

Hardy, Stephen Paul

People of the Black Mountains 1: The beginning

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Chapter Five: People of the Black Mountains 1 : The Beginning

The aim in this and the next chapter is to provide a relatively detailed explication and analysis of the two completed volumes of *People of the Black Mountains* in order to indicate how they might contribute to the development of a relational poetics and politics of place. The term ‘novel’ is used to describe the book but it cannot be categorised simply either as a work of fiction or of history. It was noted in the previous chapter that Tony Pinkney, using Linda Hutcheon’s term, describes it as ‘historiographic metafiction’. Pinkney is very positive about the novel’s value but it has not received universal admiration. Fred Inglis chooses Carmen Calil, Williams’ publisher, to provide a representative assessment in his biography of Williams. Her quoted comments include: ‘extraordinary but difficult to read; ‘he is no novelist, his didacticism is wearisome; not a man to whom comedy, or any comic leavening of life came easily; immensely impressive (...) but (...) it’s not very good.’ (Inglis 1995: 292–3). Such comments do not indicate overwhelming enthusiasm and it is not difficult, particularly if, unlike Inglis or Calil, one takes a less than sympathetic attitude to Williams’ fiction in general, to imagine other readers encountering similar problem. Calil’s comments include a degree of negative assessment from the perspective of trying to market Williams’ novel as a piece of entertaining as much as enlightening fiction. However, if the most negative aspects are put to one side, her characterisation is of an extraordinary and impressive, if somewhat didactic and humourless piece of writing. The same, of course, might be said of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, a comparison which can serve as an introduction to possible connections between Williams’ last novel and the epic poem as genre.

Reference to one modern epic poet, Charles Olson, has already been included here. *People of the Black Mountains* bears an interesting relation to *The Maximus Poems*, working with a comparably vast time-scale and focusing on a geographical area of comparable dimensions. Williams’ novel may not be the most accessible of novels but the difficulties it presents in terms of arcane reference are minor in comparison to Olson’s poem. In this respect, *People of the Black Mountains* has the potential to provide a bridge between relatively arcane works like *The Maximus Poems*, and forms of imaginative literature more accessible to a broader readership. It was noted in the previous chapter that Pinkney provides an approach to the significance of place partly comparable with that of Heidegger. The comparison might also apply to Williams here; the attention and valuation afforded to the qualities of place and groundedness in the novel sometimes borders on the essentialistic and mystical.

Like Olson’s poem in relation to the United States, Williams’ novel provides a distinctive perspective on the history of the British Isles. Both works suggest the possibility of an alternative course for a future history to take and, in this respect, have

something in common with Paul Carter's approach to relations between natives and European colonisers of Australia. Carter tries to imagine what would have happened if the latter had been less paranoid in their outlook and adopted a more open attitude to the place in which they found themselves. So does Olson, and in both cases interpretations of actual historical figures are employed to support this perspective. Williams adopts a comparable approach but uses fictional characters for his central figures, usually presenting any actual, historical figures in a relatively negative light. His narrative moves from a troubled present to a distant history which needs to be recovered and redirected. Both the epic and pedagogical elements in *People of the Black Mountains* bear a tangible relation to the work of earlier Marxist writers such as Brecht, Lukács, or even Bloch, a relation Pinkney discusses in an earlier essay on Williams (Pinkney 1989(b)). The forty stories of the novel might be characterised as a form of Brechtian epic drama in the way they provide the reader with an open-ended tale, but one whose pedagogical element is clearly discernible. Williams' approach to realism also bears a strong relation to that of Lukacs. His concerns are with the everyday life and problems of people from less privileged social classes, particularly when dealing with those holding greater power. At the same time, he is equally concerned with the relation of people to the natural forces exerted by the places in which they live. Like Lefebvre, Williams has a 'double vision' with respect to his perspective on both social and ecological issues. These characteristics have made him an influential writer on geographers with a socialist or Marxist orientation such as Harvey and in this respect he can be compared to John Berger as a novelist. Berger, particularly in his later trilogy of novels on the life of French peasants, also focuses on relations between land and people and on questions of social deprivation and injustice (Berger 1979, 1987, 1990). A further connection with Williams's focus on a particular area might also be made with approximately contemporaneous writers who also focus on specific places or areas. In this context, the north-west of England is a useful area on which to focus briefly in that it borders on parts of Wales and shares with it an ambiguous attitude to the dominant socio-geographical area of British and English culture, the south-east of England. The north of England is not a nation but it can be classified as a region or a number of regions. The role of poets, novelists and historians as confidence builders in such areas can be significant. For example, two writers from the north-west, Glyn Hughes and Frank Lean have sought, in different ways, to provide their readers with evocations of the Pennines area and Manchester, respectively, which help to furnish such places with a more detailed and thereby more meaningful identity. In Hughes' historical novels, notably in *The Hawthorn Goddess* and *The Rape of the Rose*, the relationship between the landscape, the social and technological development of the region and the political problems of earlier centuries are all dramatised in ways which contribute to providing the area with an identity which is more than that of the declining industrial north (Hughes 1985; 1989). Lean's detective novels, such as *Kingdom Gone*, *Nine Lives*, or *Red for Rachel*, to take three relatively recent examples, are all set in contemporary Manchester and are aimed at a slightly different readership, but explore numerous areas of the city

and contemporary developments within them (Lean 2000 (a), (b), (c)). Novels like these employ forms of mapping and history which can help provide a more detailed and equitable sense of cultural diversity within the different places and regions of the British Isles. Williams' approach offers a variety of means for developing such initiatives.

