

RAYMOND WILLIAMS, *THE COUNTRY AND THE CITY*

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For anyone concerned with what David Craig has called the 'real foundations' of our literary tradition there is no book quite like *The Country and the City*, first published in 1973 and now reissued. Williams's incisive readings of poetry and prose of the last four centuries are combined with economic history, agrarian history, and shafts of personal reminiscence as he strives to reconstruct the actual experiences evoked but also distorted within forms such as pastoral verse and the nineteenth-century novel. The mixture of generous quotation with passionate engagement and wide-ranging commentary makes this an ideal introduction to the serious study of English literature and culture.

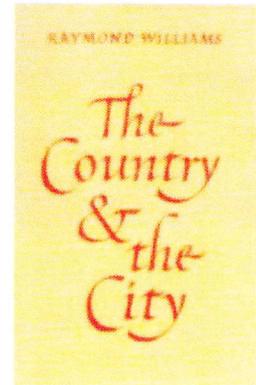
Despite memorable chapters on Hesiod, Ben Jonson, and the poetry of the country house and the rural retreat, Williams's prime focus is on the modern literature of the countryside beginning with the counter-pastoral of George Crabbe. His book has a special resonance for those of us – a very large number – who can trace our family histories back, in a few short generations, to toil on the land. That few if any are immune to the false idealisations of rural life can be seen when we reflect on his assertion that 'there is more real community in the modern village than at any period in the remembered past'.

The urban literature that interests Williams begins, effectively, with Wordsworth on Westminster Bridge and Blake's 'London', although the church, palace and 'chartered streets' of Blake's poem reflect a more traditional understanding of the city as a fortified concentration of spiritual and temporal power. Williams's city, instead, is the modern industrial metropolis, the workshop and centre of an ever-increasing population which has long outgrown its ancient walls. Williams's discussions of Dickens, the 'slum novelists' and the exponents of twentieth-century urban alienation lead up to his remarkable Chapter 24, 'The New Metropolis', where he turns from an anglocentric to a global perspective and encapsulates virtually the whole field of postcolonial studies as it has emerged in the last forty years.

We may read *The Country and the City* for its subtle exposition of such concepts as the 'historical escalator', the 'knowable community', and the contrast between 'educated' and 'customary' modes of thought. We may find inspiration in its politics – in what Stan Smith, in his foreword to this edition, calls a 'socialist humanism that puts mealy-mouthed twenty-first century versions to shame'. We may, if we wish, view this remarkable book as a stage in the imaginative journey recorded in Williams's novels from *Border Country* to *People of the Black Mountains*. Equally, we may now read it in the light of the current and fascinating revival of English nature writing, in the work of Roger Deakin, Richard Mabey, Robert Macfarlane and others. What would Williams have made of them?

His powerful dissection of the myth and the reality of Richard Jefferies's writings comes to mind, as does his appreciative but sharply distanced account of the Georgian poets. A rare anger shows when Williams recalls that the Georgians settled near Ledbury, where some of his own family lived and worked, yet that Edward Thomas once wrote that 'the countryman' spoke what was – to Thomas and his readers – a foreign language. 'Authentic observation' had (once again) been overcome by 'sub-intellectual fantasy'. Not the least significant aspect of *The Country and the City* is that, while patiently unravelling a long history, it offers stringent and level-headed guidance for today's writers intent on rediscovering and re-experiencing the life of the countryside.

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REVIEWS