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Reminiscences of Norman and Yvonne Nicholson by Janice Savage

I am a member of the Norman Nicholson Society and was formerly Librarian in Millom from 1972 to 1987. During those years, I came into contact with the poet and his wife on a number of occasions. They were both so approachable and unassuming. Of course, at the beginning of my time at the Library, I was unaware of the considerable importance of Norman's work and his literary reputation. However, I soon acquainted myself with his writings. I found his prose style so very readable and his poetry most original and attractive with wonderful word pictures. As I got to know the town better, I read *Wednesday Early Closing* and *Provincial Pleasures* with great interest and some amusement.

Norman could often be seen strolling about in Millom, with a warm woollen scarf wrapped tightly around his throat in winter, but at all times of the year, his tweed cap on his head and walking stick in his hand. He walked at a measured pace, stopping every now and then to observe his surroundings or converse with other pedestrians.

He was a member of St. George's Church and used to deliver two copies of the Parish Magazine to the Library (one was for Haverigg Branch Library). He brought these in to us once a month and collected the money for them.

On one occasion, when I had asked him if he would kindly autograph my copy of his booklet *Stitch and Stone; a Cumbrian landscape*, commissioned by the Ceolfrith Press, and which contained illustrations of embroidered landscapes by Kenneth Dow Barker, he invited me into his ground floor sitting-room behind the shop. He duly signed the book for me while chatting for some time about my library work. It was fascinating to see him in his homely surroundings, made familiar by his description in *Wednesday Early Closing*.

Another memory of him is when he had requested a book for some research he was doing. It was available from Carlisle as a reference work only, so it was arranged that he would consult it in Millom Library. I offered him the use of my office for the duration of his study, just a couple of days. He was very grateful and sent me a "thank you" letter afterwards. I will not comment on his typing – you may have heard that it left a lot to be desired!

It was a great thrill to be part of the arrangements to place in the Library the bronze bust of Norman, sculpted by Mrs Joan Palmer of London. She had been evacuated to Millom during the war and had admired the poet and his work for many years. The unveiling ceremony with Norman, Joan and her husband, town dignitaries, Library staff and local press present, was a truly happy

Reminiscences of Norman and Yvonne Nicholson (continued) **by Janice Savage**

occasion. The bust had so wonderfully captured his likeness. Norman gave a really witty reply, thanking all concerned. I much regret that his speech was not recorded.

In 1987 when many events took place to celebrate the Library's Centenary, it had been planned for Norman to give a poetry-reading for some of the town's Senior Citizens, who were to be transported to the Library for this occasion. Sadly, he became terminally ill shortly before this and was unable to carry it out, much to everyone's disappointment.

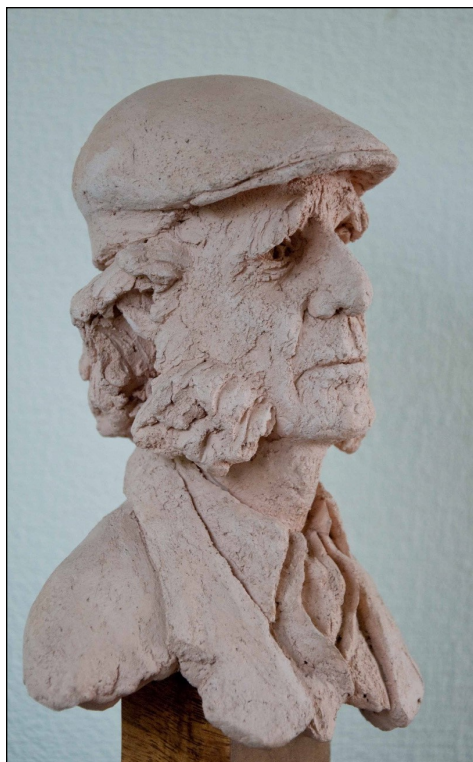
I knew Yvonne through our both being members of the Millom Youth House Committee. As the Youth Club met in the large room above the Library two or three evenings a week, I had been asked to represent our interests on the Committee. Yvonne would bring along her crochet to the meetings and sit doing it throughout the proceedings. I don't know exactly what she was making, but the work was beautiful and quite colourful. She was greatly missed when she passed away in 1982. It was a considerable shock to realise that she had so unexpectedly pre-deceased Norman.

