

Border Country: A Personal Encounter

John Barnie

I can't remember why I took down a copy of *Border Country* in the campus bookshop at Birmingham University. It was 1962, I was in my second year studying English literature, and feeling out of place in what was still a drab Victorian industrial city. Out of place, too, in the confident, middle-class environment of the English Department where everyone seemed to have read more than I had, coming as I did from King Henry VIII's Grammar School in Abergavenny, which must have been one of the smallest grammar schools in Britain with about 180 boys and ten or eleven teachers.

It is unlikely that I had read a review of the novel and I don't believe the author was ever mentioned at KHGS (where I was a pupil from 1952 to 1960) not even as the scholarship boy who had gone to Cambridge. That was unsurprising, I suppose, because in the 1950s Raymond Williams was still to make his reputation, and the Second World War had intervened between him leaving the school and me entering it fourteen years later.

Perhaps it was the title that attracted me. I was from border country, a 'border mongrel' as Jan Morris once referred to those who live between the mountains of Wales and the rolling fields of England. Abergavenny proclaims itself 'The Gateway to Wales' but it is equally of course the gateway to England—a gateway Raymond Williams passed through to Cambridge and myself a generation later to Birmingham.

Reading the novel, it very soon dawned on me that this wasn't any old border country, it was *my* border country and I had no difficulty in providing myself with a key to the thinly disguised locations of the story. Gwenton was Abergavenny, where I grew up, and Glynmawr was Pandy. I began to realise, too, that I had all kinds of personal connections with the novel. After the First World War my father's elder brother, Don, had been a porter at Pontrilas, just up the line from Pandy where Raymond Williams's father, disguised as Harry Price, was a signalman. In the small world of country railwaymen they would almost certainly have known each other, or known of each other. Don had married a Lewis from Ewyas Harold, one of whose relatives had run the Pandy Inn for a time, where Don and my father occasionally played darts.

When Matthew alights at night at Monmouth Road Station and thinks he is going to have to walk to Pandy, I knew exactly his route down the station approach to the Monmouth Road, because I had walked it many times myself, and I knew where Morgan Rosser's car drove through town after he picked Matthew up.

There was more—all kinds of details. In the 1950s, fields of black and red currant bushes were a common sight around Abergavenny, and I thought Morgan Rosser's enterprise might have been based on Chandlers, the market gardeners who had fields between Abergavenny and the Mardy. (I had gone currant picking myself at Tredilion. It was back-breaking work for a pittance, and the overseer made sure you picked every bush clean.) I was on more certain ground when Matthew goes to Gwenton/Abergavenny to order a wreath for his father's funeral. There was no florist in town at that time nor when I was growing up, and he is directed to J.J. Roberts, Seedsman, who does a line in flowers for weddings and funerals.

That, I knew, had to be Percy Jeffreys, Seedsman, a few doors down from my father's sweet shop in Frogmore Street. It was a small narrow shop, the walls lined with sacks of various seeds and bins of animal feed. The shop had an unforgettable smell, a rich musk, slightly acrid, slightly dusty, with Mr Jeffreys standing behind the counter in a brown shopman's coat reaching down to his knees.

I had some acquaintance, too, with signal boxes on the line. During the War the family of the stationmaster at the Junction Station had been billeted on us. One evening in the early 1950s he offered to show me round the station, and we cycled together up the Ross Road to the Junction. He took me along the tracks to the signal box, the rails shining with a steely glint in the dark. The warm smell of machine oil greeted me as soon as the door was opened, and there were the banks of signal levers, all brass and steel, with a cloth hanging over one lever, just as Raymond Williams described. The signaller let me try to pull one of the levers, but I couldn't. You needed strength and a special knack. An express was coming and he set the signals with great ease, then tapped out a message to the signal box down the line. They let me lean out of the window and a big green and brass Hall or Castle class engine thundered past. It wouldn't be stopping at Abergavenny. So, when Raymond Williams described the signal box at Pandy, he was describing a small but memorable part of my experience as well.

When Morgan Rosser expands his jam-making business, he starts delivering to shops in the mining villages and towns of the eastern Valleys. In his small way, my father did that too in the late 1940s, acting as a sweet and chocolate wholesaler to corner shops in places like Blaenafon and Nant-y-glo. Sometimes I went with him in the car, and we drove up Black Rock, following in Morgan Rosser's tyre tracks.

But there were other things which I had thought personal only to myself. When Morgan Rosser addresses Matthew/Will by his surname, Rosser's daughter intervenes: "'You mustn't call him Price", Eira said, "It's an English habit he doesn't like.'" At KHGS masters called us boys by our surnames as a matter of course, but I always resented it. It was a mark of our inferior position, and since leaving school, I have never let anyone call me 'Barnie'. Eira was right—it is an English habit, the mark of public-school-educated 'chaps' whose world has nothing to do with me. It seems Raymond Williams must have felt this too; there was no doubt plenty of it at Cambridge.

