

Terry Eagleton<sup>1</sup>

## MEMORIES OF RAYMOND WILLIAMS

As a truculent young socialist, I was invited by Raymond Williams to help teach his students in Cambridge. My main concern with Cambridge at that time was how to find the nearest exit back to reality, having spent three undergraduate years cowed by the braying of willowy young aristocrats who read a little Law between one college party and another and shouldered the townsfolk off the narrow medieval pavements. Even so, one doesn't reject an offer by the greatest socialist thinker of post-war Britain, so my plans to become a village postman were put on hold.

I already knew Raymond a little, mostly from his lectures. He lectured without a script, effortlessly producing a stream of impeccably grammatical sentences that were entirely improvised. You could get him to speak into a tape recorder (I did, once or twice) and the transcript would require no editing whatsoever. Yet, there was nothing automated about this extraordinary eloquence. On the contrary, it was like it sprang from the depths of his body, the ideas inseparable from feeling and experience. He detested glib, smartass speech, though he was characteristically tolerant of those who indulged in it. In fact, it is his generosity of spirit that springs to mind when I think of him. He had an enviable air of authority and self-composure, but also a certain warmth and humility, beneath which one could occasionally glimpse a flash of steel. He struck you as a man deeply at ease in his own being, which was quite an achievement since he was encircled by malicious dons and openly hostile colleagues. I think that this was, in part, because he had a core of solitude or inner detachment, a self-protective distance from his surroundings, which he probably needed to survive, but could, sometimes, bemuse and frustrate others.

He was also impressively practical. Materialism with him was as much of a life-style as a doctrine. He had a quick, intuitive sense of how things worked, which, among other things, made him a superb chairperson and political organizer. He could plant hedges and dig ditches, and it was an ominous sign when this devoted gardener retired to a house in Saffron Walden, which he has chosen partly because it had no garden. The weak heart, which caused his death, was already proving itself a problem. The house was the scene of my last meeting with him, when I came to interview him for the *New Statesman* and his mind was full of the fiction he was writing. The next thing I heard was that he had died. A few days later, I stood between Robin Blackburn and Tariq Ali in the graveyard at a tiny Welsh chapel, looking out over the Black Mountains as we laid their most distinguished son to rest.

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