

REVIEW ARTICLE

FIELDWORK AND THE BORDER COUNTRY

Raymond Williams' latest novel, The Fight for Manod (hereafter Manod), is the last part of a trilogy that started with Border Country and was continued in Second Generation. Although, in this sense, a conclusion, it is only in Manod that Williams begins to reflect on issues which have concerned him since the closing pages of Culture and Society. Several of these issues, I feel, are relevant to the practice of social anthropology.

The central themes of Manod concern the problems of 'commitment' and the idea of 'fieldwork'. These are problems of major importance in our discipline and their treatment in Manod highlights crucial issues in contemporary theoretical work. On a more general level, the movement initiated by Williams and other members of the New Left has made important and controversial inroads into the study of culture and society, manifest, for example, in the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Williams' own work on communications and the mass media, and the seminal contribution of New Left Review. These contributions, far from leading to debate among social anthropologists, have been more or less ignored. Why should this be?

Partly, I feel, this lack of attention stems from the notion that Williams' academic background is literary and that his range is confined to radical literary criticism. This notion is predicated, of course, on the feeling that social anthropology is concerned with 'theoretical' representations of society whereas Williams' work stems from 'literary' or 'fictional' accounts. It is, I believe, hard to maintain this distinction. Each form of representation requires conditions of existence that can be specified in more or less social terms. Williams' work is a testament to the certainty that truth and fiction are not clear-cut oppositions; as he shows in The Country and the City, so-called fictional accounts can provide us with important insights into historical conceptualisations of the 'social'. It seems to me important to reverse the question about truth and fiction and ask of social anthropology: why has theoretical representation been so privileged that it has been drained of all social context? In Manod the complexities of the writing push to the limit the notion that literary or fictional representation is distinct from theoretical representation. The book thus raises questions particularly pertinent to the current, 'theoretical' state of social anthropology. To illustrate these points it is necessary to provide a brief outline of the book.

The plot of Manod is simple enough. Manod is a tiny rural settlement in mid-Wales. An implicitly Labour government is involved in a massive scheme to develop Manod and its environs into a new kind of city. This city is to be based on the original dispersed settlements in an attempt to create not a unified and densely settled population but an organically linked series of local centres:

Each of the centres would go up to ten thousand. Between each, as you see, at least four or five miles of quite open country, which would go on being farmed. So what you get, as a whole, is a city of a hundred, a hundred-and-twenty thousand people, but a city of small towns, a city of villages almost. A city settling into its country.
(p.12)

The political capital is obvious: full employment and adequate transport and cultural facilities in an area chronically lacking these and a solution to the burgeoning problems of the inner city districts. The plan for Manod is the outline of a possible resolution to the extreme distance between the country and the city.

In this situation Matthew Price, a lecturer in social history in his late fifties, is asked to go to Manod, to stay there for up to a year, and to 'live the problem'. There are several reasons for choosing Price. His own work has been on the movements of populations and communities within Wales, a work which, it is claimed, has 'humanised' the historians' practice. He understands the area not only statistically but also in terms of its community. The other main reason for the choice of Price is his intimate connection with this border country, for he himself has been the subject of such migration between country and city, custom and education, Wales and England. Robert Lane, the Government official in charge of the Manod project, believes that these two factors make Price an excellent candidate for such participant observation.

Price, however, is not alone in this consultancy work. He is accompanied by the radical young sociologist, Peter Owen. Price has the respect of the political establishment and of the academics within that establishment, but Owen is different. His radicalism has taken the form of violent protest against the Vietnam war, rejection of an academic career in favour of working on car assembly lines, and survival by freelance journalism and writing. His connections with Wales are through his wife's parents; he sees this year's work as no more than a public relations exercise for governmental decisions already made.

These two take up residence in Manod and begin their work. The images that Williams uses to describe the countryside around Manod are dominated by age and damp and the endless migration of people that either die in old age or look for employment or residence elsewhere. The community is still there but only in certain specific aspects. Neighbourliness, however friendly, can be claustrophobic; community only manifests itself at the rituals of marriage and death. The social seems drained and restricted by decades of colonialism and economic decay. In this village perhaps the most remarkable quality is the resilience of community in the face of such diversity.

