

# *Introduction: Raymond Williams and Working-Class Writing*

Article

Accepted Version

Wilson, N. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4843-840X> and O'Brien, P. (2020) Introduction: Raymond Williams and Working-Class Writing. Key Words: A Journal of Cultural Materialism, 18. pp. 5-21. ISSN 1369-9725 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/93754/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Published version at: <https://raymondwilliams.co.uk/journal/#:~:text=Key%20Words%3A%20A%20Journal%20of%20Cultural%20Materialism.%20Key,and%20cultural%20forms%20in%20the%20contemporary%20global%20era.>

Publisher: The Raymond Williams Society

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

[www.reading.ac.uk/centaur](http://www.reading.ac.uk/centaur)

**CentAUR**

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online



**\*This is the pre-publication version of this article, published in *Key Words* 18 (2020). This accords with *Key Words* Green open access route\***

## **Introduction**

### **Raymond Williams and Working-Class Writing**

Phil O'Brien and Nicola Wilson

Raymond Williams wrote extensively on working-class writing, both from a theoretical position and as an author from a working-class background. His body of work poses important questions around 'uneven and privileged access to writing and to print' and how 'the economics of commercial publishing' could work against the writer.<sup>1</sup> One of the central challenges he consistently identified was of a 'creative' kind, a task described as 'finding forms for a working-class fiction of fully developed class relations'.<sup>2</sup> Across Williams's engagement with what is hesitatingly labelled the 'working-class novel' in his work, there is a complex process of both documenting and questioning, of seeking to capture the currents of working-class writing while simultaneously pushing to extend and overcome limiting definitions. This is one of his invaluable contributions, not only to theoretical discussions of class but also to that defining feature of his work: the relationship between culture and society. Williams consistently makes a double move then, in order to expand and push forward our understanding, finding useful resources while posing formal and, ultimately, cultural and political questions. This special issue of *Key Words* on 'Working-Class Writing' aims to do the same, in part through its range and breadth of material. Such variety is captured in two interviews (with writer Lynsey Hanley and publisher and academic John Goodridge), by four essays mapping key developments across the twentieth and into the twenty-first century (on 1930s proletarian fiction, post-1945 and mid-century writing, and contemporary drama), a Recoveries piece on the short stories and autobiography of Malachi Whitaker, a keywords entry on class, and an extensive reviews section which encompasses recent scholarship on working-class literature.

We are delighted that one of the contributions to the issue is by Williams himself; it is the first time one of his essays has been published in full in *Key Words*. 'British Working-Class Literature after 1945' was originally given as a talk in Aarhus, Denmark on 25 September 1979. Williams was 58 at the time, nearing a retirement taken four years later, and gave ten lectures overall on a two-week tour of Danish universities.<sup>3</sup> It was a fortnight of public speaking which captured the immense variety of his writing and thinking, work that

*New Left Review* described in the same year as ‘crossing academic boundaries and confounding disciplinary expectations’.<sup>4</sup> He spoke on Marxist literary theory, cultural studies, the development of women’s studies programmes, critical approaches to television, socialism, and on Welsh literature and the industrial novel.<sup>5</sup> The lecture on the working-class novel was recorded and is published here for the first time. It will be included in a new collection of previously unpublished and uncollected Williams essays, titled *Culture and Politics*, released by Verso next year (2021 being the centenary of Williams’s birth).<sup>6</sup> As an essay it represents a period of sustained reflection on questions of class, form, working-class writing, and the problems of categorisation. These were themes Williams returned to repeatedly in his writing, but there was an urgency and directness about the way he addressed them at the end of the 1970s and into the early ’80s. ‘British Working-Class Literature after 1945’ should be considered alongside, and in some ways read as an earlier version of, his work of the same period: ‘Region and Class in the Novel’ and ‘Working-Class, Proletarian, Socialist: Problems in some Welsh Novels’ first published in 1982 and, from the same year, ‘The Ragged-Arsed Philanthropists’. Some of the central, overlapping strands of these writings can also be traced back to ‘The Welsh Industrial Novel’, published in 1979 from a lecture a year earlier, and to ‘The Welsh Trilogy; *The Volunteers*’ chapter in *Politics and Letters* (1979).<sup>7</sup> They are a loose collection of essays which include discussions of the presence and absence of work in fiction, inheritance plots, literary form and entry points for working-class writers (including autobiography), escape narratives, and discussions of, amongst others, Virginia Woolf, Charles Dickens, Robert Tressell, D. H. Lawrence, Jack Jones, Gwyn Jones, Lewis Jones, and Gwyn Thomas. Emerging across such interventions are the structural contours of working-class writing in the twentieth century, what Williams describes as the necessity of ‘showing whole, determining social relationships’ and the ‘continuing tension, with very complicated emotions and relationships running through it, between two different worlds that needed to be rejoined’.<sup>8</sup> He talks of this ‘showing’ as a problem facing those authors who first attempted to write working-class experience into the novel form. According to Williams, D. H. Lawrence, for example, is an example of a writer from a working-class background who struggled to maintain a robust engagement with class as a whole social process and set of relations – particularly in his later fiction – because of a reliance on working-class life as an experience of childhood. This is one of the recurring problems that Williams theorises, which persists today, within the working-class novel founded on a personal back story and, additionally, an ‘escape’ from one class to another. As Williams warns,

both the working class and the general complex of class relationships are displaced: the former to childhood and adolescent experience, without significant attention to the continuing conditions of adult working-class life; the latter, almost wholly, to generalities of an ideological kind.<sup>9</sup>

Here you get that double move by Williams referred to earlier: a recognition of the value of a method but also, more pointedly, an articulation of the limitations of what valuable resources are available.