Attention might also be drawn here to the work of historians of Celtic culture such as Peter Beresford Ellis in providing alternative and relatively accessible versions of the nature and significance of earlier historical periods. One such study considers the 'dark ages' between the withdrawal of Roman troops and the Norman Conquest and suggests that the Battle of Brunanburgh rather than that of Hastings might be the crucial one for the future course of British history (Ellis 1993). John Cowper Powys (who falls outside the period covered here but whose novels are concerned with a metaphysics based on a sense of place) also set his last novel, *Porius* (2007) in the same period. Examination of the potential of less well recorded periods of the history of the British Isles is a characteristic shared by the first volume of *People of the Black Mountains*.

Brief initial mention might also be made here of Williams' possible relations to de Certeau or Deleuze and Guattari. *People of the Black Mountains* can be compared to aspects of de Certeau's work in that it is concerned with the problems of people living in an area whose custody and domination is constantly and complexly contested, usually by 'outsiders' rather than 'insiders', to use Relph's terms (Relph 1976 : 61–2). The inhabitants of the area are often depicted devising tactics to cope with the strategies of those with more power than themselves as well as with the natural environment. In relation to Deleuze and Guattari, Williams' novel offers a positive, co-operative approach to social and political evolution, (perhaps comparable to Bergson's approach to natural evolution) despite a considerable emphasis on the tragic developments it can involve. Deleuze and Guattari take this further in their evocation of a complexly shifting chaosmos where sociality is something which needs to be constantly fought for in the face of tendencies in social orders to organise differential elements in human behaviour in repressive ways. *People of the Black Mountains* is full of stories of characters whose behaviour is, retrospectively, beneficial to the region in which they are situated, but who are persecuted in the name of social conventions. As in some of Williams' earlier novels, relations between a distant centre and a particular area are of marked significance. The notion of elusive, 'nomadic' situations and forms of behaviour, escaping and subverting the more established power of the centre(s) becomes relevant to a history which itself might aptly be termed nomadic.

5.1. The Beginning: Introductory

The first volume of *People of the Black Mountains* covers a period stretching from 23,000 B.C. to 51. A.D. This means that most of it deals with a period of time that falls outside the usual range of histories of Britain. Williams is, in effect, dealing with pre-

history — the province, until relatively recently, of archaeologists and researchers of mythology rather than what is usually understood as history by modern historians. This characteristic of Williams' novel links it to the concerns of Olson, Heidegger, Carter and even Deleuze and Guattari, all of whom are concerned to free themselves from what they perceive as the limiting boundaries of modern conceptualisations of history and historiography. Williams's view of history is distinctly modern in its concern with progress, but is also concerned with the more conservative notion of attachment to the same place. Here, comparisons with cultural theorists like Lefebvre, or historians like Braudel are also relevant. We are presented with a long history whose morphology, like that of the landscape, puts into a different perspective changes viewed as enormous by historians with more short-term concerns. At the same time, there is again a danger of the lapse into a yearning for a pre-industrial haven outside of the reaches of modern capitalist social relations.

The novel opens with a bardic invocation entitled 'First'. This is preceded by two sketch maps of the relevant area, partly reminiscent of editions of the novels of Hardy, and perhaps more distantly of Tolkien's *The Lord of The Rings*. In the opening invocation — 'You now hold this place in your hand' (1) — body and place are brought into an intimate relation which one might connect to notions of orientation and centring presented earlier. Attention to this relation is a major constituent of Edward Casey's study of the re-emergence of place as a significant force in modern philosophy. Casey dates this development from Kant's essay of 1768 which positions the body at the centre of subjectively oriented perceptions of place. He views this perception as being more fully developed in the twentieth century, firstly by Husserl, Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty, then, most powerfully by Heidegger and, more recently, by a series of French thinkers, including Deleuze and Guattari (Casey 1997: 201–242). Olson's approach in *The Maximus Poems* is also based on notions of projection from the body, though many of the more substantial aspects of his approach were reduced in subsequent critical reception, as Perry Anderson notes, to a relatively trivialising focus on the formal attributes of 'projective verse' (Anderson 1998 : 15–16).

It is made clear in the novel, partly by the date attached to each tale on the list following the maps, that we are dealing with questions of time and history as much as those of place and geography. The holding of the place involves a perception of all the generations of its human inhabitants, which are 'distinct but all suddenly present' (2). This is not the straightforwardly linear conceptualisation of a history of progress. It seems to move towards the redemptive kind suggested by Benjamin in his *Theses on The Philosophy of History* where the injustices of the past as much as those of the present have to be fought against (Benjamin 1992 : 247). Being familiar with a place means feeling all of its history as a multiple contemporaneity. The form of Williams's novel, with its multiple, momentary episodes, supports this perception.

The first of a series of framing narratives, entitled *Glyn to Elis*, follows the invocation. The form of the narrative involves a deeper perception of place and a sense of maintaining or reviving historical continuity. The grandson, in danger of being

lost himself in the increasing darkness, searches for a lost grandfather, whom he addresses as 'Taid' in the older and more local Welsh language rather than in the more recently imported English in which the novel is predominantly but not totally written. Orientation in a time of darkness, a motif also running through *The Maximus Poems*, is a constant element in these framing narratives. Glyn's limited opportunities for visual perception make him rely on memory and feeling to guide his way. The theme of wandering or being lost in darkness has multiple overtones, suggestive both of a search for redemption and of contemporary disorientation. The element of gothic observed by Pinkney in much of Williams' later fiction seems to be present and these perceptions might be connected to those of other Marxist writers. Jameson's 'cognitive mapping' and Deleuze and Guattari's 'haptic space' (as opposed to the visible space which can be mapped by less local and more powerful forces such as the state) are two examples. The attitude of partial distrust towards the state and professional academia, evinced in Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a nomadic science, is also perceptible in the contrast between Glyn's feelings towards Elis and those towards his natural father and stepfather, a professional historian and politician, respectively. The distinction Williams makes is not between state and nomad but between professional and amateur, but the problem of enclosure and the repression of vitality is addressed. Professional historians are negatively characterised in terms of their attitudes to amateurs and their lack of openness and commitment to the places and people they study:

Pushing away, often coldly, the enthusiasms of the amateur they would reduce what they were studying to an internal procedure; in the worst cases to material for an enclosed career. If lives and places were being seriously sought, a powerful attachment to lives and to places was entirely demanded. (10)

This is a different perception from that relating to the practitioners of nomad science made by Deleuze and Guattari, but the figure of the troublesome intellectual who will not fit smoothly into the patterns organised by the state or even the local society recurs regularly in Williams' treatment of place.

