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*Comet: the Newsletter of the Norman Nicholson Society*

## MEMORIES OF YVONNE NICHOLSON by Rosemary Joyce

Yvonne Edith Nicholson, née Gardner, was born on May 24th 1921. She was my sister and was third in a family of four. She attended Rhodes Avenue Junior School and later Glendale Grammar, Wood Green. She obtained her matriculation with flying colours. During the war she joined the WRNS as a torpedo WRN. She and I followed Amateur Dramatics at the church. She was a blonde, as was I, and we were selected as angels in the Passion plays!

After the war she attended a Government Course for teaching. Her first post was in Ladywell, Birmingham where she lived with the local Vicar and his wife (Norman and Sybil Darrall). She specialised in Drama and Modern Dance.

When the Darralls moved to Millom Yvonne joined them and became a teacher at the secondary school there. She produced many productions at the school, often making the costumes also.

After attending a course at the Royal Academy of Music she met Norman Nicholson because she wanted to produce "The Old Man of the Mountains". Then one thing led to another!

My husband and I lived in Barnes, London, and we met Norman with much trepidation. When told he would have to see my Father to ask for her hand in marriage — he wrote a letter instead! Sent with a copy in Yvonne's writing! The wedding breakfast was held in the Rectory and they left for a few days in the Lakes whilst we visited Coniston and stayed on a farm.

Since Norman was frail she took enormous care to prevent chills etc. Yvonne learnt to drive and was able to transport him for readings and so forth. They even went on holidays! Their annual holiday was always carefully planned: the most outstanding was Norway — Norman had not travelled abroad before that time.

She looked very pretty on her Wedding Day dressed in a pink suit and a charming hat. Norman was horrified at the thought of wearing a suit. After much thought and worry he wore one of his father's!

Yvonne was able to read Norman's bad writing and corrected his manuscripts. The John Rylands Library, Manchester, has the certificates of their wedding on July 5th, 1956. My daughter, Liz, has the Queen's Medal for Poetry and it is not damaged! Sarah, my other daughter, has the OBE medal. They both went to the Palace for the first presentation and Liz and Sarah parked outside the Palace to await Norman and Yvonne's re-appearance — they then were escorted to lunch with John Betjeman, who was charming.

Yvonne sadly developed cancer and I visited her in the hospital and many years later she had secondary cancer and died at the age of 60. They had been most fortunate in having Margaret and Jean to run the house at this time and when Yvonne died they were able to run the house for Norman in the way Yvonne had taught them.

Yvonne and Norman were both very kind to my girls and Norman particularly liked to be driven by Liz in her M.G. He also taught her to appreciate whisky! And he wrote an outstanding poem for her wedding: "Epithalamium for a Niece".

*Continues on page 12*

## A SURPRISE PRESENT! by Angela Petersen

### A report on the Norman Nicholson Society AGM January 2009

A surprise present delighted members of Norman Nicolson Society celebrating the poet's birthday on Saturday, January 10. Geoff Edmondson arrived with a large framed portrait of the Millom poet sketched by New Zealand artist Michael Browne, on a visit to Millom in August 1983. The portrait was shipped from New Zealand in time for the birthday celebrations and gifted to the society. Michael Browne was an elected member of the Contemporary Portrait Society which held regular exhibitions around a theme shown in London. He said: "The theme for that particular show was Poets and I had connections with the North so I chose Norman Nicholson as my sitter. I have a 15th century cottage which I inherited from my father in Appleby Bridge nr Wigan, which my great grandfather bought in 1860 and I was born in Wigan so it seemed appropriate to pick Norman. The drawing took most of one day - my wife Jenny went off to the beach looking for shells and later in the day we had a very enjoyable afternoon tea. Norman was very pleased with the drawing. Conversationally we had a very good day talking about his poetry and my painting and other related topics. We had no further contact as mostly I was in London teaching. One thing that we do remember well was arriving in Millom for the first time with his street name in hand and asking several older Millomites where this was, and the three of them in unison said 'Ah you've come to see Norman Nicholson! I thought him a very intelligent and likable man with a dry sense of humour". The society now hopes the portrait will be hung alongside the stained glass window dedicated to the poet in St George's Church.

The birthday event, in the began with the annual report, chairman, Dr society was going from Cooper, who lectures at reported on a busy year the society had grown, status. It was becoming a the Cumbrian literary he added, would continue Norman Nicholson to be and would always benefit



**Society Chairman David Cooper with Geoff Edmondson and the surprise present of a portrait of Norman Nicholson**

The society's magazine, *Comet*, was better than ever, thanks to the efforts of editor, Antoinette Fawcett. It was the means by which members of the society living out of the area could keep in touch with the events. More pictures and readers' memories of the Millom poet would be welcomed, he added. The society had applied for a domain name and now has its own website, [normannicholson.org.uk](http://normannicholson.org.uk) up and running.

Plans for future events included a session, in Ulverston, to explore dialect in poetry, and Norman Nicholson's criticism of some dialect poets. There will also be a talk on the poet during Millom Heritage Week, in September, which will take a look at some of the botanical aspects of his writings, as the year coincides with the 250th anniversary of Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. The popular Norman Nicholson Festival will take place again in October, when the society will explore the relationship between his works and visual art.

The birthday lunch followed the AGM. Afterwards, members of the Maryport Writers' Group entertained with a selection of their own poetry. The meeting closed with members singing Happy Birthday and enjoying a celebration cake.

**Angela Petersen**

new Bradbury Centre, general meeting. In his David Cooper, said the strength to strength. Dr Lancaster University, which, he said, indicated not just in size, but in permanent presence in landscape. The society, to aim for the poetry of read by a wider audience from new members.

