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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: the country and the city revisited, c. 1550–1850

Gerald MacLean, Donna Landry, Joseph P. Ward

I
AFTER WILLIAMS

In revisiting the literary and cultural terrain mapped out by Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City* (1973), this book seeks to connect Williams's analysis of urban and rural spaces with current critical concerns. In many respects Williams's study remains "the indispensable commentary on the poetry of rural life."[1] Literary, social, and art historians, as well as geographers and social and cultural theorists, continue to invoke *The Country and the City* as a necessary starting point for any investigation of the politics of place in the formation of English cultural identity. As recently as 1996, the "incredibly rich literary analysis" of *The Country and the City* was cited, by the geographer David Harvey, for exemplifying the critical relationship between place and space.[2] Certainly, its broad historical scope – reaching across several centuries from the emergence of mercantile capitalism through its transformation by and into industrial capitalism and colonial imperialism – continues to challenge seemingly neater historical periods.

In *The Country and the City*, and perhaps more profoundly in his fiction,[3] Williams created an influential paradigm for conceiving of place and social space, country and city, the rural and the metropolitan, as dialectically related constructs, not fixed and separate entities. Yet however influential Williams's model of country and city has proved over the years, in the disciplines in which it has had most influence, critical thinking has altered in several important respects. However resonant the term "place" may be of rootedness and fixity, no place can ever be wholly abstracted from the social relationships, capital flows, cultural representations, and global forces that late-twentieth-century theorists have come to call "space."

The decades since the publication of Williams's book have seen a great deal of innovative scholarship on the politics of culture, especially

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the representation of social identities and their constitution in specific geographical locations, places networked within the larger web of capitalist space. As early as 1972, John Barrell was revealing the particularities of the poet John Clare's sense of place, nourished in Northamptonshire on the edge of the Lincolnshire fens. Barrell showed how Clare's sense of space had developed in the old open-field agricultural landscape before enclosure, and how Clare struggled to express an aesthetic of locality against the tides of literary convention and agricultural improvement.[4] In *The Politics of Landscape*, published in 1979, James Turner dealt with the ideological and aesthetic uses of landscape in a sophisticated, theoretically nuanced way that would prove influential.[5] The work of Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall on gender within middle-class families and Peter Borsay's study of the distinctive culture of provincial towns represent important developments within social history of the 1980s.[6] Geographers such as Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels have radicalized the understanding of land as landscape by drawing attention to its symbolic dimensions.[7] The early 1990s saw a flourishing of similarly informed studies across the disciplines of cultural, social, literary, and art history.[8]

In the years since *The Country and the City* was published, notions of space have been theoretically developed in ways that challenge Williams's often tacit conceptions. Especially in the work of Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, and Edward W. Soja, new conceptions of capitalist space have been formulated with regard for poststructuralist thinking across the academic disciplines.[9] If the impact of poststructuralism has most often manifested itself in a suspicion of totalizing theory and an eschewing of scientific or empiricist reductionism, these are critical imperatives that were already at the forefront of Lefebvre's project as early as 1971.[10] One of the tendencies of the new spatialization has been to disrupt "received theory and dominant metanarratives," as Harvey has argued, so it is easy to see why spatial metaphors have proved crucial for much theorizing, regardless of discipline.[11] Emphasizing the inescapability – and duplicity, or at least slipperiness – of signification within cultural practice has rendered untenable the kind of simple distinction Williams was able to make between the "real history" of social relations on the land, and mere ideologies on the other. From 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.[12]

