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- Memories of Norman Nicholson by Neil Curry
- My favourite Nicholson poem — regular feature:
- In this issue U.A. Fanthorpe writes about 'Epithalamium for a Niece'
- Forthcoming Events— suggestions invited
- Messages of Support from Andrew Motion and Melvyn Bragg

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Norman Nicholson — A Few Memories

By Neil Curry

editor of Norman Nicholson's
"Collected Poems"

I recall very clearly the first time I met up with a Norman Nicholson poem, as I was none too pleased about it. I was reading English at Bristol University and had just been introduced to that wonderful eighteenth century poet William Cowper. I had read about his life in Olney and his tame hare and I thought that I might write a poem about him, but browsing in George's bookshop I picked up a copy of a slim volume called *Rock Face*, turned to page 29 and found that some called Norman Nicholson had already written one, and he'd written

about Caedmon. And I had too. No, I was none too pleased about it, as I had to admit that he seemed better than me. So I read more of him. I also read his book about William Cowper which is still the best thing ever to have been written on him. Everyone should read both it and Cowper.

Years passed and I moved to Ulverston to take up a teaching post there and I joined a poetry workshop which included Gael Turnbull, Geoffrey Holloway, William Scammell, David Scott, Chris Pilling and Trish Pogson. They were great gatherings. Lots of fun, and with a group as talented as that, very productive. Sometimes we were

joined by Norman and being the one living furthest south I would drive him home. It was then I first saw the collection of (empty) malt whisky bottles which went round the entire work surface of his kitchen. I helped him drink some.

About that time I published a small booklet of sort-of-metaphysical poems about plants, called *Between Root and Sky* and could never afterwards shake his belief that I was an expert botanist. He would ask me questions I could not answer.

(story continues on page 2)

Norman Nicholson—A few Memories (continued from front page)

*"She came to him in
dreams — her ears /
Diddering like
antenmae, and her
eyes / Wide as dark
flowers where the
dew / Holds..."*

Norman Nicholson

From *"The Tame Hare"*,
p. 140, Collected
Poems, edited by Neil
Curry

Then Norman died in 1987 and many of his books went out of print. While Craig Raine was in charge of the poetry desk at Faber there was no chance of him coming back into favour, but then mercifully Christopher Reid took over and I was asked to edit his *Collected Poems*. When the book appeared in 1994 I did readings and gave talks on his work in various parts of the country and of course in Millom. Norman's literary executor, Irvine Hunt, asked if it would be OK if he said a few words after my talk there and naturally I agreed.

When his turn came, Irvine explained that Norman had once said to him, "If anyone ever gets round to editing my *Collected Poems*, I want you to buy the poor bugger a bottle of whisky out of my money and give it to him." And from behind Irvine's back and from beyond the grave I was given a bottle of whisky. From Norman. A tearful moment for me.

I have since found out that Peggy Troll took charge of the collection of empties and while she has used some for her own brews of home-made elderflower wine, a few are still preserved

in his memory.

Norman Nicholson's poems have not yet received the recognition they deserve. I was astonished to discover that the short monograph I published on him in 2001 was the first extended study of his work to appear in this country, but I believe that we may now look forward to something more substantial.

Having been involved with his work for so long I am delighted that a Norman Nicholson Society has been formed and honoured to have been asked to speak at its inaugural meeting.

Neil Curry

Inaugural Meeting of the Norman Nicholson Society

Those who knew Norman Nicholson personally may feel that such a modest man may never have wished to be honoured by having a society established in his name. He may have felt that the only memorial he needed would be those writings of his which would survive to be loved and read by future generations.

Yet the Society has been

founded and its Inaugural Meeting is taking place on the same day on which this first newsletter is published.

The aim of both the Society and the Newsletter is to make known to the wider public the great treasure to be found in Nicholson's writings, in poetry, prose and drama.

The Inaugural Meeting and this inaugural newsletter celebrate

this legacy with contributions from writers who have known and loved Nicholson's work for many years. We hope that this will mark the start of the critical appreciation and understanding which this wonderful body of work deserves.