Like Elis, Glyn is ultimately, if not immediately, at home in and deeply sympathetic to the landscape he explores. The evocation of the landscape he walks through has resonances with the work of Wordsworth, Heidegger or Olson. It does not have the smoothness and plasticity of a model, any more than the intellectuals referred to, including Elis, have the smoothness of the professional state functionary, but while not easy or comfortable to live with, both the landscape and Elis are presented as ultimately to be learned from and trusted despite initially disquieting features. A similar characterisation might be applied to Williams' novel itself. The relation between place, thought and memory is further extended in a later passage:

Solid traces of memory! The mountains were too open, too emphatic to be reduced to a personal recollection; the madeleine, the shout in the street.

What moved, if at all, in the moonlit expanse was a common memory, over a common forgetting. In what could be seen as its barrenness, under this pale light, there might be the sense of *tabula rasa*: an empty ground on which new shapes could move. Yet that ideal of a dissident and dislocated mind, that illusion of clearing a space for wholly novel purposes, concealed, as did these mountains, old and deep traces, along which lives still moved. An empty and marginal land, in which the buried history was still full and general was waiting to be touched and moved. (11)

Pinkney discusses some of Williams' reservations about aspects of modernism in his introduction to *The Politics of Modernism* (Pinkney 1989: 1–29) These include a degree of wariness about excitement at the potential of technological development and related technical and individualistic exhibitionism in the sphere of modernist, avant-garde literature. That wariness is partly reflected here. The continuity and development of common cultures is preferred to what are presented as the individualistic epiphanies of Proust's 'madeleine' or Joyce's 'shout in the street'. The emphasis is on reawakening older, more constant elements, now partly forgotten and marginalised. The description of the landscape has a gothic, haunted feel to it, with its 'empty and marginal land' and 'buried history' but 'waiting to be touched and to move' again emphasises the tactile and the emotional as well as the dynamic. A connection is made with the more mythical notion of resurrection, of bringing the land back to life in troubled times. Again, one might link this to Carter in his attention to cultures which respect the 'lie of the land' as opposed to clearing it for the imposition of a new project. Like Carter, Williams refers more positively to traces, which tend to be seen as grounding discourse, than to the important but more ambiguous role of signs, which are portrayed as more subject to complex game-playing and devious forms of interpretation. This is particularly true of the second volume, *The Eggs of the Eagle*, which takes its title from a story concerned with the problematic nature of reading the meaning of signs and dreams. Williams tends towards Lefebvre's approach in insisting, if not quite so polemically as Lefebvre, on the way in which discourses are grounded in something deeper and less accessible to consciousness. In Lefebvre this is termed the social production of space, in Williams the power and influence of place. There is also an important relation, in a history of place which has both an epic and regenerative element, to the romances of John Cowper Powys or Tolkien. Both Pinkney and Bramwell note connections between socialist and more conservative reactionary forms of thinking and those connected with attention to ecological considerations in the earlier part of the century. Bramwell provides a relatively detailed account of literary developments in twentieth century England relating ecological and mythical concerns to the restoration of a lost land. She includes consideration of the work of H.J. Massingham, J.R.R. Tolkien and Henry Williams, among others. (Bramwell 1989: 104–132)

The insistence on the long history of a specific landscape is further developed in later paragraphs. What Glyn experiences is as much a sense of place as of history:

It was more than a sequence of particular moments — the specific times, the changing ways, of the extended history. It was a more settled, permanent sense, of men and women, on these mountains, handling earth, stone, trees, grass, animals: people deep and gone into this place but still seeming to shape it. (12)

Glen Cavaliero, in a discussion of ‘numinous landscapes’ in twentieth century English fiction, refers to *People of the Black Mountains* as ‘a novel with a powerful rendering of timelessness in a particular place’ (Cavaliero 1995:257). The reference is only a footnote but connects Williams to the other, earlier writers Cavaliero is primarily interested in discussing, including Hardy, Lawrence and John Cowper Powys and also provides an interesting discussion of ‘numinous’ landscapes in English fiction (133–157). Williams is not a primarily mystical writer but the significance attributed to place in his novels is as marked as his sense of history — which is substantially derived from that sense of place. Place, history and people are further connected in the ensuing paragraph where a regional geography of the mind is proposed, one which then develops into an alternative, multiplicitous form of relation:

Perhaps the different kinds of memory were different regions of the mind. At his books and maps in the library, or in the house in the valley there was a common history which reconstituted memory, a cast of mind which could be translated anywhere, in a community of evidence and rational enquiry. Yet he only had to move on the mountains for a different mind to assert itself, stubbornly native and local, yet reaching beyond to a wider, common flow, where touch and breath replaced record and analysis: not narrative as history but stories as lives. (12)