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The rise of interdisciplinary work in history, geography, literature, and art history, combined with the broadening of the English literary canon, make a project like Williams's largely unthinkable today. For all its complex specificities, that deeply layered text was itself formulated exclusively within the parameters of literary history, and more specifically within the Cambridge English curriculum, in ways that scholars, including many of the contributors to this volume, have begun to question. The very notion of literature itself has expanded to include the writing of women and racial and ethnic minorities as well as working-class men. The texts of popular culture, including broadsides, pamphlets, newspapers, court records, and other archival materials both visual and verbal, now clamor to be read alongside the formerly canonical works of literature. The enlargement of the literary canon has complicated the field of literary and cultural studies at the same time that a new social history "from below" – focusing upon women, the working classes, colonized peoples, and ethnic and sexual minorities – has become both possible and necessary. Despite the considerable problems of retrieving evidence for the point of view of those "who left no wills, for whom no inventories were drawn up, who had few family papers, no account ledgers or bills,"[13] the popularity of writing history "from below" remains undiminished. Movements toward interdisciplinary work in both literary and historical studies have meant that historians such as J. M. Neeson may now investigate the effects of enclosure by considering the evidence of George Morland's paintings and engravings and John Clare's poetry, while literary and art historical scholars like John Barrell have analyzed what enclosure might actually have meant for Clare's parish of Helpston.[14] Williams would no doubt have approved of such developments.

Few would now consider taking on such categories as "country" and "city" across so many centuries of English history from an exclusively literary point of view. At the same time, the very Englishness of Williams's conceptual framework, which gestures toward the British Empire only in its closing chapters, would today be criticized as insufficiently attentive to questions of imperialism and colonialism. Interdisciplinary work now seeks to account for developments both within and across social history, literary studies, art history, and feminist and postcolonial theory. Any study of the politics of culture needs to challenge both old views and guard against premature orthodoxies.

Yet scholars have paid a price for their distrust of historical grand narratives. Although the new interdisciplinarity achieves argumentative

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complexity amidst a wealth of detail, it depends upon a retraction of vision from what was possible for Williams. The transition from feudalism to capitalism, the rise of the middle classes and the English novel, the English Revolution that ended in a Restoration of monarchy, the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions, the making of the English working class, the rapaciousness of the empire machine: large scale explanatory narratives of this sort have come to be seen as too simple, too monolithic, and too ideologically loaded. But what has been proposed instead? Rather than substituting improved explanations for long-term changes, cultural criticism and revisionist history have mainly focused on the local and the particular. As John Brewer once observed, in place of a new grand narrative, they have offered instead many interrelated short stories.[15]

In the spirit of Williams's historical comprehensiveness, though aware of its shortcomings, this book offers a longer vista of early modern English history than is generally available in a single volume. Spanning the traditional literary and cultural periods of the Renaissance and Romanticism, the subjects of this book mark the consolidation of a national identity that, despite enormous local and regional variants, confidently imagined itself ordained to set about ruling the world. How were the English people able to remake themselves from a rough, bucolic island nation, divided amongst themselves by localized feudal loyalties, dialects and even languages, into an imperial power? How can new concepts of spatiality, of socially produced space, help us to envisage how new forms of identity emerged during this period?

II

SPACE, MERCANTILISM, IDENTITY

Williams may have represented the country and the city as dialectically related, an advance over many previous analyses, but country and city nevertheless function dichotomously in his scheme of things. Analytical categories are not the same as descriptive terms. While country and city may continue to describe concrete and specific geographical places, they do so as relational constructs within the social production of space, with its movements of capital, labor, and commodities. What Williams figured as an analytical dichotomy can be more satisfactorily grasped as a series of permeable boundaries. Certainly the explanatory force of a single urban-rural divide has been questioned in the work of Ray Pahl and other sociologists, for whom the very terms rural and

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urban are regarded as "more remarkable for their ability to confuse than for their power to illuminate."[16] Between 1550 and 1850, as more people traveled and migrated than ever before, differences between urban and rural cultures became less distinct even as they were increasingly reiterated as the social values that constituted Englishness.