## HELEN SUTHERLAND by Mary Burkett

*Editorial note: This account of Helen Sutherland's life and her importance to art and artists, especially in Cumbria and the North of England, was written by Miss Burkett as a follow-up to the talk she gave to members of the Norman Nicholson Society in June 2008. Because of the importance of this article, I have not wished to give a shorter, highly edited version, but instead have decided to present Miss Burkett's memoir over the course of two issues of 'Comet' - the next instalment dealing with Helen Sutherland's relationship with Norman Nicholson. Since the present issue of 'Comet' is primarily concerned with Norman Nicholson and the Visual Arts, it seems highly appropriate to remind readers of the special role which both Helen Sutherland and Miss Mary Burkett herself played in helping to develop the Lake District and Cumbria into the thriving Arts and Visual Arts centre of excellence which it is today.*

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It must have been in 1963 that Helen Knapp and I were invited to tea with Helen Sutherland at her eyrie in Matterdale. I can remember being a bit in awe of her erudition and amazed and delighted at the contents of her beautiful drawing room. David Jones, Winifred and Ben Nicholson, Christopher Wood, Gabo and Hepworth, and the work of many other artists, was all around— and there was another Hepworth too, in the garden.

I can remember that Helen Sutherland was small and not particularly striking physically, but her mind, vision and voice were memorable. She was already becoming lame and I remember picturing her living alone up there in the long winters. She had not been alone when she first came in 1939. She had brought four little evacuee boys to whom she gave a home, food and clothes. She had treated them as her own and read to them and mothered them. After they left she had other children to stay, children of friends to keep them away from the dangers of war. Nicolette<sup>1</sup> and Basil Gray, when worried about the war, had asked her to be a guardian to their children.

It was soon after this first visit that I was summoned to tea on my own. After a short time she asked me if I'd help her over something. Her Ovoid Form with Strings by Barbara Hepworth needed a repair. One of the gut strings had become detached and she asked me if I'd mend it for her. At the time I was reading towards a Museum Diploma and conservation by proper orthodox methods was much in my mind. I said it ought to be done by a professional and she dismissed that and so I stuck it together with 'UHU'. I knew this was reversible because we'd mended pots in Iran with it under the British Institute of Persian Studies there.

Helen Sutherland as a child was sent to boarding school in Barnet and then to a Convent in Paris which she loved—'the order, grace and frugality' — and after that her education was over. She married Richard Denman in 1904 at nearly 23. Although the marriage was a disaster, before it her husband had introduced her to his friends the Hodgkins, and they opened up a whole new world to her— the world of literature, poetry, the arts and religion and the humanities. It affected her life forever. There was an annulment of her marriage in 1913. In the First World War she did war work and felt sorry for innocent enemy aliens stuck in this country and under suspicion. Her mother died in 1920 leaving her her fortune, her father died in 1922 and left his great P. & O. Shipping fortune to the King Edward's Hospital Fund. Her father sold their home so she bought a house in London and rented part of Bamburgh Castle where she was near her friends the Hodgkins and Bosanquets, the Cheviots and Holy Island. She began a really happy part of her life buying pictures. She bought a tiny Seurat and a Derain—she comments in her diary that Modern Art was regarded "as of no serious importance—a bad joke". Art History had hardly arrived in England. The Warburg Institute didn't arrive in London till 1933. She bought a Nash, Duncan Grant and Maillol. She didn't follow fashion just searched for herself recognizing their intrinsic values and beauty without the help of others. She first met the Nicholsons in 1925 and bought two of their pictures. In 1926 she bought a big Winifred landscape "with a road that goes deep into the past and the future".

## HELEN SUTHERLAND by Mary Burkett (continued)

Back in Northumberland where she had lived she had created the 'Ashington Painters'. They were pitmen and it had been thought at the time that Art Appreciation would be good for them— WEA classes were all the rage— but when in 1934 the art teacher Ben Lyon began embarking on Art Appreciation they were totally out of their depth and they switched to a practical approach and he started them off on lino cutting and painting. They became very keen. She was their patron and organized shows and took them to London, to visit the Tate. Lee Hall wrote a play about them which I think is being shown at the National Theatre, or at the Cottesloe Theatre at the moment<sup>2</sup>.

In Nicolete Gray's brilliant introduction to the Arts Council catalogue, "Helen Sutherland Collection: a pioneer of the 1930s", she tells how Helen Sutherland struggled to see and interpret Ben's inward vision and became utterly involved in the eventual acceptance of new understanding of contemporary art. In 1928 she leased her favourite house, The Rock, near Alnwick, set in a park with avenues of trees, a lawn going down to a lake and a wood— and in this house she entertained energetically. One of those who was frequently a guest was Nicolete Gray herself, from when she was seventeen. She describes these visits as the most exciting events in her life where she met David Jones, Helen Ede, Edward Wolfe and others, where she went for a mass of energetic walks with her hostess, where they did fascinating expeditions to Roman sites, the Nicholsons' house at Lanercost or to Holy Island. But she also describes it as quite an ordeal: "one had to contribute, to be beautiful if possible and wear beautiful clothes, to join in conversations (and Helen was ruthless to those whose contribution was foolish or trivial), to conform to the spirit of the house which was something positive."

Nicolete was fascinated by Helen who was always wrestling with her temper and possessiveness. Helen could be "delightfully gay and she could be very intolerant, jealous of her house and possessions, angry and suddenly defensive" but she could admit the inadequacy in herself which surprised Nicolete. Helen's riches sometimes became a barrier, sometimes, because of her enormous generosity, a "god-send to her friends". One of Helen's most delightful meetings was when she went to Brancusi's studio. She so relished his conversations, his "illuminating words, and character, goodness and charm, and his forest of eternity towered up in one corner and the great bowls and little yellow and grey cactus shone and looked beautiful on the great mantelpiece". For Nicolete, Helen's character was "contained most of all in her voice, in her handwriting and in a kind of eternal youth which she retained even when I last saw her— when she was over 80 years old."

Patronage was not a word which Helen Sutherland really liked. She said her pictures just came to her as necessities, but there is no doubt that she became a major patron to the contemporary art world to help 'up and coming' struggling English artists as opposed to the dealer over-promoted selection.

Her collection grew till she began to give some of it to people as presents and so to help the promotion of art appreciation. As her vision grew she became more focussed in her taste, what she gave to her chosen artists was of inestimable value. They felt they were no longer working in isolation. They were enormously appreciative of her deep commitment and interest in their work. But after the '30's even her means declined. Artists who were successful put up their prices, sometimes beyond her range, and several paintings in her collection were given to her by artists. Talking of Barbara Hepworth's sculpture she felt that it gave her a new grasp of what Form is, "the miracle and the mysterious". Probably her two favourite artists were Ben Nicholson and David Jones, "their creation of beauty and their common devotion to truth".

