovering from the stress and hardships of the Second World War) and a particular place (an upbringing situated on the Welsh/English border). He died in 1988 and consequently did not live to see the educational reforms driven by Thatcherism and neo-liberal ideologies. This does beg the question as to how relevant his views on education are to contemporary educators. This is an issue that Menter tackles directly throughout the book, noting that there is a great deal that can be understood about the contemporary educational scene through the influence and insight of Williams.

What would Williams have made of the struggles that define the current educational scene? An over prescriptive and limited curriculum, the decline in humanities and arts education, the over reliance on economic principles on which education is assessed and valued, the crisis in teacher recruitment and retention, a decline in student well-being and mental health: all of these issues seem a long way from the principles that defined Williams' life and work. Without engaging too extensively on speculation, Williams's legacy provides an excellent starting point to re-orientate our educational thinking, to measure what we have lost and to assess the implications of this for democracy and our cultural and political lives.

My personal response to this book is that it reminds me of the multiple and varied ways in which Williams has informed my own intellectual development. I first encountered his writing as a student of drama and English; *Drama in Performance* (1968) introduced me to the idea that plays needed to be analysed within the context of their original conditions of production. Later, whilst working on my Masters thesis the chapter on 'Education and British Society' in *The Long Revolution* informed my views on the place of the arts in the curriculum. My research on improvisation is underpinned by the methodology of *Keywords* and the importance of mapping the different meanings attributed to words at different times and in different cultures. As a teacher and teacher

educator my work has always been informed by the belief that education is about enabling ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

Menter does the legacy of Raymond Williams a great service by sharing the richness of his vision, intellectual thinking and his practice and, by doing so, bringing these ideas back into a contemporary educational discourse. This is a book worth reading in its entirety, investing the time to step aside from current educational arguments in order to consider the trajectory that education has taken in recent decades, what has been gained and what has been lost. Williams reminds us of the importance of the agency of teachers, that culture and education is 'ordinary', that the humanities are important, that fiction is an important way of understanding the social world and the processes and institutions that contribute to the 'structure of feeling'. At a time of environmental crisis, the escalation of inequalities and injustice and the threats that populism and social media pose to democratic discourse the values and ideas of Raymond Williams offer the possibility of hope. Ian Menter's book provides a forceful reminder that this legacy offers alternative ways to thinking about education that have relevance today

References

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