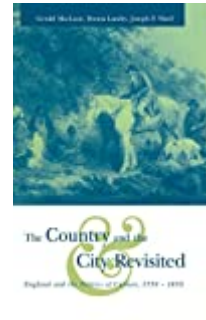


Gerald MacLean, Donna Landry, Joseph P. Ward, eds. *The Country and the City Revisited: England and the Politics of Culture, 1550-1850*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. xiv + 258 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-59201-7.



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The View from Nowhere

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According to this volume's editors, *The Country and the City Revisited* returns to the literary and cultural terrain mapped out by Raymond Williams's justly celebrated book, *The Country and the City* (1973), in order "to connect Williams's analysis of urban and rural spaces with current critical concerns" (p. 1). In their introduction, the editors usefully indicate the analytical value of a concept of "space," designating a domain of negotiation subject to prevailing social, economic, political, and intellectual forces, over the limited notion of a physically rooted, geographically specifiable "place"; in addition, they also stress the need for a more expansive concept of national identity formation than the parochially domestic notion of "Englishness" used by Williams. The editors have clearly absorbed the lessons of recent critical theory and the experience of its crucible, global capitalism: they know that what happens in one part of the world can affect the material and social life of persons halfway across the globe, and they rightly insist that historical cultural studies take account of this reality.

However, their attention to the strengths, as opposed

to the limitations, of Williams's study is regrettably much less acute. In effect, the introduction argues that while it may be necessary and productive to revise our concept the virtual and material parameters of urban and rural space, there is no need to do so by revisiting *The Country and the City* – for, in terms of its conceptualization, analytical methodology, and subject-matter, the book is too outmoded to be of any use, except as a point of reference to measure how far interdisciplinary scholarship has advanced since its publication.

This is unfortunate, especially should students take up *The Country and the City Revisited* as a kind of introduction to Williams's criticism. Moreover, the essays comprising *The Country and the City Revisited* do little to counter the negative impression fostered by its editors. In fact, eight of the thirteen studies make no explicit reference to a single text or concept of Williams's; of the five that do address Williams's work, only three – those by Eliga Gould, Elizabeth O'Brien, and Elizabeth Bohls – "connect" with the analyses of *The Country and the City* in any substantive way. Throughout, the volume puts Williams and his work at a distance from its concerns.

This would not be so remarkable were it not for the expectation created by the volume's title, and the opening paragraphs of the introduction, which cite the influence of *The Country and the City* on subsequent studies. The dismissal thereafter is stunning.

That said, the essays themselves make this collection a formidable and important production. Each chapter has something of value to offer, whether a new perspective on a familiar text, or an unusual textual object, cultural artifact, order of discourse, analytical approach, reading, thesis, or some combination of these features. Several display the productivity of the recent expansion of visual culture studies into fields outside of art history. There are historians reading literature (and not merely to trap it in a "fiction"!) and literary scholars reading non-canonical "documentary" texts, in addition to a more traditionally "disciplined" kind of scholarship akin to Williams's own. There is perhaps a little too much attention to georgic, but for a variety of reasons, not the least of them contemporary environmental politics, georgic is a hot property at the moment, and the scholarship compelling.

Among the most noteworthy individual studies in *The Country and the City Revisited* are Elizabeth Bohls's reading of the colonial historian Edward Long's 1774 *History of Jamaica*, where she argues that the *History*'s "discursive technology" (p. 180) of landscape aesthetics was indispensable to imperial Britain's need to create and sustain a colonial self-identity that artfully screened its ugly, brutal qualities; and Richard Quaintance's study of how eighteenth-century topographical prints simultaneously produced and exploited the sociability of the burgeoning middle class, enticing it to "interact with" the civilized social and cultural space the prints represent – not directly, but vicariously, by "buy[ing] into" (p. 150) a commodity, the print itself. There are also stimulating essays by Robert Tittler, on "civic memory" (p. 67) and civic portraiture c. 1560-1640; by Robert Markley, on the proto-environmentalism of Marvell's "Upon Appleton House"; by Nigel Smith, on the "cross-racial sympathy" (p. 113) of the neo-Puritan vegetarianism Thomas Tryon; by Eliga Gould, on the exploitative use of the term "country" in the rhetoric of patriotism of the Seven Years' War; and by Anne Janowitz, on the figure of the "Gypsy" in comparison to that of the "Jew" in Romantic period poetry. Andrew McRae contributes the most ambitious essay, which considers the connection between early modern "discourses of travel" or mobility, and early modern "spatiality" or "productions of space," to counter the extreme historiographical attention to the "discourse of settlement" or place (p. 41-2). Although inventive and

provocative, McRae's essay suffers, ironically enough, from a lack of space to adequately develop its ideas.