If class is ‘a formation of social relationships within a whole social order’,<sup>10</sup> then, according to Williams, ‘a working class, at its most general, and in any socialist perspective, is really a formation within a much wider system: not only the much wider national and international economy; but also the relations between classes’.<sup>11</sup> In his body of thinking on working-class writing, Williams attempts to map the different types of working-class novel before gesturing forward to how the form could and should be developed if it is to fully articulate class as a structural condition. He notes a number of different yet similar forms of writing about the working class: ‘the family novel, the family novel partly extended to a class, and the novel written from a conscious class perspective’.<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere, he defines four specific features within the general category of working-class writing: the novel of 1) ‘working-class childhood, and of the move away from it’; 2) ‘a past period of working-class life, typically just at the edge of living memory; unconnected to the present’; 3) ‘contemporary working-class life, naturalised, depoliticised, reproductive’; and 4) ‘working class–middle class encounters, within newly mobile and mixed communities’.<sup>13</sup> Crucially, Williams expands on these ways of writing about class experience in ‘British Working-Class Literature after 1945’, partly by drawing on the difficulties of writing about his working-class family in the semi-autobiographical *Border Country* (1960). There is a danger of enclosure, he warns, a risk of shutting working-class experience off from both the wider dynamic formations of class and the historical processes embedded within contemporary social relationships. Williams wrote *Border Country* seven times he admits, albeit with different titles, as he struggled to articulate the experience of the working-class family who stay and the child who leaves and returns, what he calls ‘the move back as well as the move away’.<sup>14</sup> Williams adds, ‘that life had to be experienced not just as family background, which is the way the form pushes it, but as something where it is not known what is going to happen’.<sup>15</sup> There was ‘no form’, he felt while he was grappling with *Border Country*, for the ‘sense of

the continuity of working-class life, which does not cease just because one individual moves out of it, but which also itself changes internally'.<sup>16</sup> So Williams's debut novel is partly an attempt to break free from the demands of the form, demands often shaped by the plots of middle-class lives familiar from the longer history of the English novel.<sup>17</sup>

What is different about the Aarhus lecture is that Williams compares *Border Country* explicitly to the work of his contemporaries David Storey and Alan Sillitoe. Here are two writers whose novels defined a new form of writing about working-class life but whose works are rarely placed alongside Williams's novels of the same period (his 1960 debut *Border Country* and its 1964 follow-up *Second Generation*). Nor do these writers occur amongst Williams's line-up of authors-to-think-with as in his other published essays on working-class writing (he gives both a brief single mention in *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* and they are no doubt in mind when he discusses the 'new forms of the fifties' in his interview with *New Left Review*).<sup>18</sup> Williams takes up a unique position here, as one of the most significant literary critics of the twentieth century as well as a postwar novelist with a working-class upbringing. He does not suggest that the solutions of the problems faced by the working-class writer can be found in his own novels; he does, however, suggest ways beyond the important but (what he identifies as) limited forms of working-class writing of the mid-twentieth century. According to Williams, the postwar working-class novel was defined and, in the final instance, hindered, by two ways of writing: 1) the working-class novel *without* work as a significant lived experience; rather, the move away being *the* central experience; or 2) 'the working-class weekend novel', one which briefly depicts work as monotonous and to be endured while the real action takes place *outside* of work. The first form – 'versions of the novel of escape', like John Braine's *Room at the Top* (1957) – had a long trajectory, from Lawrence through to Storey, while the second, typified in Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), was associated with youth and sexual vigour and 'became one of the dominant motifs of the sixties'.<sup>19</sup> In both cases, and despite locating significant value in each, Williams argues that the inability to conjoin productive tensions between individual change with the postwar 'movement of people', plus the absence of working-class work as a lived and enduring social process (including a lack of writerly engagement with the 'marked changes' to manual occupations by the end of the '70s) limits the reach of both forms as a contemporary structure for working-class writing.<sup>20</sup>

It is important here to keep in mind Williams's specific definition of 'work' as 'regular paid employment', a narrowness he was aware of and would be duly criticised for in the contemporary second-wave feminist debates.<sup>21</sup> In his discussion of 'work' in *Keywords*,

Williams points out the specialization of understandings of work to paid employment and ‘the predominant social relationship’ (rather than the productive effort itself) as a ‘result of the development of capitalist productive relations’.<sup>22</sup> ‘It is only in this sense that a woman running a house and bringing up children can be said to be not working’, he notes, while elsewhere describing as ‘entirely right’ the women’s liberation movement’s ‘demand of payment for housework’.<sup>23</sup> This historically specific and gendered understanding of work as paid social relationship opens up suggestive caveats about inclusions and exclusions in Williams’s theoretical framing of working-class writing. The overriding concern with waged work as defining feature of the working-class novel and the implicit absence of paid domestic work within Williams’s theorising, for instance, is a masculinist blind spot that causes him to neglect other forms of working-class writing that were available to him.<sup>24</sup> Instead, Williams turns to two alternative paths forward, the starting points found in both the traditions of Welsh working-class writing and the ‘subjunctive realism’ of playwright Jim Allen; the latter is of particular relevance here.

