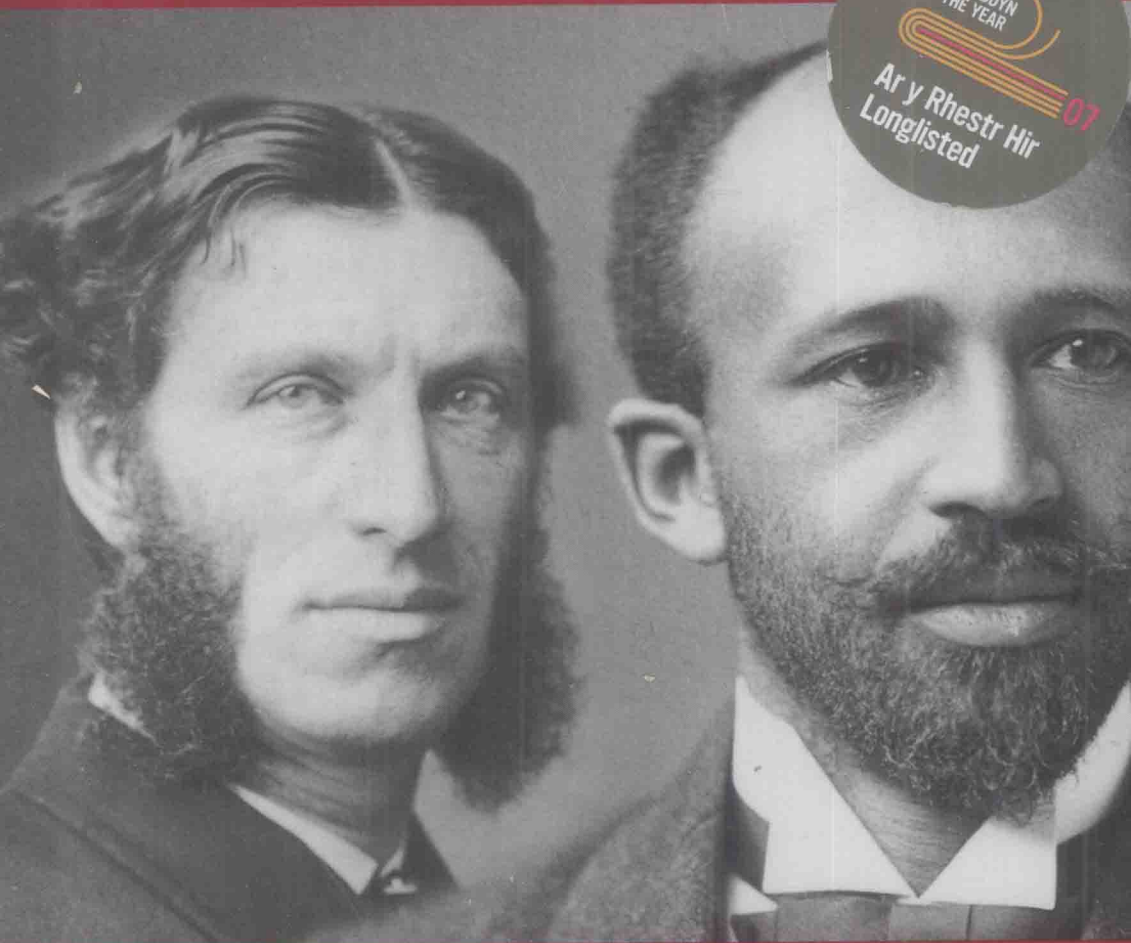


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ETHNICITY AND CULTURAL AUTHORITY

From Arnold to Du Bois

Daniel G. Williams

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AUTHORITY
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DANIEL G. WILLIAMS



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Daniel G. Williams
Abertawe/Swansea
December 2004

‘But I will not say that I shall profess to believe exactly as my fathers have believed. Our fathers themselves changed the horizon of their belief and learned of other races. But I think I can maintain my grandfather’s notion of separateness with communication.’

George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*

‘We have at length to prove our worth to the whole world, not merely to admiring groups of our own people. We must justify our own existence. We must show, each in our own civilization, that which is universal in the heart of the unique.’