## HELEN SUTHERLAND by Mary Burkett (continued)

She also loved music. She said: "I think there are terribly few people really who care for the best things— I don't know a soul (except Lady BC) who gives music parties". This reference was to Lady Bonham Carter, a fantastic character whom I was lucky enough to meet in Iran. We became great friends and she invited me in London to see a performance of "Esther" — because of the fact that we'd met in Persia. She often came to Abbot Hall when driving north, sometimes at an impossibly late hour to reach her destination by dinner time. I once said to her, "Where will you sleep?", to which she replied dismissively: "What are lay-bys for!".

The Church had become important to Helen, and she had come through various denominations. "She always felt a Church Tower or Spire was a universal landmark to soul and body in the landscape". Before leaving Rock, where her lease to the Bosanquets ran out in 1938, she subscribed and chose the architect Leslie Martin to build a more acceptable vicarage there. Leslie Martin was later to become famous for his work for the Festival Hall and South Bank Centre, London.

She was reluctant to leave the Rock but she at last found something she liked and in 1939 she bought Cockley Moor in Matterdale where she stayed till 1964. Again she engaged Leslie Martin to add a huge room with a green slate chimney piece and a magnificent window in the southern wall looking over the fells to the unforgettable view of High Street with its Roman road running along the top. Above this room were her private rooms and her Mondrian. The house stands 1,400 feet above sea level, is close to Great Dodd and Helvellyn and stands way up above Dockray, a village about a mile below.

She used to drive a Rolls but while at Cockley Moor changed to a Riley and in it she used to trundle up and down to Matterdale Church where she undertook many tasks as a member of the Parochial Church Council. When she first came from Northumberland she brought with her a chauffeur and one old maid. Later she struggled to find local staff.

She exchanged her somewhat sheltered Northumbrian home for the wild mountainous slopes of Cumbria. Although many of her old friends came to see her, she made new ones. One was Bishop Graham of Carlisle and another the Millom poet, Norman Nicholson.

Mary Burkett  
June 2008

*The article will be continued in the next issue of "Comet". Please see page 14 for Nicholson's poem "Cockley Moor" which commemorates his visits to Helen Sutherland's house. Philip Houghton discusses the landscape and very particular imagery of the poem on page 13 (Ed.).*

### NOTES

- Without Nicolete Gray's inspired introduction to the Arts Council catalogue "Helen Sutherland: a pioneer of the 1930s", I should not have been able to write this account of Helen Sutherland. The fact that I knew Nicolete and her husband Basil Gray very well makes me feel more at ease for having borrowed from her so heavily. But I fully acknowledge and thank her for her help.  
Nicolete was the daughter of Lawrence Binyon and a distinguished medievalist, designer of inscriptions and author of important monographs on lettering including the Greek, Latin and Arabic scripts. Her husband Basil Gray C.B.E. was a distinguished Orientalist who was appointed Acting Director and Principal Librarian of the British Museum in 1968.  
Helen Sutherland really appreciated her friendship with Nicolete and in the end bequeathed her collection to her. In fact it formed the basis of the 1970–1971 Arts Council Exhibition mentioned above.
- "The Pitmen Painters", a play by Lee Hall based on the book by William Feaver, "Pitmen Painters: The Ashington Group 1934-1984". Showing in 2008 at the Cottesloe Theatre and now showing (April 2009) at the Lyttelton Theatre, London. The production also played in Newcastle (Live Theatre) and was broadcast on Radio 3 on 23rd December 2007.

## THE NICHOLSON WINDOW: ITS INSPIRATION

The purpose of this article is to help people to understand and enjoy the stained glass memorial to Norman Nicholson. It is based on the literary work of a poet who loved Cumbria and wrote not only about the county, its beauty, its harshness and its industrial past but also about places and matters far beyond his life long home of Millom.

There are three parts. First how I came to make the window. Secondly a list of quotations incorporated into the window and thirdly a guide to the imagery, figurative and abstract, in the roundel and two lancets.

## INSPIRATION

In 1997 I was invited by a small committee to discuss a memorial window commemorating Norman Nicholson for St George's Millom. The day was cold and the church was cold but those attending were very enthusiastic and sympathetic to Norman's work. There were four things they wanted to see in the window: the bloody cranesbill; the bee orchid; Halley's comet; and the dazzle of the sea to the West. The first three are specific images, the dazzle was a different matter. Apart from these four requirements this group, which I believe had never commissioned a work of art before, were extremely open as to what else might be in the window or how much time I would have to complete the window. The millennium was approaching but this, thank goodness, did not concern them.

For the position of the window I chose the North aisle as the northern light is more mysterious and poetic. In the summer after 4pm the sun is nearly in the North, it sparkles and shimmers thorough the surrounding trees creating moving shafts of light on the church's red sandstone pillars. When I left the church I walked through Millom to Hodbarrow to gain an impression of the town and coastline. I realized that this would be a wonderful commission.

Over the next two years I read the *Collected Poems, Wednesday Early Closing and Provincial Pleasures*. I stayed in Dorothy Hodgson's caravan at Silecroft and climbed Black Combe on a beautiful day. I saw the hills of the Lake District and most importantly The DAZZLE of the Sea to the WEST. During the following months I listened to tapes and watched videos of Norman Nicholson and fell in love with Norman's bright blue eyes as well as his poetry and prose.

By the year 2000 I began to make sketches of how I might do justice in glass to Millom's famous son. My greatest relief came when I showed Irvine Hunt my latest coloured sketch and he kindly said, "Norman would have loved it." I then organized a palette of colour which I felt would give life to Norman's ideas. I went to Hetley's Stained Glass Warehouse in London and selected sheets of English, French and German glass, rich dark colours, pale tints, creamy, streaky and seedy to really give the project "WIGAN".

Throughout the work my talisman became Norman's lines from "Poem":

I would make a poem  
Precise as a pair of scissors, keen,  
Cold and asymmetrical,

[Text of poem redacted for copyright reasons]

a thing  
You could take up, examine and put down.

I could hear his strange voice saying these lines then and now as I write.

