

mostly siding with the former.

Following the conference, the non-SWP delegates from Sydney met to discuss the situation, and responded with a plan for separate processes in the Sydney area — thus avoiding the spectres of “witch hunts” and expulsions, so beloved of the political culture of parts of the left. Hence the rival letters, and the beginnings of a rather confusing episode for many not so well versed in the intricacies of the Australian left.

So far the split has been largely confined to Sydney, where the bulk of the SWP’s membership is concentrated. A national telephone hook-up of the various centres in March suggested, though, that similar conclusions have been drawn elsewhere. And since Sydney has so far been the hub of the project, the indirect effects of the split there are sure to spread.

One effect may be to bring philosophical differences over methods of work, hitherto submerged under a rather artificial bonhomie, to the light of day. Another may be a rethinking of the direction of the SWP, whose major allies now are on the ultra-left and among the hard-line minority of the CPA — neither of whom are favourably disposed to the current new party project.

Finally, the tendency of the new party project to become “stuck” on political fundamentals may be exchanged for a more outward-looking approach. One excursion in this direction was charter supporter Jack Munday’s campaign for the state upper house in the recent NSW elections — although this was buried under the rightwing landslide in that poll.

The NSW elections may prove ominous for the project in other respects, too. Given that its viability may depend on the relatively calm political waters of Labor governments, the unmistakable signs from the NSW poll suggest that the projected party nationally may have, at best, only another two years in which to strike its roots.

David Burchell

# Raymond Williams

## 1921-1988

**T**he pre-eminent British socialist intellectual Raymond Williams, who died in February, deserves a full retrospective which, unfortunately, time and space will not allow here. As the editors of *Politics and Letters* (1979) (a series of interviews with him conducted in 1977-8 by *New Left Review*) noted, he occupied “a unique position among socialist writers in the English speaking world today.”

books, Williams also had the distinction of being a best seller. In the UK alone, 750,000 copies of his books had been sold by 1978. Among these, many of them now set texts in universities and extra-mural courses, are *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958), *The Long Revolution* (1961), *Communications* (1962), *Drama From Ibsen To Brecht* (1968), *The Country And The City* (1973), *Keywords* (1976), and *Marxism And Literature* (1977). He also found time to write novels, television, film and play scripts and to play an active role in socialist politics.

Born into the Welsh working class, Williams became a ‘scholarship boy’ and went on to Cambridge where he was active in the Socialist club and, briefly, in the Communist Party. After a commission in the anti-tank regiment during the war he became active in adult education and the Workers Education Association as a staff tutor at Oxford University and then on to become lecturer and, in 1974, Professor of Drama at Cambridge University.

His influence on a generation of socialists, especially those who were trained in the 1960s battlegrounds of ‘old’ and ‘new’ left, is enormous. This is especially, though not uniquely, so in the area of cultural politics. In recasting the relationship between culture and society, in resisting some of the old dogmatism of left and right, in drawing attention to both the complexity and importance of the forms of popular culture and their relationship to what he called in a simple but memorable phrase ‘a



Photo: Verno Books

whole way of life’, Williams ranks, in the twentieth century, as the foremost cultural thinker of the British, and possibly Anglo Saxon, socialist tradition.

Williams’ relationship to Marxism demands a history in itself. In spite of his disclaimer as “one who has never been a Marxist” in *Culture and Society* (1958), it is clear that his engagement with marxism became more and more productive through his later works to his cautious, later self-definition as a ‘cultural materialist’. This led him to engage, less suspiciously, with the work of some of the continental European marxists — Lucien Goldmann, Gramsci, Althusser and, more recently, Rudolph Bahro. The latter interest signalled a shift, more or less contemporary with his retirement, back to the more general and global dilemmas of socialist politics; to the insistence that, in real terms, the ‘alternative’, as Bahro put it, does not have much of a shape or texture in socialist thought.

If it does come to have such a shape, texture and plausibility, then it is certainly worth registering Williams’ immense contribution to it.

Colin Mercer