Rabindranath Tagore to W. E. B. Du Bois

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INTRODUCTION: CULTURE, ETHNICITY, AUTHORITY

In late June 1926, W. E. B. Du Bois took the podium at the annual gathering of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People in Chicago.¹ In a convention dominated by speeches on political organisation and group mobility, Du Bois struck a slightly discordant note: 'How is it that an organization like this, a group of radicals trying to bring new things into the world, a fighting organization which has come up out of the blood and dust of battle, struggling for the right of black men to be ordinary human beings – how is it that an organization of this kind can turn aside and talk about Art?'² Du Bois's message was that artistic achievement had a central role to play in the struggle for social equality and his words, published later that year as 'The Criteria of Negro Art', were to become one of the most influential cultural manifestos of what became known as the Harlem Renaissance.

Having drawn a broad outline of his intended topic, Du Bois proceeded to evoke a visit to Scotland:

In the high school where I studied we learned most of Scott's 'Lady of the Lake' by heart. In after life once it was my privilege to see the lake. It was Sunday. It was quiet. You could glimpse the deer wandering in unbroken forests; you could hear the soft ripple of romance on the waters. Around me fell the cadence of that poetry of my youth. I fell asleep full of the enchantment of the Scottish border. A new day broke and with it came a sudden rush of excursionists. They poured upon the little pleasure boat, – men with their hats a little on one side and drooping cigars in the wet corners of their mouths; women who shared their conversation with the

world. They all tried to get everywhere first. They pushed other people out of the way. They made all sorts of incoherent noises and gestures so that the quiet home folk and the visitors from other lands silently and half-wonderingly gave way before them. They struck a note not evil but wrong. They carried, perhaps, a sense of strength and accomplishment, but their hearts had no conception of the beauty which pervaded this holy place.³

He then turned to his primarily African-American audience, and asked:

If you tonight suddenly should become full-fledged Americans; if your color faded, or the color line here in Chicago was miraculously forgotten; suppose, too, you became at the same time rich and powerful; – what is it that you would want? What would you immediately seek? Would you buy the most powerful of motor cars and outrace Cook County? Would you buy the most elaborate estate on the North Shore? Would you be a Rotarian or a Lion or a What-not of the very last degree? Would you wear the most striking clothes, give the richest dinners and buy the longest press notices?

Even as you visualize such ideals you know in your hearts that these are not the things you really want. You realize this sooner than the average white American because, pushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world; if we . . . lived in a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life. It is that sort of a world we want to create for ourselves and for all America.⁴

The mid-1920s had seen one of the periodic revivals of (Welsh-) American David Llewellyn Wark Griffith's ground-breaking and virulently racist film, *Birth of a Nation* (1915), in which the heroic Ku Klux Klan gathers around a banner that reads 'Scotland'. Thomas Dixon's novel, *The Clansman*, on which Griffith's film was based, also depicted white Southern resistance to Reconstruction as a manifestation of the Scotch-Irish spirit.⁵ In a striking reversal of the imagery of both film and novel, Du Bois made the African American, rather than the white American, a kindred spirit to the Scotsman. The African-American speaker is not only familiar with the writings of Walter Scott but is also at one with the landscape and with the 'quiet home folk' who are not visible until forcibly 'pushed aside' by the

American excursionists. A connection is made between African-American and Scottish primitivism, with the emphasis on 'romance' and 'enchantment' striking the characteristic chords of Scott's medievalism and the late nineteenth-century poets of the 'Celtic twilight'. I begin with this passage as it is a striking, late manifestation of the characteristically Victorian tradition of cultural discourse that is my subject even though, in this case, dating from the 1920s. While my reference to *Birth of a Nation* suggests that Du Bois is, as always, responding to a pressing social context, his words embody a number of the key oppositions that typify the writings of the authors discussed in the course of this book: materialism (estates on 'the North Shore') v. primitivism (the 'enchantment of the Scottish border'); industry ('powerful motor cars') v. nature ('deer wandering in unbroken forests'); philistinism ('the tawdry and flamboyant') v. cultural appreciation ('a conception of beauty'); the particular ('full-fledged Americans') v. the universal (a 'vision of . . . the world').