I consider it to have been a great privilege and pleasure to have known these lovely people, Norman and Yvonne.

Mrs Janice Savage January 2009

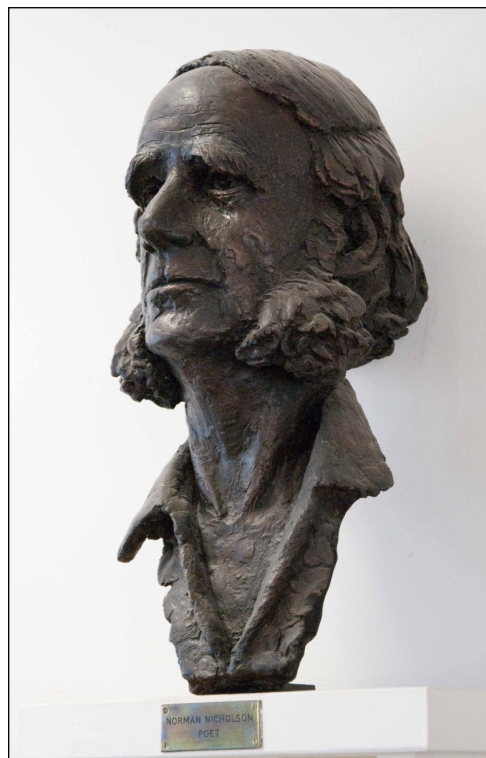
Maquette of the bust of Norman Nicholson by Joan Palmer

photograph by John Troll



Bronze bust of Norman Nicholson in Millom Public Library sculpted by Joan Palmer

photograph by John Troll



A Publicity Stunt for Norman by Dorothy Richardson

I first met Norman Nicholson in the early 1950s. I was then an employee of the North Western Gas Board. One day we decided to invite Norman to visit the showroom for a photograph to be published in our internal magazine—*Link Up*. This would be good publicity for Norman throughout the North West.

I went to the back of 14 St. George's Terrace and made my way up to the backyard and through the pot geraniums. Mrs. Nicholson (Norman's stepmother) came to the door and after hearing my request to see Mr. Nicholson, she asked me if I could return later. I agreed; then she added in a whisper, and with a mischievous smile, that Norman was upstairs finishing his ablutions. She then said, "You know what these men are like for taking their time." I wonder what Norman would have thought about her comments! She appeared to me quite old-fashioned, ladylike and very sweet, and obviously very proud of her famous stepson.

Later that morning I met Norman: he was very charming and agreed to call in the showroom the next day. Dead on time he arrived. His friendliness and sense of humour were unforgettable. His visit ended with him discussing the cricket scores with my male colleagues.

A few years later my sister and I had our own business a few doors away from 14, St George's Terrace. We became very friendly with Norman and his wife Yvonne. They were very good customers and loved Caithness glass.

Yvonne and I were also committee members of Millom and District Arts Society and also St. George's Parochial Church Council.

Very happy memories of Norman and Yvonne.

Dorothy Richardson 2006



Norman Nicholson and the North West Gas Board; Dorothy Richardson at the counter

HELEN SUTHERLAND: PART 2 by Mary Burkett

Editorial note: This is the second part of an article by Mary Burkett about Helen Sutherland. It was written as a follow-up to the talk given by Miss Burkett O.B. E. to members of the Norman Nicholson Society at Isel Church in June 2008. In this, and in the first part of the article (published in Comet 4, 2, March 2009), Miss Burkett details elements of Helen Sutherland's life which have particular importance for her patronage of the Arts in the North. As evidenced by Nicholson's poem "Cockley Moor", Helen Sutherland's patronage was also of vital importance to Nicholson, particularly in helping him to gain confidence in his work in the early stages of his career and especially in helping him to feel less isolated than he might otherwise have done.