This is a different kind of alternative to a linear history than that provided by Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, though it shares some characteristics with them. Both *Ulysses* and *A Thousand Plateaus* tend towards the presentation of a multiplicitous present. In Joyce’s novel, the events of a single day are dramatised in epic form but also refer us back into history. In *A Thousand Plateaus* nomadism is presented as the opposite of a history, but dates are attached to each plateau. As in Williams’ novel, generations are ‘all suddenly present’. In each case, an itinerant or nomadic geography, a ‘tour’ in de Certeau’s sense, is provided as a form of orientation. Each book portrays a form of wandering, motivated in different ways, that amounts to a cartographic alternative to the stable linear progression and development of less experimental novels. Williams’ use of the term ‘regions’ avoids a straightforward opposition between the scholarly and the popular; there is a difference between kinds of memory but not necessarily a rift. The latter is ‘stubbornly native and local’ but connects to a wider world in a manner reminiscent of Olson’s attempt to connect the local and the cosmic; contrasting ‘stories as lives’ with history is one way of contrasting mythology with history and one might recall Olson’s desire to reunite ‘muthos’ and ‘logos’ in the writing of history. Both Olson’s and Lefebvre’s appeals to deeper forces, of which people are scarcely conscious, but which are part of a social and collective rather than individual psychology, are comparable with William’s evocation of ‘a wider common flow’.

The first framing narrative of the novel, where Williams' approach to place and history are set out in general terms has been afforded particular attention here. The approach to the remainder of the novel is inevitably more selective due to reasons of limited space but includes some attention to each of the thirteen sequences and the majority of the forty stories of which the novel's two volumes are composed.

5.2. The Beginning: 23,000 B.C. to 2,000 B.C.

The first sequence, of two stories, set in 23,000 B.C. and 16,000 B.C. respectively, leads back to the source of that 'wider common flow' referred to in the opening framing narrative. The opening story, *Marod, Gan and the Horse Hunt* begins as we wake, as readers, from Glyn's dream, which also functions as collective memory (in a fashion comparable to Olson's Jungian approach to history as collective memory), into Marod's waking and his world. That world, despite being a representation of life 25,000 years ago, is not presented as almost unimaginably different. The story portrays a brief period in the difficult life of a family group of hunters coping with the demands of their physical environment, their need to hunt for survival and to take care of the not fully healthy. Gan, like a number of significant figures in the novel, is crippled. The story describes how the group successfully manage to hunt and kill a horse but temporarily have to abandon Gan in order to do so. This results in his death from cold and ends the story on a sombre note after the triumphant conclusion to the hunt to which most of the story has been devoted. Seven thousand years and the return and subsequent retreat of the icefields of a glacial period separate the first story from the second, *Varan at the Edge of the Great Ice*. In this story Varan succeeds in locating the hunting grounds referred to in a story which other members of his society regard as mere fantasy rather than a significant, practical element of their culture.

Both stories are concerned with the search for places in the form of hunting grounds. The first story is complicated by the need to take care of Gan, a need is presented as basic in the people portrayed. Much of the story is concerned with the details of family life — at this period the life of extended rather than nuclear families. We watch an early family-community survive, develop and negotiate both its internal, social relationships and its relations with the natural environment. In the second story we are already involved with the complexities of a transmitted verbal culture and its mythologies. As in Olson's work, these are shown as transmitting significant information about the movement of early human beings on the earth. Varan has to balance the verbal pictures provided by the tales with calculations of time and distance, deciding how to interpret tales and measure his physical relations to the world. These are early examples of themes to be developed over the subsequent twenty thousand year period covered by the rest of the novel. As with Lefebvre's epochal history of different spatial regimes, a picture of the slow evolution of people's relation to their environment and to one another is gradually built up.

The emphasis on a history of generations is a feature of most of Williams' novels, though the number of generations is usually limited to two or three in the same family. This is a feature of many regional and gothic British novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but *People of the Black Mountains* develops this characteristic to an exceptional degree. The notion of an extended family is present from the very first story but is made to include the local community over endless generations. In each story we never deal with the same people, but they are full of similarities to earlier generations, so that we have a sense of repetition with variations, rather as in Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. One might also compare D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, which covers the lives of three generations in the same area, and the way in which Williams extends this approach. The flow of generation upon generation that *People of the Black Mountains* evokes distinguishes it from the more obviously manageable field of a novel which takes place over a relatively limited time period. Pinkney's observations on Lawrence in this respect are positive. He sees Lawrence as pursuing the creative Expressionism of an early stage of Modernism in contrast to the more aridly analytical and increasingly dehistoricised tendencies of later developments. Similarly, in his comments on Williams's relation to Modernism he notes that '(...) it was Expressionism that aesthetically formed Williams' (Pinkney 1989: 25). Pinkney perhaps tends to distinguish over-schematically between these different elements of Modernism for polemical purposes, but this does not disqualify the accuracy of the observation. The emphasis on slow, sometimes barely perceptible changes, as opposed to those which are dramatic but ultimately superficial, is an important part of Williams's criticism as well as his fiction, as titles such as *The Long Revolution* and the insistence on balancing the perceptions of Paine and Burke in *Culture and Society* indicate. In ways comparable to the approaches of Lukacs and Lefebvre, Williams is as interested in deep structural changes which occur over long periods as in the details of surface observations. At the same time, this long revolutionary perspective might be compared to aspects of Bergson's conception of creative evolution, a fundamental influence on *A Thousand Plateaus*. It may be important in this respect to view Williams as complicating a more naturalistic view of place, common to many of the earlier writers referred to here, by imposing on it a more rigorously historical perspective as much as seeing him as a Marxist novelist whose universalising tendencies are complicated by loyalty to a particular area and a related attention to issues of place and locality.