Sadly, the Aarhus recording stops before Williams’s concluding remarks. He begins to talk of television drama: James Mitchell’s *When the Boat Comes In* (a series which ran on the BBC from 1976 to 1981) and the work of writer Jim Allen who, with producer Tony Garnett and director Ken Loach, was responsible for *The Big Flame* (1969) and *Days of Hope* (1975). Thankfully, we have a good idea of what he would have gone on to say from his published writings on Mitchell and Allen. Early episodes of *When the Boat Comes In* as well as *Days of Hope*, a four-part BBC mini-series, were praised by Williams for their recreation of both working-class life and work as they expand into the wider social processes of industrial society. They are both ‘moving’ and ‘valuable’ but, as period dramas, they connect ‘to the present in mood and idea rather than in social experience’; if such forms are unconnected to the present in social experience, however, then they remain as period pieces, as ‘spectacle’ rather than ‘historical’, Williams argues.<sup>25</sup> One reason for such problems is to be found in the necessary struggle of writing the working class into forms from which they have been historically excluded. This difficulty is likened by Williams to the naturalist theatre of the 1880s and the move, arguably for the first time in realist form, by the likes of Henrik Ibsen to handle ‘a whole body of material waiting to be dramatized’. In *Politics and Letters*, Williams says:

Works like *Days of Hope*, or early episodes in *When the Boat Comes In*, were clearly able to operate unproblematically with their new material before the

same problems were hit again. Characteristically the focus of this naturalism was retrospective, filling the gap where the historical experience of the working class had never before been represented: its impulse was contemporary with the significant new works of history which were similarly reconstructing the past of an unwritten class.<sup>26</sup>

This postwar television drama was to Williams important but formally limited in value, needing to move beyond the confines of retrospection and expanding the cultural forms which are in the first instance a necessary part of historical recovery. There is a compelling similarity here to what we identified earlier in Williams's own approach to the study of working-class writing: a necessary return to the over-looked and marginalised but also a recognition that any act of recovery presents a starting point for further inquiry rather than a definitive, enclosed sub-discipline of retrospective categorisation. The first move is often urgent and essential, but it must allow for, and be followed by, an opening up rather than a shutting off.

The formal problems can partly be resolved, according to Williams, within realism and, therefore, at the level of cultural form. *The Big Flame*, shown by the BBC in February 1969, documents a fictional strike on the Liverpool docks and a worker occupation of the yards.<sup>27</sup> Williams describes how the television play shifts from the indicative realist mode (recognisable images of working and family life; familiar disputes over the reorganisation of labour) to the subjunctive: what if we did this, what would happen next? 'What the play successfully presents', he writes, 'is an experience which is not realist in the indicative sense of recording contemporary reality, but in the subjunctive sense of supposing a possible sequence of actions beyond it'.<sup>28</sup> Subjunctive realism is 'realism plus hypothesis' then,<sup>29</sup> a hypothesis which helps develop a political consciousness and politically imagined possibilities: 'it is not what they have done but what they could do next', he stresses.<sup>30</sup> The crucial moment is a fracture, according to Williams, 'between the familiar methods of establishing recognition and the alternative methods of hypothesis within that recognition'.<sup>31</sup>

This sustained period of engagement with working-class writing in the late 1970s, pushing to expand and develop an understanding of it as a form, also saw Williams place a specific focus on the Welsh working-class novel; this again takes us back to his own practice and methodology as an author. 'It is characteristic of Williams's work', suggests Daniel Williams, 'that issues that were given more theoretical formulations in the 1970s had already been explored in fictional form in his novels'.<sup>32</sup> The late-1970s has been characterised by Ben



Harker as one in which Williams revisited – by tracing and extending the work of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Bertolt Brecht, Georg Lukács, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Theodor Adorno – the ‘key episodes in international Marxist debates on literature and commitment’.<sup>33</sup> In *Marxism and Literature* (1977), for instance, Williams outlines and develops his thinking on cultural materialism as a methodology. So the 1970s was a period of deep intellectual engagement with the debates and struggles within the traditions of Marxist cultural theory, a process Williams initially began as an undergraduate at Cambridge before partially withdrawing and then returning.<sup>34</sup> It was also a decade within which, by its end, he was writing in a similarly expansive and probing manner about nation and class. Here is a fascinating and telling conjuncture: *Marxism, Wales, Working-Class Writing*. Daniel Williams has warned against describing Williams’s renewed engagement with Wales as a ‘return’ if it is used to dismiss it as a ‘retreat’.<sup>35</sup> Rather, it is a move to revisit and retrace in order to expand and overcome some of the recurring obstacles faced by Williams, both politically and culturally; that is certainly the case when it comes to the relevance and uses of Welsh working-class fiction.

Williams’s essays on the working-class novel place a sustained critical focus on the male industrial novel in Wales. They were pieces written in the aftermath of a period which saw him begin to ‘grapple self-consciously with the meaning of his Welsh experience’, becoming a ‘significant participant’ in the ‘Welsh cultural and historical debates [...] from the mid-1970s onwards’.<sup>36</sup> Williams selects, across the essays we have been discussing, the 1930s and ’40s writings of Jack Jones, Gwyn Jones, Lewis Jones, and Gwyn Thomas to explore the differences in focus within the Welsh industrial novel, in contrast to the earlier English industrial novels – by Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Kingsley, and George Eliot – memorably grouped together in *Culture and Society* (1958).<sup>37</sup> Unlike the latter from the mid-nineteenth century, the writings which come later in Wales are ‘written from *inside* the industrial communities’, notes Williams, ‘they are working-class novels in the new and distinctive twentieth-century sense’.<sup>38</sup> These works make a ‘distinctive and special contribution’ by mapping a specific Welsh structure of feeling centred around the working-class family; crucially, however, they too face ‘radical problems of form’ because the 1926 General Strike is experienced as an ‘enclosed loss’ and family defeat – compressing and foreclosing the wider social implications and political contours of that defeat.<sup>39</sup> For Williams, it is because they are written from a position which remains within the working class, with a focus on work as formative and class struggle as decisive, that the Welsh industrial novel is able to avoid the problems later encountered by the likes of Storey and Sillitoe.