In the first part of this article Miss Burkett described Helen Sutherland's early life and marriage, her inheritance of the P. & O. Shipping fortune from her father, and her life in Northumberland, buying pictures and other works of art from, amongst others, Ben and Winifred Nicholson and the Ashington Painters. She describes Helen's relationship with Nicolette Gray, the daughter of Lawrence Binyon and a distinguished medievalist and author in her own right. Nicolette was to inherit Helen Sutherland's Collection. Miss Burkett also describes Cockley Moor, Sutherland's house in Matterdale where Norman Nicholson visited her. The story continues here.

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Helen exchanged her somewhat sheltered Northumbrian home for the wild mountainous slopes of Cumbria. Although many of her old friends still came to see her, she made new ones. One was Bishop Graham of Carlisle and another the Millom poet, Norman Nicholson. She met him within the first few years of her arrival in Cumbria. His poem 'Cockley Moor, Dockray, Penrith', which was published in *Five Rivers* in 1944, makes us assume from the incisive description on the house and contents and situation that he had already stayed there and was thoroughly familiar with it all. In fact, he met her first in 1940. Poetry was becoming more important to her and she used to invite Norman to stay while she endeavoured to help him and understand the nature of his writing.

Much later a diary entry for Wednesday 1st July 1964 reminds me of the first talk and recital which Norman gave us at Abbot Hall Art Gallery to the Friends. There was an audience of 72 people. Norman and his wife often used to visit us, but it was a long way from Millom. There was another poet who lived near Kendal, Margaret Cropper. She was delightful and very much interested in Cumbrian dialect. I came to know her well when I was first at Abbot Hall. Her volume of poetry was not published till later still, in 1984 with a foreword by Michael Ffinch, another poet whom I also knew well.

Helen also met Percy Kelly and Donald Wilkinson. Then Ophelia Gordon Bell, Heaton Cooper's wife, and sculptress at Grasmere became a great friend to Helen and they went to concerts together and corresponded. Just down below Cockley Moor, on the shores of Ullswater in the romantic setting of Lyulph's Tower, used to come another visiting artist, Lelia Howard (Lelia Caetani) who painted here as well as in her native Italy. Helen used to visit her and her husband at Nynfa and in their house in the Cotswolds and used to look forward to their Ullswater visits.

Helen's arrival in Cumbria was like a breath of fresh air to the artists' community. They are always in need of support and inspiration. It is very easy in a rural community for rural activities to assume an undue importance, so visits from another of Helen's friends, Kathleen Raine, were all the more refreshing and inspiring to those residents rather cut off up here. Kathleen dedicated her book *The Hollow Hill*, published by Hamish Hamilton in 1965, to Helen. Probably, together with David Jones and Ben Nicholson, Helen was as close to Kathleen Raine as to any of her friends. In Kathleen's autobiography she talks about the help Helen gave her when she came to stay in Cumbria. She used to take her poems to Cockley Moor and discuss her problems. Both she and David treated Cockley Moor as a place of real creativity. She had, of course, always appreciated David Jones, as a poet as well as an artist. Kathleen Raine gave a copy of her poetry book *Stone and Flower* to Norman and he really treasured it. It was part of his collection which, on his death, was bequeathed to the John Rylands Library where it still remains as part of the material relating to Kathleen Raine. It is inscribed by her "To my friend Norman Nicholson (for whom also the North is holy ground). Kathleen Raine, Feb. 1944."

Helen Sutherland's garden was still a joy to her and extremely important. Making full use of the height, she chose suitable species such as gentian and all manner of shrubs and sweet-smelling roses. The stream that ran through the garden dropped down to Aira Force. She used to work in it with a gardener till she became very lame in the years before 1964. Then she realized she could not

HELEN SUTHERLAND: Part 2 (continued) by Mary Burkett

not make full use of the house and grounds, was no longer able to take long walks and she was stranded there in the snowy winters. From the fifties to late sixties I can remember every winter seemed to have a great deal of ice and snow. Up at 1,400 feet she was almost cut off and really oppressed by continuous wind and the length of the dark nights.