The framing section of the second sequence finds Glyn pondering on the significance of developments in the earlier period and the traces that indicate them. Geological and climatic changes are covered first. We are reminded that both Marod's and Varan's people were shown temporarily inhabiting the same spot at a turn in the River Wye and that traces of their existence remain. The sequence's stories are set at approximately three thousand year intervals between 10,000 B.C and 5,400 B.C, roughly half that between the stories in the earlier sequence. The first, *The Summer Lake and the New Blood*, also deals with a hunt and with a crippled individual but the problem takes a different form. Pani, while wanting to produce a child by

Varan, whose name echoes the main character of the previous story, is persuaded to conceive with the more elderly and crippled Mirin when Varan and others are lost. It is a decision distasteful to all but seen as necessary for the continuation of the bloodline.

In the second story, *Cara, Daughter of Cara*, the continuity of generations is emphasised even in the title. Again, the story manages to produce a complex, painful situation out of what looks to be a straightforwardly promising one. In a seasonal wedding ceremony, Cara insists on going against the wishes of her elders in waiting to marry a slow and apparently unsuccessful individual, Ral, rather than someone more obviously promising. Like Gan and Mirin, at the beginning of their stories, Ral emerges as a wounded figure. The regular reproduction of life is complicated by the combination of Ral's character and Cara's insistence on remaining loyal to him. In both cases what provides the motivating power of the story is the unconventional and far from attractive nature of a decision. In this story, too, we are presented with the gathering of a multiplicity of tribes, rather than the story of a single group's experiences.

The third story, *Inca's Fire and Aron's Pig*, begins with one of the main characters placing his hands on the layered sandstone, as in the invocation at the beginning of the novel. Incar is a strong, successful figure but like Cara displays interest in a less conventional individual, this time the sickly but perceptive Aron. Aron introduces the idea of rearing domesticated animals but the tribe and even Incar fail to see the value of his perceptions. The story does not end with a simple vindication of the role of creativity in social evolution but with an illustration of the slow, difficult, contested process of acceptance it needs to endure in order to prove lasting. Again, this is characteristic of Williams' general approach to questions of social development.

The stories of the second sequence raise a number of points about the slow, painfully creative nature of social development but it can be asked whether in doing so they really contribute to a poetics and politics of place. One answer to this question is that Williams' novel presents a cumulative poetics and politics which builds up an increasingly complex and interactional as well as highly social conceptualisation of place. A significant role is played by the natural environment which we see the various communities and characters negotiate and this remains a relative constant, even as social factors become increasingly important. At this stage, physical-geographical elements are almost as significant as those which are socio-geographical but even in the first story the problem of caring for the weak is presented as almost as pressing as that of getting food and the success of Varan's search is as dependent on his interpretation of a verbally transmitted history or mythology as it is on his ability to read the physical environment. In the second sequence, place has already become significant in the way in which successive generations choose the same spots and in developments such as that initiated by characters like Aron. Rather than working back to the earliest beginnings of a region and its cultural identity, Williams begins there and builds up a dramatic representation of its various layers of identity.

The third sequence begins with Glyn's hands on the layered sandstone. He reflects on the nature and the slowness of change: '(...) the true pace, always, was local

and day by day (83)'. He also notes how the change of climate produced changes in attitude and culture, though over a period of a thousand years or more. On the one hand, the local people become more cautious, on the other, new people arrive from across the waters. Questions of communication in culture have already emerged as being of significance in the stories. Varan uses the old stories and Incar tries but fails to understand the value of Incar's contribution. This is an aspect of Williams's approach as compared earlier with that of Habermas. The element of communication and interaction between different social groups inhabiting the same area becomes increasingly significant in the third sequence with four stories, all dated 3,400BC, providing an equivalent to Joyce's 'Wandering Rocks' episode in *Ulysses*, reminding us that what happens in one instance can be happening simultaneously, in slightly different forms, in numerous other lives and places. All of these different groups have found, or are looking for, a good place, but an element of Brechtian defamiliarisation is introduced by focusing on the way in which cultural elements familiar to one community (and to a late twentieth century reader) are presented as strange to another. In the first story Gord and Namila are fascinated by the practices of a herding culture. The next story presents the story of the people they have seen from their own side. The third story is then entitled *The Meeting of Hunters and Shepherds* and further explores the slow, uneven gaining of familiarity with the practices of a new, emergent culture. This culminates in the fourth story with the union of Tarac and Lisa, not merely the union of two people, but of two cultures.

The changes dramatised in the stories illustrating this process of union are summarised in the framing narrative introducing the fourth sequence of stories, bringing us closer to a sense of fixed settlement based on the grazing requirements of the flock. A precise description of the remaining traces of these unions is also provided:

On the slopes of what they called, in their language, Curve river — which a later people called Guuy or Wye — there was a string of settlements: one above the valley where Incar had set his fire, near the source of the Little Mountain River; two close on the wide grass plateau beneath the bluff which the hunters call the High Buck...(117–118)

and so on, providing a detailed geography which relates stories to places in the manner of a tour, and comparable to the approach of both Olson and Sinclair in this respect. The use Varan makes of what he learns, in the second story of the first sequence, is partly reproduced as places are invested with significance by means of stories. This is a didactic more than an exciting or entertaining process and it would be foolish to dismiss the problematic nature of Williams' dramatic modality in this respect. Williams makes concessions to accessibility, though in terms of the simplicity of his verbal style and lack of arcane referencing — in contrast to both Olson and Sinclair. Part of the value of the novel lies in the cumulative connecting of different developments it gathers into a popular, as opposed to more technical, history of an area. A form of resistant orientation is provided in the face of tendencies to empty out and re-structure or simply isolate this or other regions.

The first story of the fourth sequence, set in 3,000 B.C., focuses on the building of a long house and its relation to beliefs in, and cultural practices centred around, the Celtic mother-earth goddess, Danu. Building and knowledge are presented as closely interconnected and the festival of midsummer is represented. The second story indicates how, five hundred years later, processes of hierarchy and organized labour bordering on slavery appear in 'the White Land' and the main characters begin to feel a sense of being inferior provincials.