Most importantly, perhaps, *Border Country* revealed to me what was happening in my own life. There are many kinds of borders, and when I followed Raymond Williams to an English university I crossed, without realizing it, a cultural and psychological border that has influenced my life ever since. There is a passage in Chapter 3 of the novel which expresses exactly the alienation this entails. Matthew/Will has gone to Gwenton/Abergavenny to shop. 'In Gwenton he had met nobody he knew, and the simple shopping had been difficult, after London: the conventions were different. He had felt empty and tired, but the familiar shape of the valley and the mountains held and replaced him. It was one thing to carry its image in his mind, as he did, everywhere, never a day passing but he closed his eyes and saw it again, his only landscape.' That was my experience, too, in Birmingham, and at the end of each term, as the train left Hereford, I leaned out eagerly for a first sight of the long scarp slopes of the Black Mountains rising over the flat Herefordshire fields; and then, on the left, the distinctive profile of Skirrid Fawr/the Holy Mountain.

‘But it was different,’ Matthew muses, ‘to stand and look at the reality. It was not less beautiful; every detail of the land came up with its old excitement. But it was not still, as the image had been. It was no longer a landscape or a view, but a valley that people were using. He realized, as he watched, what had happened in going away. The valley as landscape had been taken, but its work forgotten. The visitor sees the beauty; the inhabitant a place where he works and has his friends. Far away, closing his eyes, he had been seeing this valley, but as a visitor sees it, as the guide-book sees it: this valley, in which he had lived more than half his life.’

It was a common enough experience, of course, from the 1940s to the 1960s, for education to take you out of your class and community in the way Raymond Williams describes here, but as a twenty-year-old in Birmingham I had not articulated this to myself and would not have wanted to believe it if I had. Rereading *Border Country* today, I see how accurate and penetrating it was. Other novels, mostly by English working-class writers, explored the same experience of dislocation and loss, but *Border Country* was unique for me because it did so in a world I knew intimately. It is the first and only time I have felt so personally involved in a work of literature.

And there is something else the novel taught me. At school and at university literature seemed always to be written about somewhere else, usually by English people. There were Dylan Thomas and R.S. Thomas, of course, to whom we were introduced at KHGS by our English master, Wyn Binding, but though I identified with their poetry because they were Welsh, they too were from elsewhere, Dylan Thomas writing out of Swansea and Carmarthenshire, R.S. Thomas, in the late 1950s, out of rural Mid Wales, places I had never been. For the rest, you looked across that border to England. Nobody I ever heard of wrote about Abergavenny or the Black Mountains. *Border Country* made me realise for the first time that this was possible, that anywhere, even where you grew up, can be a focus and centre of fiction—and if fiction, why not poetry, which I felt impelled to start writing in the mid-1970s.

I only met Raymond Williams once, in the summer of 1988, when I went to interview him for *Planet* on the publication of the first volume of his trilogy, *People of the Black Mountains*. We met in his remote cottage deep in the Mountains where he gave me lunch. I am naturally in awe of eminent people and so I was apprehensive. I need not have been. There was, as we would say in Gwenton/Abergavenny, no side to him. We spoke about his new book; what he hoped to achieve with it; the research he’d done in local archives; how we had both walked the long hogbacks of the Mountains.

In *Border Country* he is at pains to emphasise the Welshness of his characters’ accents, but to my ear Raymond Williams spoke with a gentle Herefordshire burr of the kind you find in the border country when you near the Golden Valley. This, too, put me at my ease. I don’t know what I expected—an educated middle-class English accent, perhaps, which would at once have made me guarded.

The conversation turned to KHGS at one point and our respective experiences there. I was surprised to learn that we shared several teachers, most notably Mr Newcombe the authoritarian and, as far as I was concerned, feared Headmaster—Ebbw Vale, MA (Cantab). Perhaps he was instrumental in Raymond Williams’s choice of Cambridge over Oxford? There was Harold ‘Acer’ Sharpe, too, who over the decades drummed Latin grammar into the

heads of pupils like Raymond Williams and myself. We studied excerpts from Ovid and Caesar in the text book *Latin for Today*, though there was never any sense that Latin literature might be exciting.

Not long after our meeting Raymond Williams died unexpectedly. I had lost touch with my classmates at KHGS years before, and there was no one who might have understood the trajectory of my experience. Raymond Williams, could, however, because he had travelled it a generation earlier. It seems absurd to say so because I met him only that once, but there was for me then—and seems to me now—a sort of fusion of experience focused on KHGS, Abergavenny, Pandy, and the Black Mountains—and the alienation of being educated away, the longing for impossible return—which is distilled in the pages of *Border Country*, and is why the book has a special place for me; and why I will never forget my encounter with its author.