Her friends were very worried about her, as is shown by her old friend Dorothy Hodgkin's letter of February 1963:

My own darling, I've been so disturbed to think of thy isolation—and all the ways it must complicate things.... especially I hate to think of thee having to go out even for a little—not only facing such bitterly cold winds but all the deep snow.

Ben Nicholson had also written to express his worries for her well being and then there was a touching letter from Hubert Howard from Rome:

I was so sad to leave Cumberland and the Tower in the knowledge that returning there I should find you no more at Matterdale. We have been neighbours so many years, and ever since you first came I have loved going to Cockley Moor to visit you, assured always of a rich harvest of friendship and of kindness and understanding, qualities of a generous and Christian heart; and finding there too the full stimulus of intellectual ferment in the discussion of history and literature, and art and religion; ----- How rare it is, dear Helen, to find so much in a single person and in one place.

So she moved to a nursing home near Stoke Poges where she had lovely rooms and marvellous caring and was able to see her London friends and go to some concerts. But alas she was ill and she died on 29th April 1965, fortunately never having lost her spirit and her generosity.

In the summer of 2007 Michael Bennett recalled the nature of Norman Nicholson as a gentle man and as a tribute to him began a series of small studies "For Norman Nicholson". For Michael it was rather a trip of nostalgia taking him back to his early painting career when Black Combe had dominated his ideas as well as Norman's view. He had carried out a number of compelling small black and white drawings of the subject which I clearly remember showing at Abbot Hall. He recalls how Norman and Yvonne had invited him to visit them at Millom and he was delighted to see one of his pictures which they had bought, hanging between a dark Sheila Fell and a similarly dark Percy Kelly. It made Michael observe that Norman who preferred 'black and white pictures to colourful ones' had, after all, described the whole of his very colourful life in black and white—the printed word. These latest dark images make a great tribute to the poet's memory.

Norman, like Helen, valued enormously the act of letter writing. It was Norman who initiated the gift of his library to the Rylands Library, Manchester.

Stella Halkyard of the John Rylands Library, Manchester University, in an essay "Thinking Global, Acting Local: Norman Nicholson's Engagement with the Literary and Artistic Networks within and beyond the North West Region of England", gives a clear description of Norman's way of categorizing his poetry as provincial. In a special edition of the literary magazine *Aquarius* Norman Nicholson explains how proud he is of every aspect of his place of origin: the other people, the buildings, local activities and the complete interdependence of each on the other. Far from rejecting the concept of provincialism he was proud of it. It carried no pejorative connotations for him. It was his chosen milieu to which he was happily rooted. This does not mean his work smacked of any amateurishness, it was as profound as that of anyone from another region who "acted local yet is thinking global" as Stella Halkyard puts it.

In his early friendship with Helen Sutherland Norman was free to meet his peers in poetry, literature, art and music and make friends with people who had all experienced very different backgrounds and educations. It resulted in a fantastic forging of minds but tantalizingly enough Norman does not seem to have recorded diary entries on any of his early visits to Cockley Moor. How did he first go? It is even suggested that the introduction might have been made by Michael Roberts or even T. S. Eliot himself who had been up to visit her and then included Nicholson in his Faber collection.

Mary E. Burkett

FORTHCOMING EVENTS AND MEMBERS' NEWS

Sat. October 17th, Network Centre, Millom: Norman Nicholson Festival Day

This event is becoming an established annual date, which aims to celebrate Nicholson's work with as wide a range of people as possible, to help establish a new readership for Nicholson's poems, prose and drama, to enable and develop creative responses to Nicholson's work and themes, and to be a social occasion on which both members and non-members can meet with each other. A particular highlight of the occasion is the involvement of young people in the event.

This year's Norman Nicholson Schools' Competition has taken as its theme Nicholson and Nature and has encouraged a good response to Nicholson's work in the form of paintings and drawings.