In fact this space problem constrains all of the contributions to *The Country and the City Revisited* to varying degrees, yet on the whole the writers exercise extreme economy and make the most of the space they have been allotted. Nevertheless, with the average essay just shy of sixteen pages long, including notes (the longest is nineteen pages; the shortest, fourteen), all remain significantly underdeveloped. Their abruptness is unfortunate, given their generally high quality. Moreover, it makes the twenty-three page introduction composed jointly by the three editors appear excessively indulgent, especially given its remarkable unhelpfulness. In order to set the diverse array of subjects and concerns on view in the essays in some discernible historical context, it purports to survey recent work on urban and rural culture and historiography.

But its presentation of this body of work, especially the historical studies, is superficial, and tends to distort the general view by overrating aspects of change and underrating those of continuity. It also omits consideration of Carl Estabrook's *Urbane and Rustic England: Cultural Ties and Social Spheres in the Provinces, 1660-1780* (1998), which presents a view contrary to that posed by the editors, of an increasing rather than decreasing distinction between rural and urban culture, at least for the middle section of the period covered (though it is likely that this collection had already gone to press before the appearance of Estabrook's book). To be sure, some degree of perspectival distortion is inevitable when addressing so large an interval of history as the one surveyed by this volume. Less excusable however is the editors' total neglect of sociology, arguably the most important among the critical investments of *The Country and the City*, which is, despite its literary subject matter, a book about capitalism, class, and social revolution.

In *The Country and the City*, Williams attempted to demystify one dimension of capitalist hegemony: the naturalization, in and through classical and neo-pastoral and other rural literature, of a specific "structure of feeling" of English country life that masked agrarian and industrial capitalism's dehumanizing and exploitative system of social and economic relations. We would never learn this by reading *The Country and the City Revisited*. With the exception of the essays by Gould and Loewenstein, *The Country and the City Revisited* remains blind to matters of class and revolution, focusing instead on such individualist, conformist, and suburban concerns

as self-fashioning (collective and individual), personal consumption and mobility, environmental conservation, multiculturalism, and free trade, to name the most recurrent of them. There is nothing inherently wrong about these topics. They accurately reflect the “current critical concerns” invoked by the editors on the first page of the book; furthermore they represent, not surprisingly, the personal interests and commitments of those in society occupying a socio-economic status comparable to that of university and college professors in the Anglo-American world.

This wider audience will surely be pleased to learn that its social practices and values possessed deep historical roots. For that reason alone, the critical perspective of *The Country and the City Revisited* is justified. But it is, however, a narrow one, reflecting the knowledge and experience of a very small minority of people privileged enough to be (or at least to imagine themselves to be) at liberty socially, culturally, and economically, to treat “place” as “space.” This minority exercises a class privilege characteristic of a specific position in the social hierarchy. In a volume that invokes Williams’s work and its legacy so directly, some attention to this aspect of its own conditions of production, and its social and cultural functions and effects, is in order.

The production, maintenance, functions, and effects of social class boundaries preoccupied Williams throughout his career. His concern lent unusual force and meaning to his work, and to *The Country and the City* in particular. The editors of *The Country and the City Revisited* evidently regard Williams’s attention to the limits of perspective as a liability, as it appears when they com-

ment that, “[f]rom the point of view of more recent work, Williams’s England, framed by his study window in Cambridgeshire, is itself only another image, a further gloss upon an already deeply layered text of Englishness” (p. 2). As if Williams wasn’t making precisely this point by deliberately inscribing his own geographical and intellectual “place” at the opening of his study; yet Williams appreciated that relativizing his own perspective accomplished something more than a mere “gloss”: a clear delineation of his view had the potential to realign the relations of power in society.

In *The Country and the City Revisited*, by contrast, we get the view from nowhere, a kind of disembodied omniscience that puts Williams in his place and secures the status quo. Its high-handedness is made possible by investment in a panoply of critical technologies now available to mobile, free agent global scholars: theories, methodologies, disciplinary knowledge and agendas of all kinds – another form of capital controlled by those with the right credentials in the “information economy.” Ironically, in condescending to what they think of as Williams’s naiveté, the editors display in their introduction the very critical limitations that they suggest his work possesses. A placeless, classless outlook is the hallmark of middle class epistemology. Let us beware the limitations – social, economic, political, and intellectual – our progressive self-image occludes from view.

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