How to represent working-class defeat, both formally and politically, is a pertinent question raised by the work of both Jim Allen and the Welsh industrial novelists. It is revealing, therefore, that Williams returned to such questions in the late 1970s and early '80s. Here is a critical moment, one marking a transition from the political confidence of his mid-70s writing to what has been described as 'attempts at imagining forms of community that gesture beyond [...] two moments of defeat', informed by the 1979 Welsh devolution referendum and the Miners' Strike of 1984/85.<sup>40</sup> The feeling of defeat can be expanded, however, to encompass the rise to dominance of the New Right and the victory of Thatcherism more broadly, the latter often seen to be crystallised by the defeat of the miners but explored as an ascendant ideology by Williams before 1984.<sup>41</sup> What the working-class novel should do at such a moment was often explained in the negative ('[t]he working class is not a childhood family', '[t]he working class is not a past tense',<sup>42</sup> for instance), but for Williams the task was to work through conceptions of class and nation in order to reach for 'new perspectives and new forms'.<sup>43</sup> This involved the recognition of a 'working class still making itself, though now in diverse ways'.<sup>44</sup> More specifically, it involved the 'obvious need for work which can recognise [...] the altered political and social conditions of the now exceptionally diverse contemporary working class'.<sup>45</sup>

It is some of this diversity, capturing the work of those writers who were already producing new forms to articulate a sense of the working class as a broad social and historical formation, that is missing from the Aarhus lecture. While Williams discusses African, Asian, and West Indian literature in *The Country and the City* (1973) – examining the 'economic and political relationships [...] beyond the boundaries of the nation-state', for instance, through the work of Chinua Achebe, Han Suyin, and George Lamming among others – there is no discussion of black immigrant working-class writing in his essays on class and the British novel.<sup>46</sup> Trinidadian-born Sam Selvon's London novels exploring class and postwar Caribbean migration do not seem to be a part of Williams's literary reference points of the '50s, nor do Nigerian-born Buchi Emecheta's 'self-documentary' fictions of the 1970s.<sup>47</sup> As the first African woman to find a novelistic form to write about female working-class immigrant experience in postwar Britain, Emecheta is a writer whose work expands and moves beyond what Williams identifies as the limitations of post-1945 working-class fiction. Like Williams, Emecheta's father worked as a railwayman and her semi-autobiographical novels describe the crossing of national and classed borders. Crucially, however, the 'move away' traced in Emecheta's work is an inverse of the conventional 'escape' from working-class life. Both *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) (later republished

together as *Adah's Story* (1983)) focus on the protagonist Adah Obi who emigrates from Nigeria to England post-independence, leaving a relatively affluent lifestyle in Lagos (well-paid work as a librarian at the American Consulate; the employment of four servants at home) to one of poverty and abuse in London. Even though her job at North Finchley Library is described as 'first-class', Adah is a 'second-class citizen' as an immigrant; her life as a poor, black, working mother is defined by structural racism, violence, domestic abuse, misogyny, and the inequalities of the class system in Britain during the 1960s and '70s. The conjoined oppressions of sex, gender, race, colonialism, and class combine in Emecheta's early fictions to show the experience of class as an intersectional lived identity. Emecheta finds her way through these themes in a new and complex form that shifts between documentary, autobiography, and fiction, suggestive of what was being described in France at around the same time as autofiction.<sup>48</sup>

In her autobiography, *Head Above Water* (1986), Emecheta documents the myriad obstacles to life as a working-class writer and the persistent sense of precarity. These stretch from finding the time and resources to write as a working single parent, through perceived ideological challenges around content, subject matter, and form. Aware of mainstream, gendered ideas around celebrity and authorship for instance, Emecheta notes, that she 'could never be like them', when she watches 'Somerset Maugham, Jimmy Baldwin and the rest of them on television [...] because even then I knew I was going to write about the little happenings of everyday life'.<sup>49</sup> *Head Above Water* also lays out some of the material and economic difficulties for a working-class writer challenged by the material instruments of writing and the professional presentation of manuscripts, through the challenges in negotiating literary and publishing networks – in finding agents, editors, and publishers – through to the slow payments and timescales involved in literary publishing itself. Movingly, Emecheta describes how she would type out her own manuscripts, poorly, at the start of her career in the mid-1960s because she could not afford a professional typist; she reveals how her second agent suggested that the roughness of her work and poor presentation was putting some publishers off.<sup>50</sup> Writing as a successful, internationally-known novelist and academic in the mid-1980s, Emecheta concludes her memoir with the proviso that 'living entirely off writing is a precarious existence and money is always short'.<sup>51</sup> She consistently complicates the often neat narrative arcs of the working-class escape by locating her writing at the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and the specific pressures of cultural expectation. Her work pushes against the imposition of accepted norms and the conventions

of the novel form, just as Williams was exploring new forms to talk about the complexities of class as a continuing and shifting lived experience a decade earlier in *Border Country*.