Beyond the community in a geographical and also, to a lesser degree, a social sense, the farmers of the area are engaged in a qualitatively new set of relationships that stretch far beyond Manod. Price and Owen discover the existence of an ever-increasing network of land deals between farmers and a small group of businessmen. Arrangements that change the patterns of landownership and the corporate status of the farmers involved are eventually traced by Owen to England and London, and then, via various holding companies - Afren Agricultural Holdings, the Mid-Wales Rural Community Development Agency - to a multinational, Anglo-Belgian Community Developments.

Once Owen and Price have discovered this, the period of fieldwork is brought to a halt. Price and Owen decide to confront the Government with their information. Beyond this, though, their responses differ. Owen resigns his post and proposes immediate publication of the unearthed facts, while Price attempts to fight the bureaucracy of government, still hoping to realise Manod in a humane way:

'But these advanced designs are at the moment only technical. Yet there is unique opportunity, just because they are technically different, to explore new social patterns, new actual social relations.' (p.194)

The conclusion of Manod is no conclusion at all. Price suffers a heart attack as a direct result of his decision to try and change Government policy. He takes up an academic post in South Wales. In the end the problem of Manod remains unresolved, an open-ended project subject to the vagaries and power struggles of party politics. And Price is no clearer about either his relationship with the border country of his past or the changes he still feels.

It is through the vehicle of these two central characters, Price and Owen, that Williams discusses the nature of commitment. Price, the older of the two, has moved from a position within the Labour Party to an independent stance. For him this is partly a result of the irreconcilability of his own views of the world and the social relationships that should be attempted on the one hand, and the monolithic technology of planning that fuels the ambitions behind the Manod project and party politics on the other. Price sees only faceless bureaucracy:

He stood on the island, looking along the streets of the Ministries, Buildings opaque from the street that are blind to the street. In the centre of the street stone men, cast men, metal horses. Stone helmeted features running with grime. An upraised stone arm, leading an empty charge. Power in stone. (p.9)

(It is perhaps worth remembering that in Williams' previous novel The Volunteers, set a decade in the future, there is only coalition government) Yet, working independently of party politics, Price is presented as a 'committed' man. Commitment here does not depend on a simple and clear-cut choice concerning adherence to party ideology; it involves, instead, the adoption of a critical distance, a rejection of planning that relies solely on technologies of power and pre-given hierarchies of participation. Commitment entails the awareness of an intimate connection between the public and the private domain. For Price, Manod is not only a receptacle for planning; it is a felt experience, something understood as a lived tradition. And Price understands that the choice between development and non-development is, in itself, false. Mid-Wales could adopt certain strategies of development - enhancing tourism, increasing subsidies and plough-up grants for farming, initiating cooperative-based local industries - which would maintain and stabilise the local population, but the plan for Manod envisages something more than an over-spill or a series of workers estates built around central massive factories. Manod is conceived as a new form of community, its industries developed around the latest ideas in alternative and intermediate technologies of fuel and power ('... a city built primarily to demonstrate the new energy and communications technology ...' (p.191)). Its aim is to integrate the farming populations instead of simply alienating them. These factors only increase the commitment of Price at a personal level. A potential has been suggested for the border country but it is a potential that could wreck a traditional structure of feeling. In the end Price is broken by the implications of that commitment.

The other extreme of commitment is embodied in the character of Owen. Owen's past contains both the Oxford of academic life and the Oxford of the car factory at Cowley. His parents are both militants, his father as a trade union member, his mother in the Labour Party. His anger is directed indiscriminately at an exploitative system. Yet there is in his anger a specific quality relevant to Manod. In conversation with Price he views Manod as an impossible project until power relations are radically 'changed at the centre'. He says:

'I grew up in the kind of place that is now the best they can imagine: a car works with housing estates all around it. And that's the real pressure. Here, like anywhere else, the factories would take their unquestioned priority.' (p.74)

Owen's commitment is one that blocks this governmental planning simply because it is rooted in an unacceptable set of power relations. But for Owen, too, there is a way in which the public and the private connect. In the simple fact that he is now married and that he sees a real need for settlement, he is forced to choose and to take sides over Manod.