Antoinette Fawcett

Writing from the Nicholson Project: by Antoinette Fawcett

On top of the wall	This town	Millom Lagoon
Crimson cliffs flake and crumble under the sun. Threads of rain carve canyons to flow along. Forests of moss make sand from sandstone.	of breadwinners, of iron and steel, stone cracked open, marshy fields, quiet places, scraps and traces.	swims from its turquoise fantasy to be black-wet, concrete blocking, the wave-dump.

These scraps of poetry are offered as a taster of some of the writing inspired by Nicholson's work. We hope to publish a range of examples from the participants in the next newsletter.

*"Even the names are
a folk-song: /
Fat hen, rat's tail,
cat's ear, old men's
baccy and Stinking
Billy / Ring a
prettier chime for me
than honeysuckle or
jasmine..."*

Norman Nicholson

From *"Weeds"*, p. 340,
Collected Poems,
edited by Neil Curry

The Nicholson Project Millom: by Patrick Burke, Outreach Officer English Heritage

English Heritage, Copeland Borough Council and Millom TIC are funding and supporting a Project using Nicholson's Work as its inspirational basis:

A key aspect of Nicholson's work charted the relationship between the natural and built environment – particularly in his home town of Millom. Famed for its mining and ironworks and the poet chronicled the impact of industry,

the community's loss following the closures of 1968 and the real experience of daily life in West Cumbria.

Using his work as an inspiration, a new project funded by English Heritage and Copeland Borough Council is enabling local residents to develop their own responses to Nicholson's legacy. Working with artists based in Cumbria,

the participants are improving their creative skills in writing and photography over a series of workshops and visits to key sites. By examining the past and present this new group of artists will be articulating their experiences and the role that heritage – be it natural, built, industrial or cultural – can play in Millom's future.

Forthcoming events

Once the Norman Nicholson Society has been launched on Friday March 31st 2006, we hope to bring you a range of events and lectures taking place throughout the year.

Members of the Society will be notified by post and / or by e-mail of such events and a full list of our plans will appear in the next issue of *Comet*.

Suggestions for events and possible speakers would be warmly welcomed by the Society.

Any member of the Committee may be contacted with such suggestions.

Two contact addresses:

Peggy Troll, 18, Lowther Road,

Millom, Cumbria LA18 4LN

Canon Wendy Bracegirdle, Millom Vicarage, Millom, Cumbria LA18 4JA

I am also happy to receive suggestions by e-mail:

antoinettefawcett@yahoo.com

and will make sure that these are passed on to the committee.

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Submissions are invited. Contact me at the e-mail
address below in the first instance.

E-mail: antoinettefawcett@yahoo.com

I hack and hammer

at the handiwork of verse

From 'Caedmon' by Norman Nicholson

Messages of support:

from Andrew Motion:

"I am delighted to know that a Norman Nicholson Society has been established and greatly look forward to hearing more in due course. Meanwhile I am glad to have the chance to send the Society my very best wishes and hopes for a long, harmonious, energetic and inspired life.

Andrew Motion"

from Melvyn Bragg:

"I am sorry that I can't be with you on Friday 31st for the launch of the Norman Nicholson Society. It is a great thing for the memory of Norman, for Millom and for poetry that this society has been formed and I am delighted to play a small part in it.

Best wishes, Melvyn Bragg."

Norman Nicholson v. The Book of Common Prayer

By U. A. Fanthorpe

My favourite Nicholson poem, by a short head from many others, is 'Epithalamium for a Niece'. I first heard it from the lips of Norman Nicholson himself, in a college in Lancaster, and I was quite overpowered by its simplicity, heart, depth and wit. I praise all these qualities, but Norman Nicholson has a richness of them that testifies to his humanity *and* his poetry. From the familiar Prayer Book tetrameter of the beginning he's in abso-

lute control, though I suspect that given time he'd have come up with something better than 'questionnaire'.

At 'the wind might say...' the poem rockets into true imaginative territory. This is the part I like best. And so to the majestic conclusion: 'She gives herself'. This is of course a properly feminist conclusion. A woman is not something to be handed to and fro, like a baby at a Christening. But she is also not just her own woman; she is the creation of light,

Soil and humus, stem and bone

Carbohydrates, minerals, those

Hormones and genes and chromosomes...

Above all, this is a humane poem. Thank you, Norman, who so touchingly signed it for me.

Thanks also to U. A. Fanthorpe for launching what we hope will be a regular feature in the Nicholson Society Newsletter.