During the whole of our period, English people, as well as the Welsh, Scots, and Irish, were perpetually on the move. For the early part of this period, vagrancy was both "the most intractable social problem," particularly between 1560 and 1640, and a crime, "the social crime par excellence," because the vagabond's status itself was criminalized, apart from any actions committed.[17] Vagrancy might be a crime, but "mobility was so pervasive that it was seen as much a natural part of the life cycle as being born or dying."[18] From the 1550s on, the greatest movement of people was from rural areas to metropolitan London and other cities and provincial towns. Poverty and ambition drove many into the suburbs, towns, and cities where they hoped to find work in a cash economy, and perhaps status and influence as well.

Yet at the same time that urban populations were expanding, there emerged a powerful counter-current in imaginative identifications, one that is still very much with us today: increasingly, for those who would be properly English, urbanity itself came to involve a rejection of life in the city for the country estate, house, or cottage. In order to avoid the filth and disease that accompanied city life, those who were very successful could return to the countryside, buy up land, and build themselves monuments to their own achievements. It is worth recalling that Ben Jonson's design in celebrating the ancient family estate of the Sidneys at Penshurst was to repudiate those nouveau mansions that had been "built to envious show."[19] Ironically, as Williams recognized, the Sidneys themselves were relative newcomers to the land, since only half a century earlier Penshurst had been given by Edward VI to William Sidney, tutor and chamberlain of the court. "That is not quite a timeless order," Williams observes, before going on to note that the very consolidation of one's profits from courtiership in an ancient pile made it "easy to complain, with an apparent humanity, against the crude grasping of the successive new men."[20]

The paradox of country life as the desirable end of urban aspirations was often resolved then, as it is now, with the convenience of a suburban residence. Although the London suburbs were socially and economically integrated with the City from at least the sixteenth century, later suburbs became more imaginatively distinct. By 1700, John

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Pomfret's poem, "The Choice," which Samuel Johnson thought had been "oftener perused" than any other poem in the English language, celebrates as the best of all possible lives that of an English gentleman of means with "a private Seat, / Built Uniform, not little, nor too great," standing on a rising ground, with fields on one side and woods on the other. But far from being buried in the depths of the country, the narrator wishes to be "Near some fair Town."[21] Thus does a suburban sensibility with a genteel face emerge within polite culture in England. This development must shed new light on the flourishing of middle-class suburbanization over one hundred years later, as evidenced in the architecture, gardening, greenhouses, and house-furnishing manuals of John Claudius Loudon and Jane Webb Loudon in the 1830s and 1840s.[22]

Flows of labor and capital were both internal to Great Britain and, crucially, colonial. From port cities many departed from British shores for colonial ventures, sometimes willingly, sometimes as the objects of transportation or impressment. The movement of commodities not only paralleled but became ever more deeply interfused with the movement of people. Since chattel slaves bore the legal status of commodities, the traffic in African chattel slaves was the most spectacular form of this commodification of human labor.[23] Sugar, tobacco, and African slaves dominated the West Indian traffic, while the East India trade featured tea, silk, and porcelain. As K. N. Chaudhuri argues, these commodities initiated new conceptions of space, time, and identity: "It was not for merchants to explain, much less to speculate on, the abstract unity formed by silk, porcelain, and tea between a great Far Eastern civilisation, warmed by the tropical sun, and the inhabitants of a cold Western hemisphere."[24] But this unexplained, abstract unity bound geographically separate peoples together, plantation chattel slaves and English laborers, transported vagrants and rich merchant adventurers, as well as Far Eastern and North-Atlantic traders. The economics and culture of mercantilism made possible new identities and forms of self-construction that depended on imaginary elements frequently at odds with geography.

Relations between the British colonial project and representations of English cities and countryside began much earlier than Williams's twentieth-century focus implies. The notion of industrial labor discipline originated on the colonial sugar plantation long before its arrival in European factories, for example.[25] And the eighteenth-century landscape aesthetics that shaped and reshaped much of England's rural topography into a picturesque notion of what "the countryside" should look like belonged, as Elizabeth Bohls argues, "to a repertoire of discursive

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technologies set to advance the imperial project."[26] English landscaped parks and colonial plantations became not only economically but aesthetically interdependent in the course of the eighteenth century. Such metropolitan and colonial relations seriously complicate any simple division between the urban and the rural, and these relations begin with sixteenth-century colonial exploration.