The disjunction between these two modes of commitment is most vividly conveyed in a scene late in the book when Owen and Price sit in on a ministerial-level meeting. At this discussion the full implications of the proposed development and its radical departure from previous technologies are discussed. Both Price and Owen had not been fully informed of the nature of this development. Yet, while Price is prepared to stay and to disagree, Owen leaves the room in order to publish and expose to public scrutiny the facts that have been unearthed. In a sense, the uneasy alliance between Price and Owen and the tactics they adopt are symbolic of their disgust at the forms of calculation employed by the political parties. One refuses to engage at all, preferring the relatively familiar area (yet with its own canons of truth and falsehood) of the media. The other stays to argue but to argue in terms alien to the ministerial meeting. The Minister comments:

'You've reminded us all of the most basic considerations. In fact more than reminded. You've lifted our eyes.'

This almost biblican turn of phrase could be veiled sarcasm. Or it could represent the inability of established political groupings to enter into a dialogue that is not concerned solely with planning, production and economics.

Commitment is an ambiguous concept in social anthropology. Although central to the anthropologist's relation to his work it has yet to be discussed except in terms of naive subjectivity or outright cynicism. For Price the terms of his commitment are at least clear. He has family roots in the area of Manod; he has lived, even if distantly, in this border country. Within social anthropology the terms are less clear; consideration of commitment is at best restricted to mumbled introductions, at worst ignored in the name of a 'scientific' explanation. But there are certain questions we can, and should, be asking ourselves. How, for example, did we come to be doing fieldwork in a particular geographical and theoretical area? What theoretical work are we extending, and is our line of inquiry a development or merely an ornamentation? Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, what are the predictable effects of our work on the people with whom we live and join in community?

Manod raises questions not only about commitment but also about the methodology of social anthropology. It is concerned with fieldwork. Lane, the senior Government official tells Price :

'What I'm suggesting is a different inquiry: a lived inquiry. That you should go to Manod. That you should live there as long as you need - it could be anything up to a year. That you would go informed; you'd have every access. But that you would go as yourself. To the place, to the people. That you would live the problem. And then that you'd come back and tell us.' (p.14)

For Lane, Price is the ideal candidate for such an anthropology since he has lived in the area of Manod and has attempted in his work '... to make a history human and yet still a history.' The *raison d'être* of fieldwork in this narrative is that it humanises the plans: it makes them come to life. It is not enough to examine representations of Manod, Price must also go, in the flesh, to give an expert opinion. In other words, his presence is the final guarantee that the plans, the estimates, and the calculations are correct.

It is hard to evaluate the status that Williams accords to fieldwork. Yet whether Williams approves of fieldwork or not, he recognises its inadequacy in the context of Manod. For what begins as the scene of a very personal journey - Price returning to his past in the present - ends up as a domain of multinational development in which it is Owen who takes up the investigation and returns from overseas with the results. The sub-plot of quarrelling farmers struggling to make a living and eventually entering into complex land deals is both a local concern and also the manifestation of supra-national interests. In this, participant observation and the practice of fieldwork are inadequate. Just as the century-old decay of Manod is inspired by economic and social relations beyond the area, so the changing patterns of land ownership and the threat of massive land speculation are the result of multinational machinations.

Yet, in the end, there is a problem for both Price and Owen. They know that fieldwork has failed, that it is insufficient to live the experience, or, more correctly, that the experience is no longer a localised one. But with the revelation of multinational connections none of the major characters can see what is to be done. To be sure, Owen promises publication and Lane guarantees an investigation, but this is hardly the problem. The problem is that the techniques of fieldwork and participant observation are inadequate to deal with specific kinds of economic and social relations. It is this that finally reduces Owen and Price to a position of inactivity.

This is a problem central to modern social anthropology. Williams raises many of the pertinent issues. He outlines the classic justification of fieldwork - that it provides a guarantee, through its very concern with humanity, of social reality; but he also shows how inadequate fieldwork can be in specific situations.

Faced with such a problem, we must rethink our conceptualisation of political, economic and ideological relations that are constituted neither in the community nor in the realm of a universal 'humanity' yet which have their effect both at the level of the community and at that of the individual. The sense that social anthropology has reached its limits when it comes to understanding social relations that transcend the community and that are not reducible to human subjects has resulted in the idealist responses of either a collapse into psychologism or the pretentious and absurd extravagance of a 'world system' that bulldozes its way through the specificity of the social formation. We cannot accept these two reckless responses. So the problem remains. This is the legacy which The Fight for Manod leaves to anthropology and it is this we should take up.

Steve Priddy.

REFERENCES

Williams, R. 1979. The Fight for Manod. London: Chatto & Windus.