So Emecheta faced a consistent pressure which is placed, in different ways, upon working-class writers: the weight of constructed norms defined, in part, by the publishing industry and by middle-class readerships and cultural expectations. This issue of *Key Words* touches upon the various forms such processes take, as discussed by Williams in his essay, by Lynsey Hanley who has faced a similar yet different set of expectations (discussed in ‘The Intimate Histories of Class: An Interview with Lynsey Hanley’), by John Goodridge as a publisher of working-class writing, and across the essays on twentieth- and twenty-first-century working-class writing. These are pressing contemporary concerns revolving around the complexities faced by working-class writers seeking to work within the publishing industry. What are the costs of having to work within the imposed parameters of markets and readership, as defined by the industry? Is it possible to create and shape new ways and forms of writing about working-class life? Writing is financially risky and rarely lucrative; currently, median earnings of professional writers (those who spend more than 50 per cent of their work time writing) fall below the minimum wage.<sup>52</sup> Once material and psychological barriers to entry have been faced, there is a whole industry to navigate which is often foreign to those from more diverse social backgrounds. From D. H. Lawrence to James Kelman, Sam Selvon to Pat Barker, working-class writers have been told to edit and revise dialect, style, and characters to get their work published by and for the literary mainstream.

In 2018, analysis conducted at the University of Reading into publishers’ rejections between 1890 and 1940 found that the most common reasons for rejecting the manuscripts of working-class and BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) authors in this earlier period bore out Emecheta’s concerns described in her autobiography. Rejections typically focused around concern for poor sales due to excessive (read ‘limiting’) regional settings and dialect; poor spelling and grammar; coupled with badly typed manuscripts and/or poor self-presentation.<sup>53</sup> ‘A story of the recent strike on the Scotch Railways. Only of temporary and local interest. Too much Scotch dialect to please English readers’ notes a rejection of a Dundee-based author in 1891; ‘negro dialect poems. A hopeless proposition’ reports the reader on Virginia Woodward Cloud’s volume, *Candlelight*, in 1926; ‘a gloomy novel apparently written by a working man. V. R. says it is ungrammatical and has no merits’ is the comment on *Wages of Living*, a novel submitted by Glasgow-based Daniel MacDougall that same year.<sup>54</sup> Yorkshire-based Malachi Whitaker – subject of the Recoveries section by Susie

Panesar in this issue – had her first novel rejected by Chatto & Windus because it was, according to the reader’s report:

A mining novel. Two little girls grow up and get married. The picture of life in a mining village should be good but are just dull. The subject seems to me to display the impecuniosity of miners as a class.<sup>55</sup>

These kind of judgements and prejudices – rooted in a complex mixture of literary and aesthetic taste, subject unfamiliarity, and the publisher’s commercial sense of a book’s readership and likely success – come up time and again as writers from working-class backgrounds meet the field of literary publishing. The prejudice against so-called ‘regional’ writing as an ‘expression of centralized cultural dominance’ was central to Williams’s own critiques of literary production.<sup>56</sup> To read the amount of ‘regional’ writing that was rejected by mainstream literary publishers is to appreciate, even more, those writers who did manage to see their works into print, against the often overwhelming force of ‘cultural centralization’.<sup>57</sup>

Increasingly aware of its own ‘class ceilings’ and lack of regional diversity, various initiatives, paid internships, and mentorship schemes to address systemic problems within the publishing industry have recently been launched. As Orian Brook, David O’Brien and Mark Taylor, authors of the 2018 report *Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries*, noted: ‘The situation in Publishing is especially grave, with over a third of the workers from the upper middle class social origins and only about an eighth from working class origins’.<sup>58</sup> In early 2019, trade magazine *The Bookseller* undertook a large survey of class in publishing and found that a majority of those who identified as working class felt their career had been negatively impacted by their origins. ‘The data shows that for those from working-class backgrounds’, wrote Philip Jones, ‘the publishing business is a difficult, off-putting and prejudiced space’.<sup>59</sup> Katy Shaw’s 2020 *Common People* report makes a number of specific recommendations to challenge this bias, starting with increased funding to support the regional writing development agencies and incentivising the decentralisation of the publishing industry. As she says in her report, ‘the profile of the gatekeepers to publishing needs to change’.<sup>60</sup> And of course so does the publisher’s sense of audience. Anamik Saha and Sandra van Lente’s report, *Re:Thinking ‘Diversity’ in Publishing* (2020), argues that ‘minority and working-class audiences feel alien to the core publishing industry. The big

publishers essentially cater for a white and middle-class audience'.<sup>61</sup> This takes us back to Chatto & Windus's readers' reports one hundred years ago.

While austerity policies and the erosion of the welfare state have made barriers to entry in the creative industries higher than ever, the last decade has seen a concomitant resurgence of popular and academic interest in working-class writing and cultural production. This includes large recovery volumes like John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan's edited *A History of British Working-Class Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), *Working-Class Literature(s): Historical and International Perspectives* (Stockholm University Press, 2017) edited by Magnus Nilsson and John Lennon, and Ben Clarke and Nick Hubble's edited *Working-Class Writing: Theory and Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). These collections, along with numerous other books and recovery projects, in particular Goodridge's database of British and Irish labouring-class poets (discussed in 'Publishing and Working-Class Writing: An Interview with John Goodridge'), have helped address Raymond Williams's concern with mapping the working-class writing that made it into print, let alone the much larger range that has never been published. Smaller, independent presses such as Dead Ink and Unbound have had popular success with collections of essays by contemporary working-class writers: *Know Your Place: Essays on the Working Class by the Working Class* (2017) and *Common People: An Anthology of Working-Class Writers* (2019); the latter is included in our reviews section. Both these volumes include essays on the difficulties of being working class and getting into publishing and/or being published as a working-class writer. They build on a long-running tradition of small presses taking on and publishing working-class writers, like Trent Editions (formed in 1998) as discussed by Goodridge.

