

Norman Nicholson: The Poetics of Place and Space

by David Cooper

My interest in Norman Nicholson and his writing first developed during my time as Arts Officer at the Wordsworth Trust, Dove Cottage. I vividly remember picking up a copy of *Greater Lakeland* from Sam Read's Bookshop in Grasmere and I was quickly drawn in by the physicality of Nicholson's prose and the sensitivity of his understanding of the Cumbrian landscape. From the topographical books I soon moved onto the poetry, the plays, and even the two novels, getting my hands on texts whenever and wherever I could.

I was absolutely staggered, though, by the fact that Nicholson's work has received relatively little scholarly attention. In 1973, Philip Gardner's excellent monograph was published in New York as part of the Twayne's English Authors Series; and, over the years, there have been various articles and essays printed in literary magazines and journals, with the poets, William Scammell and Matt Simpson, endeavouring to position Nicholson's writing within appropriate critical contexts. But, astonishingly, Neil Curry's characteristically illuminating pamphlet (*Northern Lights*, 2001) is the only study of Nicholson and his writing to be published in the UK. There is clearly a critical gap to be filled.

For over two years I have been working on Nicholson within the Department of English & Creative Writing at Lancaster University, exploring his work as a poet of place and space. Anyone interested in Nicholson's writing cannot fail to notice its defining features: the celebration of the local and the particular; the resolute commitment to place; the ceaseless interest in geology, or what Nicholson calls 'the thirty thousand feet of solid Cumberland' ('To the River Duddon') on which his native county is built. But, for all its specificity, Nicholson's poetry also raises important, wider questions. How does a writer deal with earlier poetic representations of a particular landscape?

How does a poet represent the provincial community of which he is a member? What does it mean for a writer to spend (virtually) a lifetime in the one location? I know that my thesis won't provide definitive answers to these questions, but, instead, my principal ambition is to offer new ways of reading, and thinking about, Nicholson's poetry of place and space.

It is not even crucial that others agree with my analyses and assertions, since the ultimate aim of any piece of criticism must be to stimulate, to open up debate: it is this type of ongoing dialogue which is vital, I feel, if the Society is to bring Norman Nicholson's poetry to the attention of a wider, twenty-first century audience.

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