This major change and the double-edged nature of cultural progress are treated further in what is perhaps the central story in the first volume of *People of the Black Mountains*, dated 2,000.B.C. The main character, Dal Mered, is another crippled man, though here the deformation is reduced to a limp caused by a twisted ankle. He has lived in the White Land but chosen to leave it and return to his homeland. The description of this process suggests the ambivalence of Williams' own attitude to the power-knowledge relations embodied in places like Cambridge, though the story does not represent a simple rejection of them. Dal Mered teaches the young Karan the secrets of measuring that he has learnt and this process forms the main body of the story, as hunting and other practices do in earlier ones. One of its elements is a contrast between the older values of the Black Mountain people and those emerging from the White Land. Menvandir, the precise place from which Dal Mered has come, is presented as a 'fine' place, rarely a complementary term in the novel. Dal Mered is keen to point out to Old Karan of Menvandir that '...its importance is not the place. Its importance is the idea.' (161).

The antagonistic approach to places conceived of in terms of ideas and systems rather than bodily experience is a major characteristic of Lefebvre's approach to relations between power, knowledge and social space. Here, the approach is more balanced and less polemical but Dal Mered's Menvandir, source of the old stone circles such as Stonehenge, emerges from the story as a place as threatening as it is impressive. This partly stems from Dal Mered's own distinction between 'measuring' and 'signs'. While he respects the integrity of the former as indicators of accuracy and truth, he presents the latter as a means of social exploitation for priests and tells Karan: 'I wil lnot give signs, for I am not a priest but a Measurer.' (178). Shortly after, he comments on the transformation of the old 'laws of portage' exemplified in the previous story, *With Antlers to the Seariver*, into a rigidly organised system policed by guards; 'Guards and signs! This is not measuring.'(180). There is something here, as in the whole novel, of George Orwell's approach, notably in *Animal Farm*, of presenting the degeneration of a potentially positive socio-political process in terms of a semi-allegorical story. Williams's approach is, though, one which remains in relative proximity to actual historical developments. It is not only the degeneration of Menvandir which is a problem since Dal Mered arguably brings some of it with him to the Black Mountains. At the same time, neither this tale nor any of the others in the novel is an example of dystopian fiction. What makes it valuable in terms of a poetics and politics of place is its complex and relatively open balancing of different perspectives on the nature and development of a particular area. It is, though, in

this sequence, and particularly this story, that problems of relations between more powerful forms of social organisation and their tendency to dominate and displace their less powerful neighbours become a central issue. Menvandir is the first real central place or state to emerge in the novel and is presented at one stage as a symbol of modernity, as Dal Mered reflects:

It was a simple, well-ordered, well-provided settlement, the kind of safe, quiet place he seemed to remember from his boyhood, though he had often suspected that memory had softened and improved it. Yet it was so utterly different from the great Round House of the Company, with its elaborate furniture, its fine, flat-base pottery, its woven and brightly-dyed clothes and its prepared and varied food. It was as if he had moved in eleven days' walk from one time, one world to another. Yet it had been his own decision to leave the company and walk west. There had been a lifetime of interest in Menvandir, at the growing point of the world. He belonged to its modernity, and his mind could never slip back into these old settled ways. Yet quite apart from more particular reasons, he had become old and tired in his body, and it was as if his very breathing seemed to crave the softer and sweeter air of that west in which he had been born. (157–158)

This passage raises a number of problems in relation to questions of time, place and progress. Dal Mered is aware of the dangers of nostalgia and does not deny his attachment to modernity, progress and the advancement of knowledge but his body, partly, as he admits, because of its ageing, needs more nourishing than that of the hard intellectual element he values in Menvandir. Rather as in Lefebvre's analysis of space, the body is often aware of socio-spatial elements not available to the conscious mind. Both these worlds are valued and neither of them is presented as perfect, any more than Dal Mered or old Karan. The approach here can usefully be termed postmodern not only in its heterotopic holding of more than one world in one space but in its carefully qualified evaluation of the benefits of those elements of progress which occur in the area on which it focuses. Williams' narrative uses simple terms such as softness and sweetness but they are supported by a cumulative dramatisation of the shifting tensions and perspectives of disposition and feeling that constitute the complex and historical force-field which is a place, rather than an empty or easily manipulable space. The notion of the 'sweetness' of the area is one which is deployed at several stages in the novel as one to which various characters refer when defending it against what is perceived as the insensitive and intolerant impositions of outside influences.

5.3. The Beginning: 1700 B.C. – 51 A.D.

The second half of the novel leads towards the beginnings of Roman invasion and to a more accessibly recorded history of events in the British Isles as a whole. Issues of exploitation, of both people and the earth, are again raised, providing the novel with a double, social-ecological, vision. These issues are raised in relation to notions

of disease, in its physical, mental and cultural forms. In the first story of the fifth sequence, Seril suffers at the hands of her stepmother and stepbrother, running from the culture of one community to another in the process. The behaviour of Kevil, the stepbrother, is presented as bordering on the pathological but is only the first example in a series which intensifies as the novel progresses. The other two stories indicate how the earth, as much as human beings, can provide violent disruptions to life and even more virulent forms of disease. The second story deals with the experience and interpretation of an earthquake, particularly on the part of Old Samela who is sceptical about what for her are sacrilegiously modern methods of taking metals from the body of the earth and who sees the earthquake as Danu's revenge for such violation. Carvor, the central character in the story, searches among a series of different interpretations for the meaning of what is happening, deciding to move in the direction indicated by the searches of Karan the Measurer towards a sacred place. Belief is portrayed as part of a search for orientation in relation to circumstances which cannot be accounted for easily. In this respect, the story again takes on a strongly contemporary feel in its presentation of a search for direction among a plethora of competing perspectives. The final story in the sequence presents a picture of the anthrax plague and its negative effects on the lives and cultural confidence of communities:

It was a disaster beyond anything which the shepherds could have imagined. For several generations, slowly remaking their lives as the surviving children matured, there was a loss of spirit and of belief, and this in its own way was as damaging as the direct destruction of the disease. (231–232)

A comparison can be made here between Williams' approach and that of Arran Gare. Both writers' treatments of questions of place and region are informed as much by ecological as by Marxist considerations and both are interested in pathologies which affect both people and the earth. One of the basic functions of culture is to organise social life in a sufficiently coherent fashion for communities to be able to maintain and develop a productive relationship with one another and the earth. Gare, in his earlier book, *Nihilism Incorporated*, provides a polemical account of the various ways in which Western cultures have increasingly failed to meet this challenge and how the cultural nihilism of the late twentieth century might provide the possibility of a new beginning (Gare 1993). Williams' approach is less apocalyptic but his long-historical scope offers a long term perspective on questions of cultural disorientation and decline, as well as possibilities for recovery.

Some of these developments are explored in the opening to the sixth sequence. Comparisons might be made with Gare and Lefebvre here, in terms of a Marxist preoccupation with divisions of labour, but also to poets such as Olson and by extension Prynne and Sinclair, in terms of the emphasis on feeling the presence of earlier generations in the landscape and wondering at the nature of the beliefs which provided them with an adequate sense of orientation. The introductory section traces the move from a sense of wonder and reverence to one of calculation and exploitation, a preoccupation of the thinking of Heidegger as well as Marxist thinkers and the

poets mentioned. In the preceding framing section, 'Glyn to Elis 5', Williams shows himself sensitive to charges of naivety in indicating the virtues of the closely related concept of simplicity as Glyn ponders the significance of Skirrid, one of the highest peaks in the area.

He turned his eyes to the Skirrid; Ysgyryd Fawr, the Holy Mountain. It was strange how many legends had converged on that broken peak, significant only in its isolation. Unlike these complex ridges and valleys it declared itself clearly and simply: a condition perhaps of belief. (189)

There is no question here of either Glyn, or Williams, simply identifying with this position; neither the significance of belief nor of the mountain, or the relationship between the two, is excluded. One might draw a limited comparison between Williams' clear, simple style of writing in this novel and its relation to the sophisticated surface complexities of much contemporaneous fictional and theoretical writing, but what seems available is a suggestion rather than a dogmatic preference. The reflections are on processes of transition that contain both negative and positive elements. The move from generous, open enquiry and faith to organised exploitation is perhaps the most negative and telling in terms of what follows in the novel:

(...) to live for the new knowledge, to spend each day and night in the long search for its complexities, still depended, physically, on the common life of labour. The nourishment that sustained it would at first have been willingly given, because the observations still connected with everyday practice. Giving would become, within a faith, a reverent custom. Yet the ever larger monuments, the extending systems in stone, developed beyond the powers of simple communities or even neighbouring groups. At some point, through the generations, what had once been community became order and what once had been gift, tribute. (237)

The speculation here, in 'Glyn to Elis 6', follows a broadly Marxist line of approach in terms of its preoccupations with the transition from open community to an organised order of social exploitation and can be compared to Lefebvre and Habermas, but there is no question of any simple, dogmatic preference, only a speculation regarding the problematic nature of larger and more sophisticated systems of social and cultural organization. The stories dramatise this threat from such systems to the local communities of the region. The first, *Tami in Telim and Grain Valley*, opens with an evocation of the different kinds of settlements operating within the region and relations between them. The self-enclosed nature of Telim is contrasted with the open disposition of Grain Valley, the only settlement with which Telim has connections through trade rather than marriage. The negative aspects of Telim's lack of openness are quietly indicated and it is Grain Valley's openness which brings news of the increasing influence of metallurgy and the military developments connected to it. *Tami and the Devils*, provides a more graphic dramatisation of this threat and *Telim and the Lord Epodorix*, set some three hundred years later, gives a picture of the menacing nature of the new dispensation. The representative of the Lord Epodorix who visits Telim offers its inhabitants a 'peace' which includes protection from the superior fighting technology of marauding bands but also an increasing

degree of subservient incorporation into a larger and more hierarchical system. Williams has Namat, Telim's representative, speak initially of 'Lordepodorix' rather than Lord Epodorix, emphasising the lack of familiarity with a formal hierarchical system (276).

Developments are chronicled in a modality of relative, though not complete, neutrality. The impression given is of a very early instance of military, state and other large scale forms of domination. The development of military domination is traced in later stories but there is also a sense of the problematic influence of powerful systems on specific local areas. This is something dramatised in relation to the influence of international capital in the late twentieth century in Williams' earlier novel, *The Fight For Manod*. Capital and the state are shown to have a long and at least partially negative genealogy. Williams' approach might be seen as overlapping with that of Deleuze and Guattari, though the latter provide a more aggressive and schematic characterization of the state and a different notion of the significance of metallurgy and weapons in their characterisation of the war-machine. Williams accords a less positive valency to notions of movement and escape from large-scale systems, but this does not mean they are not present. The flow of history in the novel provides an alternative to the dehistoricising flows of capital and other systems which attempt to impose a 'peace' which is as threatening as war (Deleuze and Guattari's objection to the 'peace' of late twentieth century capitalist relations (1988:466–7) and so does the reluctant, wary attitude of the local inhabitants of the area to anything new. This partly accords with Williams' own sceptical attitude as a cultural theorist to any new, exciting, quick fix for current social difficulties whether it comes in the form of capital and advertising or radical revolutionary Marxism and other, related ideologies. The local, native sense of people in the area is accorded respect, though not uncritical reverence, as an important part of a developing social and political order which supports the co-existence of different communities and is capable of providing justice for all of them.

