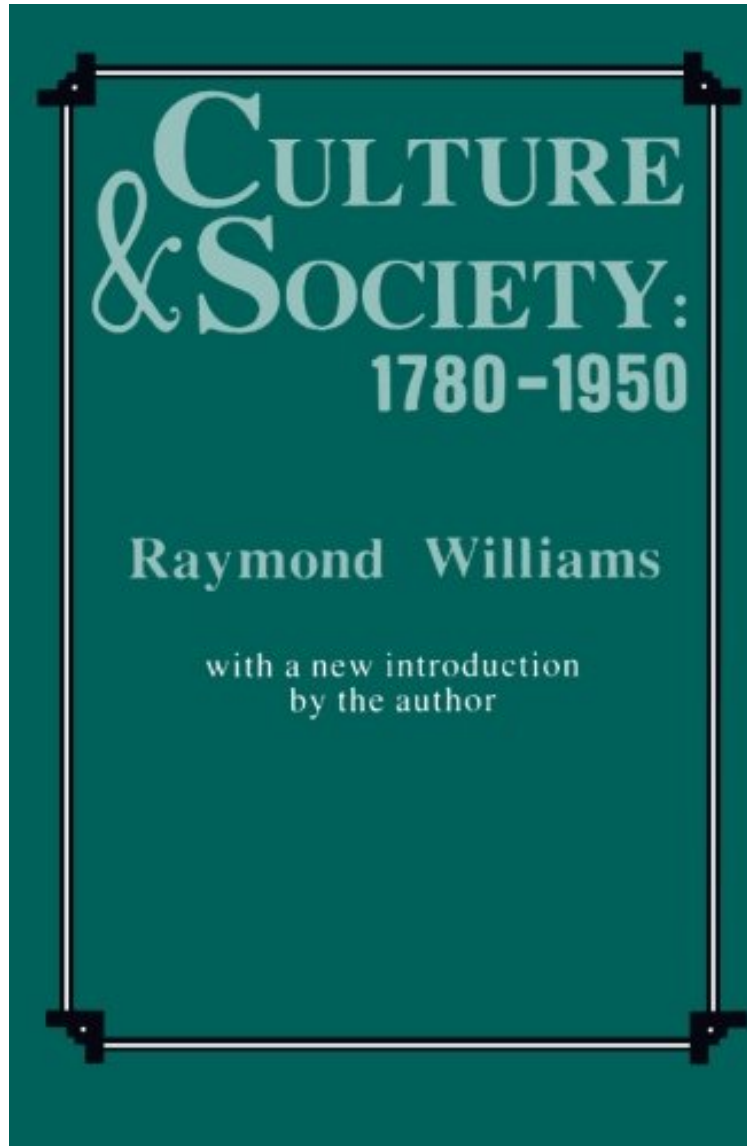


Culture and Society: 1780-1950

Raymond Williams

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0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Four StarsBy The Conscience of ZenoWilliams' best.0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy CustomerExcellent quality of delivery!! Good quality--as I'd expected. Thank you.35 of 36 people found the following review helpful. A World in TransitionBy Doug AndersonRaymond Williams discusses how the idea of "culture" and "society" evolved in England when two forces

(democracy, industrialism) were undermining traditional notions of both. Williams is a Marxist and it is clear that his analysis of Burke, Coleridge, Mill, Carlyle, Newman, Arnold etc... is directed by Marx's theory of class relationships. The book, therefore, is both an analysis and an argument. The analysis/argument is that democracy and industrialism broke down old relationships and initiated new ones. While this shift was occurring a new kind of writer was born: the cultural critic. The major theme of this book is the evolution of the word "culture". Before the period in question (1780-1950) the word "culture" was used to describe art and literature but beginning with Burke and Coleridge the word begins to be used to refer to a "whole way of life". Coleridge makes the key distinction between "civilization" and "culture". Coleridge uses the word "civilization" to describe the "general progress of society" and he uses the word "culture" to express a standard of perfection independent of the progress of society that could be used "not merely to influence society but to judge it." Coleridge envisioned a class of men or "clerisy" whose sole task would be to tend to the cultivation of society. The great fear in the minds of nineteenth-century educated Englishman was that democracy would lead to a dumming down of public life and that what society really needed was some class of educated individuals (Coleridge) or some heroic individual (Carlyle) to insure the continued cultivation of society. Raymond Williams is writing from a working-class perspective but he is a working-class kid who also happened to attend Cambridge. Writing from this unique perspective allows him to identify with both the great cultural thinkers of the past and with the "masses" that they feared. Coleridge and Carlyle felt that the masses were incapable of governing themselves and contributing to the continued cultivation of society (a notion that continues to inform much of modern conservatism). Williams suggests that it is a mistake to think of men as "masses" and that for society to grow it must remain open, and that society must encourage individual effort from all segments of society while continuing to value and cultivate a collective way of life. Exactly how society is to do this is explained only in vague platitudes. The best and strongest part of the book is the early portion that examines the definition of "culture" as opposed to "society". The argument gets fuzzy around the time of Matthew Arnold who could not quite decide just what constitutes "culture". In the nineteenth-century "culture" is tied to religious tradition in the minds of Burke, Coleridge, Carlyle and Newman. Beginning with Arnold, however, cultural critics attempt to define "culture" without reference to religion. This proves to be difficult as "culture" describes not only all the best that has been thought but also refers to a body of values that have been passed down and religious institutions are just as powerful, if not moreso, than economic institutions. It is at this point when one begins to question the materialist approach to history. In his conclusion Williams discusses democracy as if it were the natural substitute for religion or even a new kind of religion. He is not altogether successful and for me the concluding chapters were much less satisfying as cultural history than were the early chapters. This does not take away from the exceptional clarity of those early chapters. The book is an excellent study of what it means to live in a world in transition and how difficult it is to properly define a "common culture" in a world that regularly undergoes cultural shifts. Society struggles on between two cultural ideologies; between the religious conservatives and the liberal-democrat reformers. In the best portion of *Culture and Society* Williams describes how J.S. Mill tried to find some way of melding the two ideologies into one.

Acknowledged as perhaps the masterpiece of materialist criticism in the English language, this omnibus ranges over British literary history from George Eliot to George Orwell to inquire about the complex ways economic reality shapes the imagination.

The earliest ideas on culture, Mr. Williams claims, developed in opposition to the laissez-faire society of the political economists. As the ideas on culture took shape, on the one hand, they became identified with a 'whole way of life.' On the other hand... culture became a court of appeals where real values could be determined. Culture, thus separated from the whole society, was associated with the idea of perfection through the study of the arts... Mr. Williams contrasts the ideas of 'culture as art' and 'culture as a whole way of life,' and commends the latter... the book should definitely be read by all those interested in English intellectual history. (M. S. Wilkins *Political Science Quarterly*) *CULTURE AND SOCIETY* is worth a library of literary and political tracts in that it digs into the ideological layers that envelop modern politics. Written from an independent Left standpoint, this critical history of the concept of culture in England from 1780 to 1950 is exactly to the point of contemporary discussions of value. (Harold Rosenberg) From the Back Cover The organizing principle of this book is the discovery that the idea of culture, and the word itself in its general modern uses, came into English thinking in the period which we commonly describe as that of the Industrial Revolution. The book is an attempt to show how and why this happened, and to follow the idea through to our own day. About the Author One of the century's most distinguished public intellectuals, Raymond Williams (1921-1988) helped to create and form the conceptual space of contemporary literary cultural studies.