The day's events will include: a lecture by Charles Mitchell, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Cumbria; the Prize-giving Ceremony and Judges' Report; and creative writing and reading workshops. More details will follow once speakers are confirmed. The event will be held at the Millom Network Centre. Full directions can be found here: <http://www.millomnetworkcentre.co.uk/location.html>

News from David Boyd

Regular readers of "Comet" will recognize David Boyd as a lively and engaging writer on the subject of Norman Nicholson's life and work. The Vulpes Libres website has published an excellent article by David on *Wednesday Early Closing* in May of this year:

<http://vulpeslibris.wordpress.com/2009/05/19/poetry-week-wednesday-early-closing-by-norman-nicholson/>

David's second piece of news is that he has recently been awarded an LLM (by distance learning) from Northumbria University. Judging from the quality of the pieces which David has had published on the Internet and in *Comet*, this qualification is richly deserved. Good on you, David!

News from Christopher Pilling

DEFYING FATE Christopher Pilling's versions of *Défier le Destin* by the Belgian poet Maurice Carême (Arc Visible Poets 25) 2009. The paperback costs £9.99 or if you buy from Arc Publications or the translator it is £8.99 post free. The hardback costs £12.99 or from Arc Publications £11.69 post free. Order on-line at: <http://www.arcpublications.co.uk/catalogue/index.php>

News from Michael Baron

Thanks to Michael's efforts we can now enjoy a new book of Tom Rawling's poems, some previously unpublished, and with line drawings by Liz Boughton as well as photographs of family and places featured in the poems. The title is *How Hall. Poems and Memories: A Passion for Ennerdale*. Price is £7.50 and postage £1. From the Lamplugh and District Heritage Society, care of Owsen House, Lamplugh, Workington, CA12. Tom Rawling was a near contemporary of Norman Nicholson and a fine poet, best known for his 1993 collection *The Names of the Sea-trout*.

News from Hugh Thompson

Maryport Literary Festival runs from Friday 13th to Sunday 15th November, 2009. Guest speakers include: Grevel Lindop, Jacob Polley, Chris Pilling, Malcolm Wilson and Angela Locke. NN Society Members are warmly invited to attend!

Report on Society Event: Neil Curry on NN and William Cowper

On the evening of Friday 8th May, members - and pleasingly, several non-members - met at the Owl Barn in Ulverston to hear a characteristically entertaining talk by Neil Curry on the poet William Cowper.

Norman Nicholson paid tribute to Cowper in a book written in 1951 and later in 1960 in a pamphlet for the British Council: 'He brought a new kind of directness into descriptive poetry, showing the English country scene more as it really was and less as it was imagined to be'. Neil illustrated this directness, particularly in relation to the poet's life: Cowper, in both his poetry and correspondence, reveals his sensitivity and frail mental state in some detail, often evoking humour and pathos (e.g. his attempts at suicide) in the reader.

As always, this was a very enjoyable and much appreciated talk, and Neil was thanked by Chairman, David Cooper.

Peggy Troll

A tenuous link with Norman Nicholson by Margaret Edwards

It all began with a lost diary. Robert W. Robinson of Farnley Grange, Corbridge, Northumberland (Corbridge is by chance the nearest village to that of my family home), lost his diary in 1976 at some stage on a trip to Portsmouth. It was found in a lay-by near Oxford by the late Rev'd F.A. Andrews of Lancaster. Nowhere in the diary was there a trace of the owner's name or address.

But F.A. Andrews was a resourceful man. He in due course found a reference to the Hexham building business of T.D. Bird & Co. and wrote to Mr J. Charlton, a joint director of the firm, which had been asked to quote for extensions to the Farnley property. Further inquiry soon led to the reunion of diary and owner.