One way of illustrating the Victorian resonances of Du Bois's imagery and structure of argument is to compare his evocation of Scotland with Matthew Arnold's evocation of Wales in the opening of his lectures, *On the Study of Celtic Literature*:

The summer before last I spent some weeks at Llandudno, on the Welsh coast. The best lodging-houses at Llandudno look eastwards, towards Liverpool; and from that Saxon hive swarms are incessantly issuing, crossing the bay, and taking possession of the beach and the lodging-houses. Guarded by the Great and Little Orme's Head, and alive with the Saxon invaders from Liverpool, the eastern bay is an attractive point of interest, and many visitors to Llandudno never contemplate anything else. But, putting aside the charm of the Liverpool steamboats, perhaps the view, on this side, a little dissatisfies one after a while; the horizon wants mystery, the sea wants beauty, the coast wants verdure, and has a too bare austereness and aridity. At last one turns round and looks westward. Everything is changed. Over the mouth of the Conway and its sands is the eternal softness and mild light of the west; the low line of the mystic Anglesey, and the precipitous Penmaenmawr, and the great group of Carnedd Llewelyn and Carnedd David and their brethren fading away, hill behind hill, in an aerial haze, make the horizon; between the foot of Penmaenmawr and the bending coast of Anglesey, that sea, a silver stream, disappears one knows not whither. On this side, Wales, – Wales, where the past still lives, where every place has its tradition, every name its poetry, and where the people, the genuine people, still knows this past,

this tradition, this poetry, and lives with it, and clings to it; while, alas, the prosperous Saxon on the other side, the invader from Liverpool and Birkenhead has long ago forgotten his.⁶

The 'rich and powerful' Americans who encroach upon Du Bois's Scottish idyll by pushing 'other people out of the way,' are mirrored by the 'prosperous' Saxon 'invaders' who take 'possession of the beach' in Arnold's description. The view towards Saxon Liverpool 'wants beauty . . . wants verdure'; it is defined by what it lacks.⁷ Du Bois's Americans, similarly, are characterised by having 'no conception of . . . beauty'. This is significant, for what the dominant groups lack can be supplied by the primitive peoples who are being 'pushed aside' and 'invaded'; the Welsh are able to supply a knowledge of the past and its poetry, while the African Americans retain a 'vision of what the world could be if it were a really beautiful world'. The Celts and African Americans, it seems, offer sources of cultural revitalisation for a materialist and philistine society.

As well as sharing similar imagery and a similar structure of argument, both passages also share a characteristic tone or 'voice'. Despite being located within the landscapes being evoked – 'at Llandudno' and on 'the Scottish border' – both speakers seem to be at some distance from the scenes and people depicted. The 'disinterested' tone of the cultural critic espoused by Matthew Arnold is reflected in the fact that, while he perceives the Welsh to be appealingly primitive 'others', he also distances himself from the Saxons who, unlike the cultured speaker, limit their blinkered view to the 'eastern bay' and 'never contemplate anything else'.⁸ Similarly, Du Bois belongs neither to the American excursionists nor to the 'other people', and proceeds to address his audience with a distancing 'you'. A significant shift occurs in the second sentence of the third paragraph, however, where the 'you' turns into a collective 'us' as Du Bois includes himself among those who have been 'pushed aside' in America. The voice of the cultural critic is transformed from being ethereal, above society, to being embedded within it; disinterestedness is replaced by commitment as the critic shifts from speaking from nowhere to speaking from somewhere.