Experimental small presses such as Liverpool's Dead Ink are increasingly turning to crowd-funding publications and direct-to-consumer publishing to ensure a readership for more socially and regionally diverse titles (Dead Ink ran a kick-starter funding campaign for *Test Signal: A Northern Anthology*, for instance, a biennial anthology produced in partnership with the writing development agency, New Writing North).<sup>62</sup> Manchester-based Dostoyevsky Wannabe, co-founded by Richard Brammer and Victoria Brown, are experimenting with other financial models to get working-class writing into print. Dostoyevsky Wannabe is a non-profit which releases paperbacks cost-price and has had mainstream success with publications such as Isabel Waidner's edited *Liberating the Canon: An Anthology of Innovative Literature* (2018) as well as Waidner's second novel, *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff* (2019), shortlisted for the Goldsmiths Prize for innovative fiction. Waidner quotes from Raymond Williams throughout their introduction in *Liberating the Canon*, using Williams's

insights on formal distinctions and disciplinary limitations in how we understand writing to intervene ‘against the normativity of literary publishing contexts’ and to make the case for more queer avant-garde working-class writing.<sup>63</sup> ‘This is *how* we redo canonical’, Waidner writes:

We don’t just work across the identity categories (BAME, LGBTQI, woman, working-class) and their various intersections. (We don’t just put our difference to work). We also work across formal distinction (prose and poetry, and various genre distinctions) and across disciplines (literature, art, performance, critical theory and various subcultural contexts), unrepressing what the cultural theorist Raymond Williams termed the ‘multiplicity of writing’.<sup>64</sup>

The act of liberation is necessary if we are to avoid the damaging restrictions of ‘tradition’, what Williams explains as ‘an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification’.<sup>65</sup> As Waidner suggests above, there is an additional complexity when seeking to challenge and reject the marginalisation of working-class writing; by the ‘deliberate selection and emphasis’ of certain writers and texts, we risk producing limiting and potentially damaging new selective categories.<sup>66</sup> Williams discusses such challenges in his opening remarks to ‘British Working-Class Literature after 1945’. It is something he was acutely aware of when choosing to focus solely on male working-class writers in ‘The Welsh Industrial Novel’, neglecting obvious contemporaries like Kate Roberts and Margiad Evans. As Daniel Williams suggests, ‘Williams [was] drawing attention to the limits of that tradition and expressing a desire to move beyond it’.<sup>67</sup>

The essays that follow do not, therefore, seek to establish a new category of working-class writing but have rather been selected because they contribute to a much larger debate and discussion around class, form, tradition, and representation. The latter is a central focus in Matti Ron’s essay, ‘An Uneasy Avant-Garde: The Politics of Modernism in 1930s Proletarian Fiction’, which won the Raymond Williams Society’s essay competition (The Simon Dentith Memorial Prize) in 2018. By offering illuminating readings of novels by James Barke, John Sommerfield, and Lewis Grassic Gibbon, Ron probes the relationship between proletarian literary experimentation, working-class struggle, and political representation. ‘Angry Young Men at the Kitchen Sink: Rethinking Representations of Gender in Working-Class Literature’ by Jack Windle skilfully challenges the ‘canon’ of mid-

twentieth-century working-class literature and the gendered readings of supposed ‘Angry Young Men’ and ‘Kitchen Sink’ novels. The intersections of class, gender, race and sexuality are the focus of Katie Beswick’s powerful contribution ‘Slaggy Mums: Class, Single Motherhood, and Performing Endurance’. The essay examines the figure of the single mother as a social abject in order to reveal the ways motherhood is ideologically positioned and performed in contemporary theatre and other representational forms. Susie Panesar’s ‘Recoveries’ essay on Yorkshire writer Malachi Whitaker confronts the complexities of social class, literary form and authorship, considering how regionality, shame, and social mobility impact the short stories and autobiography of this recently ‘rediscovered’ writer. Whitaker’s complex relationship with class – and the nuanced ways in which she explores this throughout her writing – is fundamental to our thoughts on working-class writing here. As contemporary writer Lisa McNerney concludes in her essay for last year’s *Common People* volume:

Slippery thing, though, working-class identity. Particularly if you want to scribble for a living. Worth keeping an eye on it. I’m only saying.<sup>68</sup>

Next year’s *Key Words*, our 19th, will continue with this focus on the shifting forms of class and working-class writing by investigating a variety of countercultural legacies in the new global conjuncture of crisis and conflict. The issue will assess the complex significance of the counterculture for contemporary left imaginaries, whilst critiquing scholarship that views the legacy of the counterculture simply as pre-emergent neoliberalism on the one hand or as a panacea for socialist strategy on the other. Edited by David Wilkinson, it will expand and extend cultural materialism and the work of Williams in what will be his centenary year. The Raymond Williams Society aims to mark 2021 with a range of events – both in *Key Words* and through the continuation of our existing activities – so to keep up-to-date and to renew annual memberships visit [www.raymondwilliams.co.uk](http://www.raymondwilliams.co.uk).

---

<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams, ‘Writing’, in *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1983), 6. Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (1979; London: Verso, 2015), 274.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Williams, ‘Region and Class in the Novel’, *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1983), 237. First published in *The Uses of Fiction: Essays on the Modern Novel in Honour of Arnold Kettle*, ed. Douglas Jefferson and Graham Martin (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> Williams had previously lectured in Scandinavia in 1968 and had a long interest in Scandinavian literature. He completed his English Tripos at Cambridge with a thesis on Henrik Ibsen, which later became a chapter in *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (1952). He also wrote on August Strindberg in, amongst other works, *Modern*



*Tragedy* (1966), and published an essay on Tom Kristensen titled ‘Intensely Observing, Bloodshot Eyes’ in *Omkring Hærværk*, ed. Aage Jørgensen (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 1969).