As a poet Norman had rhythm, rhyme, metaphor, simile, alliteration, tension and humour. As an artist I have colour, light which continually varies, the black lines of the leading pattern, the exterior and interior of the church, the discipline of the architectural setting. All are my

## AND A GUIDE TO ITS POETRY AND IMAGERY by Christine Boyce

tools and restraints to use in creating a stained glass window. A reader must seek out the poets' meaning. Likewise in visual art the artist should not have to explain every image used, detailed description may destroy the very thing it describes. There is something sacred about every image as with any other work of art, be it poetry, painting, music, stained glass or other fine art or craft which each person must experience and understand at his own level. Looking and seeing are activities in which the individual has his or her part to play, it is a very exciting process.

### VIEWING THE WINDOW

To help those viewing the Norman Nicholson window I have made a list of the quotations from his poems which are incorporated in the glass. These can be seen either by close inspection or with binoculars. In Fig.1 the quotations from the poems are assigned letters corresponding to their position.

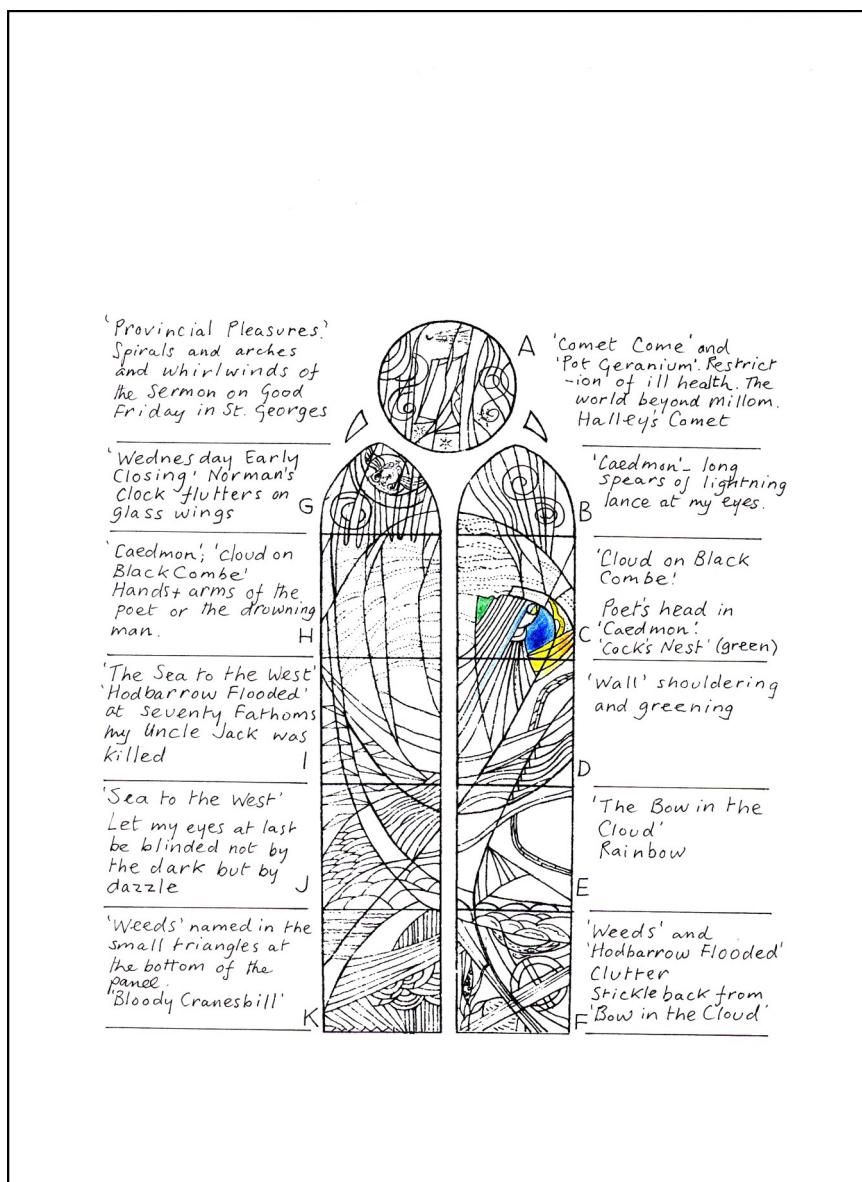


Fig 1. Guide to Poetry and Imagery

## THE NICHOLSON WINDOW: ITS INSPIRATION

### Fig 1: THE POEMS

C. Caedmon: By the grey sea, under the grimacing clouds  
I hack and hammer at the handiwork of verse.

C&D: Caedmon: I have seen long spears of lightning lance at my eyes.

C. Cock's Nest: A wren flew into our yard and then began to build.

D. Wall: Shouldering over old boulders.....green and weathering  
They built a wall slowly a day a week.

E. Bow in the Cloud: For the rainbow is the covenant of the Lord set that man  
may see it. For the seven colours are the virtues of  
man shown that he may remember them.

F. Weeds: Think of the old worked out mines.....  
Go in summer and where is all the clutter?

J. Hodbarrow Flooded: at seventy fathoms my Uncle Jack was killed.

K. Sea to the West: Let my eyes at the last be blinded  
Not by the dark  
But by dazzle.

L. Weeds: They have their uses weeds. Think of the old worked out mines,  
quarries and tunnels ... torn up railways.

The images based on Norman's poems may not always be immediately obvious. The position of the images are as shown in Fig.1 and again designated by letters ABC etc.

### THE FIGURATIVE IMAGES

A. Comet Come: Halley's Comet

E. Bow in the Cloud: Rainbow

F. Bow in the Cloud: Stickleback, a cormorant catching small fish

F. Bee orchid at Hodbarrow: bee orchid

G. Wednesday Early Closing: Winged clock (also Fig.2 & 3)

H. Caedmon and Hodbarrow Flooded : arms of the poet or of a drowning man

L.&F. Weeds: Old broken rails, barrows, clutter

L. The Bloody Cranesbill: cranesbill flowers

### NON FIGURATIVE OR ABSTRACT IMAGES

A. Pot Geranium: Tension, restriction , freedom

A. Provincial Pleasures: Swirls and arches of the Good Friday Sermon

C. & D. Caedmon: Head and ear of the poet waiting for angels to speak and inspire

C & D. The Shadow of Black Combe: Black Combe has room

Fig. 2 is a coloured photograph of the head of the poet. Many viewers find this the most difficult part to interpret. It was intended to be of the most mysterious part of the composition. The blue glass line with the words "I have seen spears of lightning lance at my eyes" gives a clue. The word eye is written diagonally to the right under the eye of the poet, the eye lid is yellow and the eye is blue as is the dome of the skull. The head is tilted backwards as the poet pleads for the words he needs.