Contemporary discussions on the role of the social critic tend to emphasise, and generally to celebrate, the critic's role as an 'alienated intellectual', an 'outsider', or an 'exile'.⁹ The (strikingly Arnoldian) assumption is that marginality provides a stimulus to insight, that a sense of exclusion encourages an analytical detachment, that a sense

of geographical or metaphorical 'exile' allows the critic to address and challenge 'the constituted and authorized power of one's own society'.¹⁰ Stefan Collini has noted a 'tendency to self-dramatisation among social critics whereby they represent themselves as "marginal" or, more bitterly but also self-importantly, as "excluded"', and argues, following Michael Walzer, that it 'may be helpful to begin by insisting that it is degrees of "insiderness" that we really need to capture in order to characterize the social critic's role'.¹¹ The question of position, of insiderness and outsidership, is central to this study's emphasis on cultural authority. Throughout the individual studies that constitute this book my aim is to explore the ways in which the authors' textual constructions of ethnicity form a basis from which to speak 'to' or 'for' a specific group or constituency. In Du Bois's 'Criteria of Negro Art' the voice of the Arnoldian critic – who seems to speak from an universalist position of disinterestedness – gives way to the committed activist; the critic shifts from speaking to his audience to speaking for his people.

My intention in comparing these passages by Arnold and Du Bois is to sketch out very broadly some of the key themes of the discussion that follows. *Ethnicity and Cultural Authority from Arnold to Du Bois* aims to reconsider the relationship between culture and society (as influentially mapped out by Raymond Williams in the 1950s) in the light of contemporary debates on nationalism and ethnicity. I follow Benedict Anderson's suggestion that it is 'impossible to think about nationalism except comparatively', and I discuss the critical and creative writings of Matthew Arnold (1822–88), William Dean Howells (1837–1920), W. B. Yeats (1865–1939) and W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) in the belief that they exhibit particularly fruitful forms of literary engagement with the keywords of this study; culture, ethnicity and authority.¹² While the late Victorian era saw the increasing presence of women writers and readers, the role of the social critic was constructed as, in Carol T. Christ's words, 'a strenuously masculine realm'.¹³ Indeed, each of the figures discussed in this study thought of himself, and positioned himself, as the leading 'man of letters' of his respective tradition. I am less concerned with the gendered elements of their writings, however, than with the ways in which they engage in a symbolic process of creating, revising and reinforcing the ethnic distinctions existing within their societies. Dominant ideas of ethnicity emerge from a constant process of cultural struggle; they are continually challenged by residual or defeated constructions and threatened by the emergence of identities that may

flourish in the future. The works of Arnold, Howells, Yeats and Du Bois embody these contradictions in intriguing ways. Drawing primarily on textual evidence, my goal is to isolate and analyse the various forms taken by, and uses made of, ethnic identification as manifested in the cultural criticism and creative writings of these figures.

The conceptions of 'culture' and 'nationhood' that emerged during the period between 1865 and 1910 are interesting in their own right but they also continue to influence the political and cultural debates of our present time. I discuss a few texts that fall outside these parameters but these dates should give a fair indication of my interests. Late nineteenth-century debates on culture and national identity are preceded by a long and complex history that lies beyond the scope of this present study.¹⁴ The 1860s, however, saw the formation of a dominant and highly influential conception of 'culture' in the writings of Matthew Arnold, and my analysis is partly an enquiry into how that Arnoldian idea is adopted and revised by writers located in different national and ethnic contexts. This range of contexts is reflected in the range of literary forms in which my four figures expressed their ideas on culture and identity. Arnold writes within the context of an established British state but feels that its stability is being threatened by emergent national and class interests. His goal in the cultural and political essays that are the subject of Chapter 1 is to encourage the creation of a common national culture that reflects and reinforces the political unity of the British state. William Dean Howells also writes within the context of an established political state but feels that the American nation, as defined politically in its Constitution, is yet to declare its cultural independence from England. Howells argues that literary realism is the appropriate form in which Americans should declare their literary independence, and Chapter 2 explores the development of these ideas in Howells's celebrated critical essays and their practical manifestations in his novels. The early Yeats, like Arnold, writes within the context of the British political state – the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland – but identifies with an Irish cultural nationalist movement within it. Rather than seeking, like Howells, to construct a cultural identity within a political state that is already in existence, Yeats argues that political independence can follow only from the creation of an already distinctive national culture. Chapter 3 discusses the development of these ideas in Yeats's critical essays and explores the strategies employed in the symbolic construction of distinctive Irish and Celtic identities in the poetry and