<sup>4</sup> Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> The schedule began with a talk on ‘Marxism and Literary Criticism’ on Monday 24 September 1979 in Aarhus and ran as follows: ‘British Working-Class Literature after 1945’ and ‘Women’s Studies as an Academic Discipline’ (both Aarhus, 25 September); ‘The Industrial Novel’ (Odense, 26 September); ‘Critical Approaches to TV’ (27 September, Odense); ‘The Role of Cultural Transformation in Left-Wing Politics’ (Copenhagen, 1 October); ‘The Role of Theory in Literary Studies’ (Copenhagen, 2 October); ‘The Cultural Role of Literary Criticism’ (Copenhagen, 3 October); ‘A Personal View of Cultural Studies’ (Roskilde, 4 October); a final untitled talk at Aalborg.

<sup>6</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Politics* (London: Verso, 2021), ed. Phil O’Brien, will include lectures discovered in a ‘lost’ archive of recordings which is on loan from Merryn Williams and the Raymond Williams Estate.

<sup>7</sup> While the essays overlap, Williams foregrounds different emphases depending on the context; for instance, whereas he highlights the significance of Dickens to Tressell in ‘British Working-Class Literature’, in his Tressell Memorial Lecture (given in Hastings in 1982) he notes how Tressell also draws on the earlier traditions of William Cobbett and John Bunyan. Williams, ‘The Ragged-Arsed Philanthropists’ in *Writing in Society*, 252-253.

<sup>8</sup> Williams, ‘The Ragged-Arsed Philanthropists’, 243. Williams, ‘The Welsh Trilogy; *The Volunteers*’, 272.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, ‘Region and Class’, 235.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, ‘Region and Class’, 234.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond Williams, ‘Working-Class, Proletarian, Socialist: Problems in Some Welsh Novels’, in *The Socialist Novel in Britain*, ed. H. Gustav Klaus (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), 110-21, 116.

<sup>12</sup> Williams, ‘The Ragged-Arsed Philanthropists’, 242-43.

<sup>13</sup> Williams, ‘Working-Class, Proletarian, Socialist’, 119

<sup>14</sup> See Raymond Williams, ‘British Working-Class Literature after 1945’, *Key Words* 18, 2020 [page number to be added later\*]

<sup>15</sup> Williams, ‘British Working-Class Literature after 1945’ \* [page number to be added later]

<sup>16</sup> Williams, ‘The Welsh Trilogy; *The Volunteers*’, 272.

<sup>17</sup> For instance, see Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970).

<sup>18</sup> Williams, ‘The Welsh Trilogy; *The Volunteers*’, 272. Williams, *The English Novel*, 152.

<sup>19</sup> Williams, ‘The Welsh Trilogy; *The Volunteers*’, 272. Williams, ‘British Working-Class Literature after 1945’ [\*page number to be added later]

<sup>20</sup> Williams, ‘The Welsh Trilogy; *The Volunteers*’, 272.

<sup>21</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976; London: Fontana, 1988), 335.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, 335

<sup>23</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, 335; Williams *Politics and Letters*, 149

<sup>24</sup> For example, the work of Buchi Emecheta, Pat Barker, Andrea Dunbar, and Agnes Owens.

<sup>25</sup> Williams, ‘Working-Class, Proletarian, Socialist’, 119.

<sup>26</sup> Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 217-18.

<sup>27</sup> *The Big Flame* was originally commissioned in 1966 with Jim Allen completing the script in 1967, the same year as the unofficial dock strikes in Liverpool. Filming took place in early 1968 and, according to John Hill, ‘anticipated the factory occupations in France in May 1968 and subsequent sit-ins and work-ins in Britain in the early 1970s’. John Hill, *Ken Loach: The Politics of Film and Television* (London: Palgrave Macmillan and British Film Institute, 2011), 87.

<sup>28</sup> Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 219

<sup>29</sup> Raymond Williams, ‘A Defence of Realism’ in Raymond Williams, *What I Came to Say* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), 226-39, 236.

<sup>30</sup> Williams, ‘A Defence of Realism’, 238.

<sup>31</sup> Williams, ‘A Defence of Realism’, 234.

<sup>32</sup> Daniel Williams, ‘Introduction: The Return of the Native’, in Raymond Williams, *Who Speaks for Wales? Nation, Culture, Identity*, ed. Daniel Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), xxvi.

<sup>33</sup> Ben Harker, ‘Introduction: Williams’s Commitment’, in *Key Words*, 16 (2018), 5-17: 5.

<sup>34</sup> Commenting in *Politics and Letters* on his return to Cambridge in 1945, after his studies were interrupted by the war, Williams says: ‘People often ask me now why I didn’t carry on then from the Marxist arguments of the thirties. The reason is that I felt they had led me into an impasse. I had become convinced that their answers did not meet the questions, and that I had got to be prepared to meet the professional objections. I was damned well going to do it properly this time’. Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 52.

<sup>35</sup> Daniel Williams, xvi.