### THE CLOCK

Fig. 3 is the clock Norman mentions in Wednesday Early Closing. He wrote that as a five year old child, "I went to Seward the jeweller and bought a bedroom clock inscribed like a Victorian photograph in a twisting of brass wire, to give to Miss Sobey as a wedding present

**by Christine Boyce (continued)**

on the occasion of her marriage to my father. Like much else that is hideous and completely useless, it has survived fifty spring cleans, and is in front of me at this moment — scratched tarnished and the fly wheel broken and one leg knocked off, unable to keep time or even stand up, yet still sullenly defying me to throw it away." I felt that at least figuratively it would be appropriate if his step-mother's clock should finally leave this earth to join Norman in the billowing clouds above Black Combe. Fig 3, a detail from the head of the left lancet, with a nod to the works of Marc Chagall and a wink to Norman showing the clock leaving this earth perhaps to join the red box kite in the roundel. I hope it made Norman smile as it is fluttering upwards on its glassy wings.

*Christine Boyce*



Fig. 2. The 'Hideous' Clock  
copyright Irvine Hunt

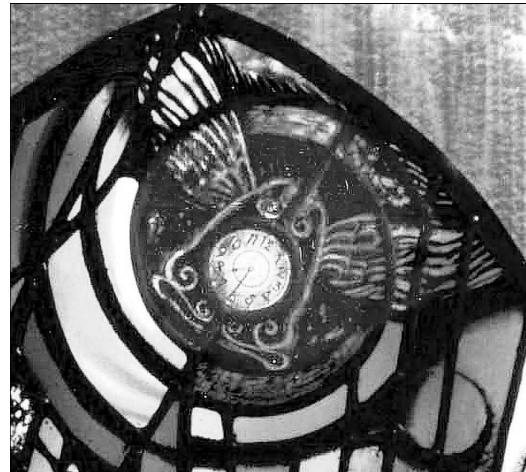


Fig.3. Winged clock



Fig.4. Head of Poet

## On 'Beck'

As a geomorphologist/geologist my profession is looking at and interpreting rocks and landscapes. My intent here is to see what use Norman Nicholson made of landscape elements in one of his poems. I have been familiar with Nicholson's poems for a long time but started to pay more attention to his geological interpretation when I wanted to show students a view of the landscape as a whole. Many poets have looked at 'landscapes'; Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* is a romantic view, Nicholson's *Black Combe White*, a more modern one. Traditionally, geography and geology students learn about landforms related to specific themes, such as rivers or glaciers, but in a rather isolated manner and rarely look at landscapes as complete entities. In *Beck*, Nicholson takes more of an integrated approach but includes detail that is geologically meaningful. I shall try to show you why I think this is such a good general viewpoint of a mountainous landscape.

Gifford (1995), in his critique *Green Voices*, includes a little on *Beck* and suggests that Nicholson is a 'Latter day Georgian poet of the English Lake District'. Perhaps, but Gifford also goes on to say (p31):

He describes the natural world in an unproblematic, idealised way that represents it as a constant. Yet many of his poems appear to deal with processes of change. How then, can one come away from his poetry feeling that he has presented a sense of permanence in the natural world?

My view is that Nicholson did a good job of showing landscape change, rates of change as well as the long timescales involved and also a problem of geological investigation, that a snapshot in a human lifetime has difficulty in detecting long-term change. Perhaps my inspection, rather than a poetic critique, will give you an idea how I think he does this. I have tried not to make it too technical; although the main point is that Nicholson actually uses geological terms correctly and in context. Thus, he writes as a geologist might or, at the very least, a good observer and recorder of the landscape. If you want more technical information then I have indicated by an asterisk (\*) in the text where you might use Wikipedia to find it. Most scientific terms have a precise meaning, and for a very good reason, we need them to communicate clearly and, as much as possible, unambiguously. Nicholson, for the most part, uses geological terms in this way rather than the rather carefree attitude of some poets as, for example, Mahood (2008, p. 250) has suggested has been the case for a number of botanical terms; 'from about 1960 onwards, poetry absorbed a whole botanical lexis'. Mahood lists botanical terms such as 'perianth' and 'calyx' that have been used in poems, as indeed have geological terms; James Fenton's *Terminal moraine* for example. In general it is not clear whether a term, botanical or geological, is used as a metaphor or to point to something objectively there in a landscape. Here however I propose to show how Nicholson puts geological words in a proper scientific context to evoke, as well as describe how a mountain landscape actually 'works'.

The very title, *Beck*, the north country word for a small, usually mountain, stream might be viewed as jargon, yet it is a natural word for Nicholson to use because he is viewing a mountain landscape in the main. Importantly, it sets the scene and shows the significance of water in the landscape as a whole. However, it is not so much about water in a river *per se*, but about mountains. Further, I think that Gifford misses the point of this poem (possibly written specifically for 'Sea to the West' in 1981) although I shall not argue this in detail but rather suggest some evidence.

A subtitle for this poem might be 'Slow'. Nicholson realised the slowness but continuity of long-term geological processes and not just as a concept but in the manner that landscape changes. By 'long-term' here we are looking at several million years, what has been called 'deep time'. I shall not go into the technicalities as to why we know this but, for the moment, you might have to take this on trust. One of the long-standing ideas of geology is that of 'Uniformitarianism'\*<sup>1</sup>, proposed by Charles Lyell in the 18C. This is also known by the phrase, 'the present is key to the past'. In other words, what is happening now (and can therefore be observed) shows that the same processes were at work in deep time. Note that the processes

## By Brian Whalley

may not operate at the same rate all the time, just that you can use present day observations to interpret the past. This can also work the other way round. So this poem is about observations and setting observations of landscape in a scientifically sound basis. As a quick aside to the perhaps best-known poem incorporating a geological term, W.H. Auden's *In Praise of Limestone*, suffice it to say that this poem is not geological in the sense that *Beck* is about a landscape. I shall take a brief overview and then go through the poem again to say a bit more about Nicholson's specifically geological interpretation.