In economic terms, this is the great age of mercantile capitalism, reaching from the Elizabethan explorers and early trading companies that enjoyed monopoly privileges, such as the East India Company and the Levant Company, to the era of middle-class family fortunes made by manufacturing products, such as Cadbury's chocolate, based on the colonial economy.[27] Not until the 1560s, during Elizabeth I's reign, did English poets first seriously begin to imagine the English nation, and the British Isles, as a whole in terms of geographical space and boundaries. While reiterating Virgil's line about the Britons inhabiting a world apart, they also began to look inside the national coastline to examine the astonishing variety of local customs and histories that made up the national map.[28] Cartographers and pamphleteers, as well as poets, contributed to the construction of new forms of nationhood. The great Elizabethan chorographical artists and writers followed roads and rivers inland to discover and describe ancient cities, local heroes, river nymphs, and other curious spirits of place along the way.

Keeping international trade-routes open frequently meant going to war in the name of one's country, even as trade offered imaginary alternatives to violent conquest that redefined both *what* that country was and *where* it was to be found. Largely through the agency of the press, an essentially urban civic and political culture – one based on writing and reading – came to assert itself far beyond the legislative world of the Court, Parliament, and the great landowners. It became increasingly possible to be non-aristocratic, and yet nationally powerful beyond one's immediate place, as studies of provincial towns, English merchants, and middle-class families, have shown.[29] In pursuing these developments, this book seeks to challenge the courtly, aristocratic, and London-centered approaches that still tend to predominate in literary and cultural histories of the English in the era before industrialization.

This "long" mercantilist moment, between the Renaissance and Romanticism, was crucial to Williams's chief concern in *The Country and the City*: the development of literary forms and structures that both insinuated and resisted attempts to make the newly emergent capitalist relations appear fundamental to English life. Although images of country

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life had been invoked for centuries to criticize urban corruption, and to posit a golden age of social harmony that had only recently vanished over the historical horizon, there was a particular urgency to English projections of vanishing rural virtues between the reigns of Elizabeth and Victoria. The mercantilist moment, celebrating imperial expansion and English greatness at home and abroad, depended upon a certain confidence, a certainty of identity as buoyant as the great ships of mercantile trade. This confident assertion of national superiority and resourcefulness, summed up in William Blackstone's description of the English as "a polite and commercial people," would no longer prove tenable beyond the early decades of the nineteenth century.[30] The aftermath of the American War of Independence, colonial and slave rebellions, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars that followed, contributed not only to an agricultural crisis marked by a severe falling-off in agricultural productivity and prosperity, but also a crisis of political confidence in British imperial governance. After mid-century, Victorian imperial ambitions would be couched in a new rhetoric of defensiveness or bellicose bombast. If there had ever been such a thing as mercantilist innocence, it did not survive the era of Romanticism and the coming of the railway.

III

A BRIEF HISTORY, NOT OF TIME BUT OF SPACE

As we have seen, between 1550 and 1850 a profound shift occurred in the balance between the urban and rural populations of England, with particular consequences for the making of social identities. What did this shift mean in terms of physical places and social space? During the sixteenth century, most men and women worked in the agrarian sector and lived in the countryside, while fewer than five percent of them lived in towns. By the middle of the nineteenth century that had changed so dramatically that towns with more than 10,000 inhabitants together comprised roughly half the population of England. While English society was becoming more urban, the relations both among and between towns and their surrounding regions changed as well. Through the seventeenth century, London dominated provincial towns; by the outset of the eighteenth century its population was nearly twenty times that of Norwich, the next largest town, and nearly thirty times that of Bristol, the third largest. During the eighteenth century, the populations of many provincial towns, including several that were little more than sprawling

