

**Ian Menter, *Raymond Williams and Education: History, Culture, Democracy*** London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. xiv + 205pp. £63.00 Hardback. ISBN 978-1-3501-8539-5.

Ian Menter's *Raymond Williams and Education* addresses a significant gap in the scholarship: while much has been written of Raymond Williams's contribution to cultural, political, and literary analysis, this is 'the first book-length exploration of the significance of Williams's work in the study of education' (ix). Menter – who was himself President of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) from 2013 to 2015 and is now Emeritus Professor of Teacher Education at the University of Oxford – makes it clear that Williams's ideas about education are of the utmost importance: 'the contribution that he made, the way in which he saw education as a key element in achieving social progress, is today more vital than ever.' (ix)

The book is organised into seven main chapters, each dealing with a different aspect of Williams's relationship with formal and informal education: his experiences at grammar school in Abergavenny and later at the University of Cambridge; his own fiction and literary criticism; his account of the history of education in *The Long Revolution*; his work in adult education through the University of Oxford extramural delegacy and the Workers' Educational Association; his status as a public intellectual; his contribution to cultural studies; and his theoretical legacy. Menter emphasises that education was central to Williams's thinking about society and culture: Williams conceived of education as 'a lifelong process of learning through experience' (45) which was not limited to the school or university, but at the same time recognized that 'organised forms of education' were to be a 'fundamental aspect' of the long revolution (57). While Menter's focus is squarely on education, the volume also functions as a helpful general introduction to Williams's most influential ideas, namely structures of feeling, cultural materialism, and the essay 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory'. Menter writes with an easy-going, accessible style which has been bolstered by extensive reading and research, with a bibliography of over 250 items. Throughout the book, Menter quotes carefully and at length from Williams's own writing as well as his biographers and contemporary critics, making this a useful resource for teachers and

students. The second chapter's discussion of Williams's fiction and literary criticism will prove to be particularly helpful for anybody teaching or studying a course on the realist novel.

As well as providing an account of the historical and biographical development of Williams's educational ideas, Menter applies Williams's concepts and analysis to our contemporary situation. 'The past fifty years,' he writes, 'has been a period during which the long revolution has in many senses stalled, if not reversed, in education and in the wider society. The political climate has shifted from one of "social democracy" to one of consumerist populism.' (164) Menter refers specifically to the severe reduction in adult education provision, the increase in measurement and compliance in teacher education and practice, the rise of managerialism in schools and universities, the continuing socio-economic attainment gap, and, bringing us right up to the present moment, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on educational provision, particularly conventional examinations. Menter's analysis of our contemporary educational landscape using Williams's ideas is mostly illuminating, although there are one or two claims which are less helpful, such as: 'there is little doubt that Williams, whilst being largely opposed to large-scale governmental organizations and bureaucracies, would nevertheless have argued for some communal form of remaining in the [European] Union.' (76) Such a remark is emblematic of where the careful practice of internalising Williams's ideas and then applying these to the analysis of contemporary phenomena shifts to something less productive. At best this is just speculation, but at worst it is the selection (and omission) of certain aspects of Williams's work to justify an opinion already held. This particular claim reveals nothing about Williams's socialism or the complexities of the present structure of feeling concerning the EU (but it does, perhaps, leave us 'little doubt' as to Menter's own opinion).

The only real shortcoming of Menter's account, however, is the conspicuous absence of any extended discussion of private education. State schools are analysed in detail, with Menter drawing attention to the social, cultural, and ideological resonances and implications of various practices such as curriculum selection, streaming by ability, and the use of formal assessment methods, but there is no consideration of the significance of private schools or the ways in which

they contribute to (and entrench) class divisions in our society. When analysing the implications of the coronavirus pandemic on conventional GCSE and A-level examinations in 2020 and the Department for Education's new method 'which took into account both the results of previous assessments undertaken by students and a teacher judgement about the trajectory of each student', Menter refers to the 'irony [...] that an alternative to the "essential" process of public examinations had been found and children were enabled to proceed into their next stage of schooling or employment' (170). But there is no consideration of the possibility – or, indeed, the inevitability – that certain schools would abuse the 'teacher judgement' aspect of the system. State school students and their parents suspected this at the time, and in February 2022 it was confirmed by *The Sunday Times*: 'In 2019, 16.1 per cent of private school pupils had their A-levels graded A\*. In 2021 – when teachers decided what marks to award their pupils – the proportion jumped to 39.5 per cent.'<sup>1</sup> No account of education in Britain is complete if it does not fully address the structural inequality created by private education.

Despite this, *Raymond Williams and Education* is a timely and well-researched volume which will make an invaluable addition to university libraries. Alongside the significant contribution to the field of education studies, Menter's accessible style, helpful explanations, and carefully chosen quotations mean *Raymond Williams and Education* will also prove to be an important resource for teachers and students of cultural studies, media studies, sociology, and literary studies, both at university and in sixth forms. Menter himself notes 'there is in the end no alternative to reading Williams in the original version' (ix), however *Raymond Williams and Education* is certainly a fine companion to the original works.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Private schools "gamed" Covid rules to give their pupils more top A-levels', *The Sunday Times*, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2022 <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/private-schools-gamed-covid-rules-to-give-their-pupils-more-top-a-levels-6z0z6w9r5>>