The poem makes it clear that it is not just the water of the beck or even the channel of the stream that is important but the stones of the hillsides and the mountains themselves. In other words, a general hill landscape in the north country. You can use the description to look at any such landscape – indeed, anywhere in the world or beyond. Geologists use the principle of uniformitarianism to say something about the surface of Mars. Sometimes the rock, as isolated fragments such as boulders, moves rapidly but the processes of rock movement in mountain-building are slow. Conversely, water is (usually in Cumbria!) flowing fairly continuously and rapidly. Water transports materials in two ways, as dissolved material and as solid particles. Many rock-forming minerals are dissolved in water but the quantities are very small. Yet it is a continuous process and is effective over long periods of time. Occasionally, when the beck is in spate, sand and pebbles (stones) are transported when the stresses imposed by the flood move these fragments along as bedload\* in short bursts, perhaps helping to undercut banks. Fine material can be carried in suspension\* when the beck is in spate. Where the river cuts through bedrock then erosion\* is slow and spasmodic. So, if you look at upland streams in the British Isles under most conditions they are just transporting, invisibly, small amounts of dissolved rock. Collectively, over long periods of time the hill slopes are reduced in height and steepness. This long-term, general lowering of the landscape is termed denudation\*; erosion is the term given to more specific processes such as stream, glacier or coastal erosion (all of which make appearances in other Nicholson poems).

In the poem itself we first see that Nicholson is well aware of the slowness of the processes involved. The stones move or flow with the water and as slow as continental drift. We now tend to use the term plate tectonics\* rather than continental drift but when the poem was written the latter term was more widely used. Indeed, it was only in the late 1960s that it was recognised as the way in which large-scale earth processes 'work'. We know more generally that the other processes mentioned, coral and stalagmite growth are also slow, more specific, geological processes.

'Motionless to the eye, wide cataracts of rock ...'; here scree is moved down hill-slopes but one in which no movement is seen in the sweep of an eye, nor indeed as views of a lifetime. But screes have moved over the last 11 000 years since glaciers were in most of the valleys of the British and Irish highlands. 'The water abrades, Erodes; ....' indeed it does, these are technical terms, although correctly, it is the stones moved by the force of the water which do the abrading, of the stones themselves as well as the solid bedrock, yet water alone will erode banks of unconsolidated\* stones, gravel and sand as you can see from undercut stream banks. Nicholson also (like Auden) recognises the way in which water itself dissolves limestone but also chlorides (such as common salt) in all their forms. By implication, other minerals are dissolved as well so this is a very useful observations for all hillsides. Remember that Nicholson has not specified limestone landscapes. The next phrase 'Every drop loaded/ With a millionth of a milligramme of fell' is absolutely right. Not only in concept, each drop has dissolved solid rock, and the units are correct too. (I say to students that they need to use units correctly in order to understand physical and chemical processes.) The actual value will depend upon the type of rock but we need not pursue this further here.

In the next section, 'The falling water ....' harks back to the slow processes involved but brings in the occasional movement of large blocks down the mountainside. Curl of strata, where rocks can bend in time (with sufficient temperature and pressure at depth in the earth), 'An

## On 'Beck' by Brian Whalley (continued)

inch in a thousand years' – yes, quite possibly on average, back to more rock types which will be under control of gravitational forces; slates and sandstone. 'Flakes' refers to removal of material from stones as they move downslope, 'deliquesce' (deliquescence\*), some rocks do, although this is probably inserted for the extra sibilants, a continuous device in the poem.

Next we have the introduction of our first two actual mountains, Ingleborough and Helvellyn. The first is formed from Carboniferous Limestone as well as the grits and sandstones of its summit and Helvellyn from the Borrowdale Volcanic Group\* of central Lakeland. Both are both wasting away daily, but slowly. Now Nicholson moves from slope processes to the river action by redistribution of alluvial\* sediments; we are moving down valley, via more sibilants, to consider the inevitable influence of gravity and forces as the core or pith mountain is eroded and sediments move, via scree\* where flat stones change their steep angles on hillsides to lower angles on shingle beaches. I particularly like the, intentional, mis-quotation from Isaiah (40:4, and also familiar from Handel's 'Messiah') with the final 'slow'. But even here there are geomorphological connotations. The highest mountains brought down to the low potential energy of a plain (and we may be invoking tens of millions of years as well as geomorphological controversy here). In addition, we sometimes find that large-scale, concave structural features (synclines\*) may ultimately become high points in the landscape. Conversely, convex structural features (anticlines\*) may become denuded by long-term geological processes. So we come full circle, under the influence of gravity to view a microcosm of the way geology works. This poem shows that Nicholson knew and appreciated more than a little geology. He uses geological words in their scientific sense, directly and by analogy, to convey both slowness of change. He uses the elements and integration of a landscape and illuminates the basis for several other of his poems in which geology is significant. It is, at any rate, a far cry from Tennyson's *The song of the brook* ('I come from haunts of coot and hern') or *Tintern Abbey*.

*I would like to thank David Cooper for various discussions about Norman Nicholson's poetry and his valuable comments on a draft of this article.*

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Brian Whalley  
 Queens University Belfast

## MEMORIES OF YVONNE NICHOLSON by Rosemary Joyce (continued)

John Rylands have the majority of books in the Library together with photos (one of the house). I still have letters and newspaper cuttings, photos etc. (now held by Sarah) - also the printing plate used in his books. I also have Yvonne's account of their visit to the palace, together with the photos.

Rosemary Joyce  
 November 2008

**Editor's note:** How wonderful to read these vivid personal memories of both Yvonne and Norman! Please do remember that we are always looking for accounts of Norman and Yvonne's lives. The more that members are able to share their memories, the more rounded and human the picture becomes. The next issue will present Janice Savage's memories of Yvonne and Norman.