Understandably, Mr Robinson was very grateful to Rev'd Mr Andrews, and expressed his gratitude in the form of a book. It was Norman Nicholson's *A Local Habitation*. His accompanying letter, dated 23rd September, 1976, is of some interest. He wrote:

I wonder if you would be kind enough to accept a book of poetry by Norman Nicholson. He lives at Barrow and as a fellow countyman I have much sympathy for his work. I met him in Newcastle a few years ago when we both received degrees from the Open University. Such a kind quiet man. I do hope you enjoy his verse.

The book, suitably inscribed with a reference to Rev'd Mr Andrews' 'kindness and pains taken to discover me, as owner [of the diary]' came into my possession when the retired Minister died. His daughter happened to attend my church in Preston, Lancashire, and knew I would be pleased to have a book of Nicholson's poetry, so gave me the book along with the correspondence from Mr Charlton and Mr Robinson to her late father. I set about trying to find out when exactly Nicholson received the degree referred to in Robinson's letter.

Not surprisingly, I contacted Antoinette Fawcett, who established that the Norman Nicholson Archive at the John Rylands Library in Manchester (where I now live) appeared to have nothing referring to an honorary degree for Nicholson from the Open University, although there were references to other honorary degrees. She very kindly offered to get in touch with Dr David Cooper, who found out that the degree was conferred in 1975. Mr Robinson's perception in 1976 that the conferring had taken place 'a few years ago' was misleading; what is in no doubt, however, are the impressions the poet made on Mr Robinson, who met him fairly briefly, and the feeling of almost 'kinship' which he could (and still can) inspire in fellow Cumbrians through his writing.

Margaret Edwards

Norman Nicholson Society: Summer Meeting by Margaret Edwards

Saturday, July 25th, was a very rare 2009 day: the weather was sunny and warm - however, some of us who were mindful of rainy episodes earlier in the week had umbrellas at the ready. The Society's Summer Meeting at the Castlegate Art Gallery was held in the delightful garden behind the Gallery. We were the guests of Chris Wadsworth, owner of the Gallery, whose invitation to enjoy her walled store of pictures defined the end of our morning session.

After suitable words of introduction, our Chairman, Dr David Cooper, gave a talk in which he drew several interesting parallels between the views of the natural world held by Norman Nicholson and Wordsworth. Our own views of the natural world around us in that lovely garden were quite evocative; and I for one thought of several passages from the work of each writer which linked with Dr Cooper's exposition. Chris, too, enlightened us about links between Norman Nicholson and certain artists, especially Percy Kelly, and generously distributed copies of the booklet published in January 2008, in conjunction with the Gallery's exhibition of Percy Kelly's work.

We re-grouped after lunch on the steps of the portico of the carefully restored Wordsworth House (I still find the colour of the exterior walls a little daunting), where observations on the poet's early life and connection with the building were shared with us by David Cooper. After that, there was the chance to enjoy a harpsichord recital by Keith Jackson. Wordsworth House has a very fine instrument made in 2006 by Robert Deegan, whose workshops are sited in Lancaster, on the quayside. Keith offered us all manner of snippets about the music he played for us and its period, and told us that the instrument before us was an exact replica of one now in Oxford. Recent research had established that the Oxford instrument was once owned by Handel.

House-browsing and enjoyable garden-exploration brought the meeting to an end. A memorable fixture in the Society's 2009 calendar.

Margaret Edwards

A VISIT TO CALDER ABBEY

Late last year, I was one of a very mixed band of consistently well-wrapped West Cumbrians privileged, despite the extreme December chill, to take part in an exceedingly rare opportunity to visit Calder Abbey on a special 'Open Day'.