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villages, began to rise at an increasingly rapid pace. By the early nineteenth century urban centers such as Manchester, Liverpool, and Birmingham were experiencing growth rates far higher than London's, though their populations were no more than one-tenth that of the metropolis. However, the combination of industrialization and the expansion of internal trade meant that provincial towns not only dwarfed their pre-industrial counterparts, but they emerged from beneath London's shadow.[31]

While there are many obstacles to gauging the metropolitan population with any precision before the 1801 census, the best estimates of the City of London's population in the early years of Elizabeth's reign place it at around 100,000, with an additional 30,000 or so in the nearby suburbs, such as Westminster. Over the next century and a half, the metropolis grew rapidly, if not steadily, until it contained half a million people by 1700, most of them living in suburban areas that had developed in formerly rural parts of Middlesex and Surrey. The relatively high mortality rate in London required huge inflows of immigrants who, responding to population pressures in the countryside, sought better fortunes in towns.[32] The relatively rapid growth of London sparked both praise and criticism from contemporaries. In a sermon published in 1620 in the hope of inspiring King James to renovate St. Paul's cathedral, Bishop John King offered the many marvelous buildings and institutions of London – such as the Royal Exchange, the livery company halls, and hospitals for the poor – as evidence that London had become an "Augustius and majestical city" fit for a great cathedral. But King directed his remarks to a monarch who had already taken steps to stem metropolitan growth from fear that "Soon London will be all England."[33]

The fortunes of provincial towns varied widely during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with most undergoing periods of economic and demographic stagnation, followed by considerable improvements after the Restoration. Leading provincial centers such as Norwich, York, and Exeter continued to dominate important ecomonic regions. Middle-size towns such as Coventry, however, failed to adapt to the emergence of a national distribution network for retail goods centered in London, and consequently saw much of their commercial activity being slowly siphoned away to other towns. Yet where a town's merchants and manufacturers adapted to developing domestic and, increasingly, international markets, then it could continue to prosper throughout the period. The population of Bristol, for example, doubled during the years

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1550–1700, and then doubled again during the eighteenth century because its traders successfully expanded their interests beyond nearby ports in France and Spain toward the burgeoning markets in the West Indies and the Chesapeake, thereby encouraging the development of local industries such as sugar refining and the manufacture of tobacco pipes.[34]

Urban growth was made possible by the greater output of raw materials and the steady improvement of the means of transporting them to markets. The growing population in south-eastern counties – and above all in London – contributed to shortages of wood for use in building and as fuel. An increased demand for coal, supplied principally from the Tyneside collieries, in turn encouraged the vast expansion of both mining and shipbuilding in the north-east.[35] Metropolitan growth was thus a catalyst for the urbanization of a region on the other side of the kingdom. At the same time, the higher productivity of agriculture made labor available for a wide array of by-employments in rural areas. The gradual emergence of rural communities that combined agrarian with manufacturing work – a process often referred to as "proto-industrialization" – was well underway in the sixteenth century and continued right into the nineteenth century as domestic and international markets expanded. Entrepreneurs, based in towns, took advantage of the willingness of rural people to supplement their incomes with waged labor to produce a wide array of goods ranging from textiles to nails.[36]

One of the great engines of such demand was the growth of middle-class consumerism, which had emerged during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries largely as a result of increasing profits from commerce, industry, and the professions. In his study of this process in London, Peter Earle suggests that while it is difficult to isolate the specificities of middle-class culture, unmistakeable desires and associated activities emerged: collecting certain kinds of objects – clocks, newspapers, novels – purchasing fire insurance, engaging in tea-drinking, joining social clubs, and for men, the new three-piece suit of coat, waistcoat, and knee-breeches. Peter Borsay's work on the related phenomenon of the "urban Renaissance" of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries demonstrates that in matters of taste and style, London set the example for provincial towns, though there was certainly room for local variations. This emergence of middle-class culture was largely – though not exclusively – urban, since it relied on polite sociability. Urban, indeed urbane, spaces such as coffee-houses, town squares, the meeting

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