## Standing - inside or out by Philip Houghton

The densely packed plantation of firs flanked the lane as we headed for the start of a walk, which skirts Wolf Crags and Clough Head, beginning at Dockray and heading towards St Johns-in-the-Vale.

Within their bristling ranks, and partly under a carpet of cones and needles, lies Cockley Moor, drawn to my attention, not by a gargling Curlew or sweeping panorama, but by a sign announcing its name. This revelatory moment made me spin on my heels, to look for Nicholson's vantage point, and the house he visited, which informed his poem of the same name.

Cockley Moor - the poem - is not wooded and view clogging, but the immediacy of its opening line, linking art and fell, jumps from the page.

The "cubist fells" are not named, despite the almost address-like title of the poem, which, one assumes, is so specific in order to shift the identity to the subject and avoid confusion with the Cockley Beck area, nearer Nicholson's home.

In search of these unnamed fells of northern Lakeland, we find a reference in *Portrait of the Lakes (POL)*, Chapter II, *The Rocks*, which may help. Here Nicholson describes Skiddaw and Saddleback - both visible from the Cockley Moor area - as "... among the most mathematically ordered of all the fells, and might have been planned by a cubist painter". This shares the direct art reference with the poem (see also *Cumberland and Westmorland (C&W)*, Ch 2, *Rock Bottom - The Old Rocks: Skiddaw Slate*, where there are echoes of the mathematical reference, again describing Skiddaw and Saddleback).

Throughout the poem, and its movement between the landscape as art in the *outside* stanzas, and the captured art of the *inside*, we find continued reference to the mathematical, cubist imagery of the opening line - there are circles, squares, angles, calculation, curving and geometry. The movement from the physical landscape to the artist's captured images, continually crosses over and the landscape as art seems to be similarly absorbed into the poet's craft, bringing it inside, setting it down, as a record.

The specific description of a captured moment in time is evident in Nicholson's observation of the artist's landscape, with "... the arrested growth of a June hour".

We find echoes of Nicholson's wider writings and his Millom based, semi-preoccupation with the slanting imagery, traced by the profile of slag banks (1), which regularly punctuates his writing (2). Here, it manifests itself in the "... geometric rain slanting to the corn". It echoes the descriptiveness of that other art-related poem - the Picturesque-related, *Thomas Gray in Patterdale*, where the imagery of the Claude Glass captured landscape contains a similar mathematical precision - "The clouds are still as paint, / And gills like tucks along the four-inch fells / Slant into neat diagonals.". In *C&W*, Ch 2 page 22, we similarly find "slanting graph-lines of rain", whilst the closing lines of *Provincial Pleasures* have - "[The rain falls slantingly through the steam of the Ironworks reservoir.]".

In *Portrait of the Lakes* - although rather in protection of the landscape, than as a criticism of art - we see Nicholson linking *landscape as art*, when he poses a trade off between the nation's, then suggested willingness to purchase, at great expense, "a picture that very few people will ever see" and, alternatively, its apparent reluctance to bear the cost of protecting the physical landscape of the Lake District, "that has brought pleasure to hundreds and thousands" - *POL*, page 182.

Cockley Moor (3) is now largely plantation, the view is still very much there, in all its Cubism, but you may have to stand slightly west of Nicholson's assumed, *outside* vantage point to take it all in.

(1) To the River Duddon: "Upon your shore, have seen the slag banks slant / Like screees ..."

(2) Provincial Pleasures, November (closing paragraphs): "The screees of slag slant up into the mist ..."

(3) The moor, which shares its name with Helen Sutherland's house, visited by Nicholson.

**Beck**

Not the beck only,  
Not just the water -  
The stones flow also,  
Slow  
As continental drift

[...]

**[The text of this poem has been redacted for reasons of copyright.]**

But the solid rock  
Is a whirlpool of commotion,  
As the fluid strata  
Crest the curl of time...

[...]

Never to be halted,  
Till the tallest fell  
Runs level with the lowland,  
And scree lies flat as shingle,  
And every valley is exalted,  
Every mountain and hill  
Flows slow.

**Norman Nicholson**  
**Collected Poems p. 320**

**Cockley Moor, Dockwray, Penrith**

Outside the cubist fells are drawn again  
Beneath the light that speaks extempore  
[...]

**[The text of this poem has been redacted for reasons of copyright.]**

Inside a man remembers he must die,  
Outside, a stone forgets that it was born.

**Norman Nicholson**  
**Collected Poems p. 27**

*Editorial note: we have two NN poems in this issue to illustrate Brian Whalley's article "On 'Beck'" and Philip Houghton's "Standing—inside or out". It is striking to see the two poems side by side: "Cockley Moor" being an early poem, from the same period as the masterly "To the River Duddon", and "Beck" from the last collection, Sea to the West. Stone lies at the base of these poems, in "Cockley Moor" seen artistically and anthropomorphically, in "Beck", as Brian Whalley points out, scientifically, ecologically, and holistically. I also like the appropriately geometric form of "Cockley Moor" in comparison to the fluid, organic form of "Beck".*

*Note added November 2018: In 2014 Professor Brian Whalley developed some of the ideas he discusses in his piece on 'Beck' into a lecture he presented to the Geological Society. The text of that lecture can be found online here: <https://www.geolsoc.org.uk/Geoscientist/Archive/October-2014/Norman-Nicholson-a-geologists-poet>.*

## Events at Dove Cottage by Andrew Forster

Most of you will know of Dove Cottage, in Grasmere, Cumbria, home of William Wordsworth from 1799 to 1808, and now an internationally famous visitor attraction. The Wordsworth Trust was founded in 1891 to acquire Dove Cottage for the nation. In addition the Trust now houses a collection of over 62000 manuscripts, books and works of art covering the British Romantic movement. The cornerstone of this collection is the Wordsworth family archive, which includes more than 90% of known Wordsworth manuscripts. The collection is housed in the Wordsworth Museum and in the Jerwood Centre, a purpose built archive and research facility that opened in 2005.

The Trust is very much concerned with encouraging audiences to engage with its collections and find meaning in them. To that end the Trust develops events based around the exhibitions. We also run a multi-award winning learning programme for schools and colleges - a programme that enables schools to meet a significant part of their National Curriculum requirements.