At this stage, the emergence of a new system is recorded by Glyn in the seventh of the framing narratives:

It had been in a way the greatest of all changes, beyond the natural variations of climate and livelihood. The old life and local communities became part of a network: not the old social networks of beliefs and gifts and trade, but a new formal network of land and property. Land and families became property within a system quite beyond them. (282–283)

There is no move here explicitly to condemn this change but there is a sense of dangerous disorientation communicated by the ambiguity of the final phrase: 'quite beyond them'. The characterisation of 'a new formal network of property' is reminiscent of the distinction made at the beginning of Williams' first novel, *Border Country*, between the distanced, anonymous, formal social relationships of the metropolis, London, and the easy, informal ways of treating people in the valley to which the main character returns. The section ends with a reference to the fact that Epodorix is one of the Pretani, the Britons, and that to most people the imposition or accep-

tance of the new order seemed no more than 'a kind of common sense' (286). Here, the reading offered seems to hover between the neutral and the ironic. Williams has time for local common sense but not an unlimited or completely uncritical respect for its virtues. He provides a long history of what can be seen, from perspectives such as those of Gare, Deleuze and Guattari, and Lefebvre, as a partly pathological system of exploitation of both people and earth.

The seventh sequence explores and dramatises the nature of this new socio-political disposition of rule by military aristocracy. The first story begins with a summary of the change of condition of Telim's inhabitants:

Slowly, against their own customs, the people of Telim learned the actual meaning of lord, which they had at first taken simply as a name. It was now, they learned, a condition. What they had considered their own settlement was now a part, a resource, of their lord. (286)

There is a direct description here of the loss of control and ownership of place by its inhabitants, moving towards de Certeau's description of the tactics of people who have no 'proper' place. These changes are reflected in the development of Banavint, described in the first story, from one of a group of settlements with minimum military fortifications to an 'impressive place' with substantial defensive outworks, wall and gate. The tensions and antagonism between these two different structures of feeling, to use Williams's own theoretical term, is dramatised especially powerfully in the second story of the sequence, *The Wise One and the Slave*. Here an accident, a literal slip, by a local girl considered a 'slave' causes a confrontation between the haughty Mation, a far from sympathetic characterisation of one of the newly emergent upper classes, and Derco, the girl's brother who is almost as short-tempered and aggressive as Mation. Like his sister, Derco is considered a slave, thereby possessing no right to communicate his opinions freely. The confrontation between Derco and Mation is mediated by diplomats for each side, Lugon for the aristocracy, Karan for the local people. Lugon insists on upholding the law, Karan for an interpretation of it which will accord with 'the sweetness of the place'. This is a concept which holds no meaning for Lugon who asks 'What sweetness?' The response is 'Of our earth, wise one. Of our place in this earth. To shed blood would sour it.' (299). Lugon is unable to accept this notion of tolerant, earth-connected perspectivism and can only appeal to a higher power to which Karan must submit. The debate between these two intellectual representatives of the two cultures continues. Karan attempts to explain his culture's 'ties' to the earth, while rubbing a piece of sandstone between his fingers at one point (305). Lugon responds to this with more angry assertions of his own culture's superiority. At the end of the story Derco escapes and Karan's life is taken in place of his. The story portrays and defends the beliefs and ways of an older, gentler culture, with close ties to the earth and to notions of place, against the arrogant dominance of a newer, more aggressively powerful one. Parallels can be drawn with Carter's portrayal of relations between aboriginal natives and the modern colonisers of Australia. Telim is shown to be limited in its perspectives but figures like Karan present us

with a powerful characterisation of its positive aspects. By this time we have reached 250 B.C and are close to the Roman invasion but the dating of these stories makes it clear that processes of domination and colonisation are not to be equated with any simple division between Roman and Celtic or pre-Celtic cultural characteristics. The great, crucial change, from an attached sense of place, to a dominating military system has taken place slowly, with intimations of what is to come from at least the time of Menvandir, and has matured into a mature system of oppression before the Romans arrive. This would seem to dissociate Williams from any simple identification with romantic notions of peripheral Celticism in opposition to the centralising, imperial tendencies of the Roman, and later the British, empire. This is not to say that he does not come closer to such a position in his treatment of later events, but it is to suggest that his treatment of earlier periods complicates any tendency to cast his perspective in terms of any simple, binary division between romantic Celticism and Roman imperialism. The final sequence of the novel focuses on early relations between the Romans and the native ruling classes. In the closing tale of the previous sequence, the enclosed, smug narcissism and squabbles of the court are complemented by a perspective which sees Julius Caesar and the Romans as being, like other slaves and distant foreigners, inferior. The eighth sequence's framing narrative and stories provide a characterisation of multiplicity and strategic disarray among what are seen from a Roman perspective as 'Celtic' tribes and a later Derco emerges as a successful outlaw whose guerilla tactics are more effective against the Romans than the heroic notions of combat favoured by the dominant military aristocracies. The novel closes with Derco confidently concealing himself from both Roman and native, British enemies.

The first volume of *People of the Black Mountains* deals, as its last framing section notes, with a period of history for the most part unrecorded. Its major themes are those of the long-term development of an area in terms of its settlement and the different forms of cultural organization that shape it. This slow, cumulative development is complemented by a slightly more mystical appeal to the 'sweetness' of place, presented in various forms. Processes of interaction between peoples and, in the later stages, the domination of some by others, play a major role in an alternative history concerned as much with issues of justice, freedom and equality as with orientation and attachment to place.