prose of the 1890s and early 1900s. W. E. B. Du Bois writes within the context of an American nation whose core principles of individual autonomy, equal rights and equal opportunity have been flouted with regard to his own people. Chapter 4 considers the range of positions adopted by Du Bois in the polemical, creative and sociological writings of the 1890s and 1900s, as he attempted to formulate a cultural nationalist position that did not have independent political statehood as its goal but rather a full and equal incorporation of African Americans within the American nation state. A series of chapters that range widely in this way will inevitably tell some readers what they already know but I hope that the different contexts occupied by my four subjects allow the argument to be advanced and developed, rather than merely restated, as the discussion proceeds. My primary aim is not to disclose influence nor explore cases of intertextuality but is, rather, to explore suggestive correspondences and to identify crucial differences. I begin by attempting to define the key words that form the foundations on which the following analysis is built: culture, ethnicity and authority.

CULTURE

In juxtaposing a world of steamboats, lodging-houses, powerful motor cars and elaborate estates against a world of tradition, poetry, romance and creativity, my opening quotations by Arnold and Du Bois embody very clearly the division between 'society' and 'culture' famously analysed by Raymond Williams. In *Culture and Society* (1958), Williams attempted to construct a tradition of – primarily English – thinkers who had addressed and meditated upon the relationship between cultural and social change. The book developed from the 'discovery that the concept of culture, in its modern senses, came through at the time of the Industrial Revolution'.¹⁵ Williams's argument is based on his assertion that that the idea of 'culture' developed as an imaginative reaction to a (rather ill-defined) process of industrialisation. The nineteenth-century critics of industrialism adopted the term 'culture' to denote a sense of how the spiritual life of the mind could be set in opposition to a declining social order. The more the actual social reality of industrial capitalism was seen to be debased and exploitative, the more the idea of 'culture' developed as a term of critique. Thus, as Williams notes, a 'word which had indicated a process of training within a more assured society became in the nineteenth century the focus of a deeply significant response to a

society in the throes of radical and painful change'.¹⁶ 'Culture' in the new industrial landscape came to mean

first, the recognition of the practical separation of certain moral and intellectual activities from the driven impetus of a new kind of society; second, the emphasis of these activities as a court of human appeal, to be set over the process of practical social judgement and yet to offer itself as a mitigating and rallying alternative.¹⁷

Several critics have sought to offer more nuanced and complex readings of Victorian culture since this account, noting how Williams had recruited a 'wide range of writers and critics . . . to speak of "culture" leaving only a few implausibly strict political economists to serve as representatives of the "society" side of the pairing' and questioning the excessively functionalist, compensatory terms of his analysis.¹⁸ Nevertheless, as Donald Winch notes, 'that a schism came into existence' in the nineteenth century 'cannot be denied'.¹⁹ While I offer several amendments to Williams's thesis as my discussion proceeds, I adopt his idea of culture as a site of contestation and as a space where alternatives are articulated. Whereas my focus is on four central 'men of letters', rather than on the plethora of characters discussed by Williams, I nevertheless follow the model of *Culture and Society* in presenting the argument 'not as a study of isolated thinkers' but in terms of 'the interconnections between them', and I begin my discussion with the 'pivotal figure' of Williams's history, Matthew Arnold.²⁰

I depart from Williams primarily in adopting a comparative, transatlantic, approach and in reconsidering the relationship between culture and society in the light of contemporary debates on nationalism and ethnicity. The relationship between the cultural critics of the New Left and the development of American Studies on both sides of the Atlantic is itself a significant chapter in transatlantic relations, whether in the American reception of Richard Hoggart's and Raymond Williams's writings, or the reciprocal influence of Leo Marx's *Machine in the Garden* on British cultural studies.²¹ The key histories of Gilded Age America, which have formed a basis for my analyses in this book, are clearly indebted to Williams's work, whether in the form of Alan Trachtenberg's *The Incorporation of America*, with its significant subtitle, 'Culture and Society in the Gilded Age', or T. Jackson Lears's exploration of American responses to industrialisation in *No Place of Grace*. More recently, Eric Lott adapts Williams's ideas in discussing 'structures of racial feeling' in