The Trust is also keen to maintain the tradition of creativity associated with Dove Cottage, and we run a thriving literature programme.

The cornerstone of this is a series of contemporary poetry readings, which has been described by Poet Laureate Andrew Motion as "the best poetry programme in Britain". This year we have started to put audio extracts from the readings on our website, and that is building into an archive of the series.

We also host a unique Poet's Residency. The major focus is on giving a poet time to focus on their own work. Over the past twenty years the Trust has had a number of poets who were in residence at early stages in their careers and have gone on to become well-known figures, such as Bill Herbert, Paul Farley and Jacob Polley, to mention just a few. Recently we have been re-shaping the residency slightly to include other regular activities, although the main focus is still on the poet's own work. We've just started Dove Cottage Poets, which is a monthly poetry workshop run by the Poet in Residence, aimed at people at all levels, from beginners to people who are already seriously engaging with poetry. Over the next few months look out for a selection of work from members of Dove Cottage Poets appearing on our website.

The Arts and Book festival is a annual 3-day festival held at the end of January, loosely themed around contemporary responses to the Romantics. This offers an opportunity for accessible exploration of visual art and literature among like-minded people.

Over the last year, we have begun to expand the Literature Programme. In the summer we ran our free weekly, informal 'spot of poetry' readings, which were a chance to hear work in progress from the Poet in Residence as well as poems from other poets amongst the staff and readings of classic poems. Our initial idea was to have the readings in the garden behind the Museum, but the weather dictated that they were mostly in the Lower Rotunda at the Jerwood Centre, a nicely atmospheric alternative.

We are developing relationships with national organisations that want to run events in the North West, building our reputation as a hub of literary activity. We ran an event with the Poetry Translation Centre in October, featuring the Sudanese poet Al-Saddiq Al-Raddi, along with a talk on Arabic translations of Wordsworth by Professor Sabry Hafez. We were delighted to welcome a Sudanese community group from Manchester who braved the floods to attend the event. It was a very special afternoon.

We are also running a series of workshops with the London-based Poetry School, aimed at more experienced poets. The series called 'Into the Living Heart of Things' It's unique to the Trust, focusing on different aspects of the Poetry of Place, a theme very much at the heart of Wordsworth's writing.

We are viewing these projects very much as pilots and hope to further develop these relationships. The Literature Programme is very much still developing, and we hope to see you at Dove Cottage at some point in the not too distant future.

Andrew Forster  
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***Editorial note:** members of the NN Society will remember that Andrew Forster gave a version of this address at the event last June at Isel Church hosted by Miss Mary Burkett OBE. We are grateful to Andrew Forster for enabling us to publish this article for the benefit of those members who were unable to attend the event.*

## Nicholson and the Visual Arts

The theme of this bumper issue of "Comet" is "Norman Nicholson and the Visual Arts" and we are very pleased to be able to share with you some outstanding articles which relate to this important aspect of Nicholson's life. The issue is also intended to prepare the soil for the Autumn Festival which will be on the same theme. The School Competition this year will also have a visual focus, with entries being encouraged in visual form.

Mary Burkett's article reiterates the story which some members will have heard at when she gave her wonderful talk about Helen Sutherland and her links to Norman Nicholson last summer at Isel Church and the poem "Cockley Moor, Dockwray, Penrith" is a reminder to us of the positive impact which Helen Sutherland's interest in Nicholson's work made on the development of his art. Her encouragement to him came at an early stage in his career as a poet and writer and meant a great deal to him because, living as he did, in relative isolation, it was one of the few means available of access to art, artists, and the intellectual stimulus he needed. Philip Houghton's analysis of this poem shows how the influence of this period continued to pervade Nicholson's work in visual imagery clearly related to the Cubist and Constructivist works of art which Nicholson had viewed in Helen Sutherland's house.

Nicholson's connection to the artists Josefina Vasconcellos and her husband Delmar Banner is well-known. Less well-known perhaps is the link that this couple had to Nicholson through their mutual faith. Delmar Banner was a lay Anglican priest and Josefina's greatest works have, as did Norman's, a strong religious, spiritual and human foundation. The link between them has physical presence near Millom in the shape of Josefina's last sculpture "Escape to Light", carved at Rydal Hall and now living on the dunes at Haverigg. This amazing work, with its symbolism of good escaping from the jaws of evil, and its strong sculptural form of dragon and human intertwined, is yet another reason to visit the Millom area.

The article by Christine Boyce on her work on the Norman Nicholson Memorial Window and the meaning of its symbolism shows how the visual and written arts mutually inspire and influence each other, as indeed, in a completely different form, does the portrait by Michael Brown of Nicholson, in which he is delineated in the full flower of his mutton-chop whiskers and in the full bloom of his genial humour.

Brian Whalley's article reminds us also that nature and culture, and art and science too, are two sides of the same woven cloth of the whole universe — that a poet such as Nicholson could both see and understand—and what is more convey that intimate and intricate understanding of the most vital processes of nature to his readers in vivid and unusual images, simple and clear language, with a true scientific basis.

Every word that Nicholson wrote gave play to both sense and intellect. No wonder then that he had such strong feelings about all the arts, and that artists and scientists respond to his work as a fount of inspiration for their own. Every word was also rooted in Nicholson's deep humanity — Rosemary Joyce's wonderful reminiscences of her sister Yvonne Gardner and her humorous anecdotes about Nicholson's foibles only add to our sense of him as a real person. This issue of "Comet" has been a real pleasure to edit. I hope that readers will enjoy it as much as I have!

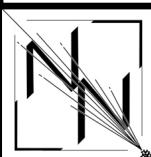
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### FORTHCOMING EVENTS

The full programme of events has not yet been confirmed for the coming year, but two events are certain:

**Friday 8th May 2009:** Neil Curry, editor of Norman Nicholson's *Collected Poems*, will give a talk entitled: "Norman Nicholson and William Cowper" at 7.30 p.m. In Owl Barn, Back Lane, Ulverston.

**Saturday 17th October 2009:** The Norman Nicholson Festival Day. Theme: Norman Nicholson and the Visual Arts.



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**Many thanks to all our contributors. Please do keep sending in articles and responses to Nicholson's work to the above address.**