- <sup>36</sup> Daniel Williams, xxiii, xvi.
- <sup>37</sup> See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 99-119.
- <sup>38</sup> Raymond Williams, 'The Welsh Industrial Novel', in Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism* (1980; London: Verso, 2005), 218. Original emphasis.
- <sup>39</sup> Williams, 'The Welsh Industrial', 221.
- <sup>40</sup> Daniel Williams, xlv.
- <sup>41</sup> In particular, see Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1983).
- <sup>42</sup> Williams, 'Working-Class, Proletarian, Socialist', 120.
- <sup>43</sup> Williams, 'The Welsh Industrial Novel', 229.
- <sup>44</sup> Williams, 'Working-Class, Proletarian, Socialist', 121.
- <sup>45</sup> Williams, 'Working-Class, Proletarian, Socialist', 121.
- <sup>46</sup> See 'The New Metropolis', in Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (1973; London: Paladin, 1975), 334-46, 334. Daniel Williams argues that 'The Country and the City expanded the boundaries of literary study as it was practised in 1973', in part because of its discussion of writers such as Achebe, Suyin, Lamming, Nkem Nwankwo, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, R. K. Narayan, V. S. Reid, Mulk Raj Anand, Yaşar Kemal, Elechi Amadi, Wilson Harris, and Es'kia Mphahlele. See Daniel Williams, xxvi.
- <sup>47</sup> Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* was first published by Allen Wingate in 1956. Emecheta describes her early work as 'self-documentary' in her 'Introduction' to *Second-Class Citizen* (1974; Oxford: Heinemann, 1994), vi.
- <sup>48</sup> See for instance Alison Gibbons, 'Contemporary Autofiction and Metamodern Affect' in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism*, ed. Robin Van Den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermuelen (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 117-130, 121.
- <sup>49</sup> Buchi Emecheta, *Head Above Water* (1986; London: Heinemann, 1994), 157.
- <sup>50</sup> Emecheta, *Head Above Water*, 155.
- <sup>51</sup> Emecheta, *Head Above Water*, 243.
- <sup>52</sup> See Arts Council England, *Models of support for literary fiction* (2017) 3. <<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/literature-21st-century-understanding-models-support-literary-fiction>> (accessed 16 June 2020).
- <sup>53</sup> This research was based on Manuscript Entry Books, readers' reports, and correspondence in the Chatto & Windus archive, University of Reading Special Collections. See Jess Brisley, 'Publishing Class: Rediscovering the Lives of the Working Class in Literature', Raymond Williams Society, 30 July 2018, <<https://raymondwilliams.co.uk/2018/07/30/publishing-class-rediscovering-the-lives-of-the-working-class-in-literature/>> (accessed 14 April 2020).
- <sup>54</sup> University of Reading Special Collections (UoR), Chatto & Windus archive, CW E/3 6 May 1981-3 Oct 1894; CW RR/14/25, CW RR/14/214.
- <sup>55</sup> UoR, CW RR/14/194.
- <sup>56</sup> Williams, 'Region and Class', 230.
- <sup>57</sup> Williams, 'Region and Class', 230.
- <sup>58</sup> Orian Brook, David O'Brien, and Mark Taylor, *Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries* (AHRC, 2018), 13, <<https://createlondon.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Panic-Social-Class-Taste-and-Inequalities-in-the-Creative-Industries1.pdf>> (accessed 8 April 2020).
- <sup>59</sup> Philip Jones, 'Top of the class', *The Bookseller*, 22 February 2019. Both the *Panic!* report and *The Bookseller* survey rely on self-definitions of class, often based on personal background, rather than on class as a complex, evolving social relation. Again, this highlights one of the difficulties of defining class and, although it is necessary to do such work, draws attention to the many problems raised by Williams in his writing on categorisation and on what constitutes a contemporary working class.
- <sup>60</sup> Katy Shaw, *Common People: Breaking the Class Ceiling in UK Publishing* (New Writing North, 2020), 31. <[http://newwritingnorth.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/NWN\\_CommonPeople\\_36ppA4\\_Web2.pdf](http://newwritingnorth.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/NWN_CommonPeople_36ppA4_Web2.pdf)> (accessed 16 June 2020).
- <sup>61</sup> Anamik Saha and Sandra van Lente, *Re:Thinking 'Diversity' in Publishing* (Goldsmiths Press, 2020), 35.
- <sup>62</sup> Dead Ink, *Test Signal: A Northern Anthology*, January 2020 <<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/deadinkbooks/test-signal-a-northern-anthology>> (accessed 8 April 2020).
- <sup>63</sup> Isabel Waidner, 'Liberating the Canon: Intersectionality and Innovation in Literature' in *Liberating the Canon*, ed. Isabel Waidner (Manchester: Dostoyevsky Wannabe, 2018), 7-19, 7. See also a special collection of *Open Library of Humanities*, 6.1, on 'The Working-Class Avant Garde', eds. Leon Betsworth, Alexandra Bickley Trott, and Nick Lee, <<https://olh.openlibhums.org/collections/special/the-working-class-avant-garde/>> (accessed 14 April 2020).
- <sup>64</sup> Waidner, 7.
- <sup>65</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (1977; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 115.
- <sup>66</sup> Williams, 'Region and Class', 233.

---

<sup>67</sup> ‘If “tradition” implies closure, the many-voiced writings of Gwyn Thomas and Dylan Thomas engage with a living history that suggests development’, says Daniel Williams, who notes that there are ‘fairly obvious limitations to Williams’s constructed canon. The omission of women writers, notably Margaid Evans in the 1930s’. Daniel Williams, p. xliii, p. xliv, and note 120 on p. lii. Also, see Stephen Knight, “‘The Uncertainties and Hesitations that were the Truth’: Welsh Industrial Fictions by Women’, in *British Industrial Fictions*, ed. H. Gustav Klaus and Stephen Knight (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), 163-180.

<sup>68</sup> Lisa McInerney, ‘Working Class; An Escape Manual’, in *Common People: An Anthology of Working-Class Writers*, ed. Kit de Waal (London: Unbound, 2019), 3-11, 11.