The decision to book a place was provoked by mere curiosity about a hidden but very well-known landmark I'd sporadically heard so much about and lived so closely nearby for over 50 years but had never seen with my own eyes or visited, mingled with recollections of NN's eloquent imagery about the place in 'Five Rivers', along with half-remembered snippets of his topographical prose. Particularly, and typically, of course:-

*The introspective CALDER hums to the pebbles
A memory of plainsong and choirboys' trebles
Of collect and introit, creed and antiphon,
Of Cistercians in the abbey of blood-red stone
Where now tarpaulin and sheet-lead shield
Groined roof and cloister and stoup from the wild
Weather of time and the wall ferns spread
Where once the praying lamp hung before the holy bread.*

Now, after the passing of the 65+ years since NN wrote these lines, there were no shields of tarpaulin or leaden sheet to be seen, just a magnificent, still-mighty, soaring but very obviously ruinously crumbling stone shell but which still seems to have miraculously sprouted and grown from the verdant pasture and countryside in which it was planted so very very long ago. A little exquisitely-vaulted roof and some of the cloisters remain; I don't recall a stoup, but piscina and sedilia still rise evocatively from the turf of the former Chancel, but no doubt these particular words wouldn't have sounded right in NN's fine poem !

But, although indeed magnificent, it has to be said that one ruined 12th century abbey, however delightfully situated, is very much like any other, to my insensitive, uneducated and not-very-antiquarian contemplation. However, this particular one must be unique in incorporating at one end a still-intact and inhabited Georgian mansion, its many stucco'd wings no doubt built from stone looted from the abbey to which it was attached, to form what must be one of grandest and most special 'semis' ever built anywhere.

It was this house, and everything about, it which fired up and intrigued my interest in a way the adjacent ruin never could. 'Genteel decay' came very much to mind as a first impression. The early-Georgian façade had once been colour-washed, but that had obviously been around a century ago. Odd bits of soggy cardboard and peeling plywood sadly and inadequately replaced more than a few broken panes in the walls' multitude of giant and grandly-rotting Georgian window frames.

The quietly spoken, middle-aged lady who emerged so startlingly suddenly and totally silently from the house as if she'd stepped through the very walls themselves was totally and exactly at one with her surroundings. She was so quietly-spoken that the chill wind unhelpfully snatched away great handfuls of her guided tour of the ruins, but it seemed that she and her family before her had been custodians and housekeepers here for much more than a generation and had seen a succession of rich but naïve owners of the property come and sooner or later (but usually sooner !) go

Then the crowning glory of the visit was upon us: the great front doors of the house were unbarred and we were invited inside, where it seemed far chillier, damper and much more dark than the now-fading daylight outside. A few tiny, naked and feeble electric light bulbs made the interior a somewhat spooky twilight, through which seemingly limitless expanses of stone flooring, steps and balustrades could be dimly perceived. We were led into a vast chamber, which must have formed the curved, dressed-stone bay-walled middle part of the building so strikingly apparent from the outside. Not Georgian, this, but a pure gem of c. 1900 'Arts and Crafts' architecture and interior design. This one room, even in its dimly-lit and decrepit state, echoed in almost every respect every significant element of the grandeur of the recently-restored Blackwell House at Windermere. A magnificent, sinuous, beautifully-detailed botanical frieze topped the interior walls; a gigantic, canopied inglenook-style fireplace featuring intricately-carved wooden columns and panelling dominated one corner. The fireplace itself was flanked by a pair of the most exquisite stained glass windows of the period I had ever seen. In that beautiful, cavernous fireplace there bravely glowed a single bar of an enameled-metal electric fire of a type popular over half a century ago. This must have been contributing about a tenth of one

by David Boyd

percent to the heating requirements of that vast room, yet it was all there was to counteract the terrible chill.

The custodian explained that this room had been designed and first built as the Billiard Room and had contained an appropriately grand billiard / snooker table of the period in its centre. But, as the then owners' children were growing up, this was considered far too dissolute a function for the room and, table removed, it had become The Games Room.

We were then led for light refreshments back into the gloom of the original part of the house, in a capacious, but heavily-curtained room near the main door. I found myself standing next to a vast, long-disused ornate fireplace, a closer look at which revealed yet more utterly magnificent expanses of Arts and Crafts Movement ceramic art-work beckoning cheerily from out of that dark gloom.

We finally stepped out of this stupendous, gloomy and chilling decay into the relative warmth and remaining light of the winter's day, but, with a unique and abiding memory to treasure and a sense of near outrage that such absolutely unique and key landmarks in this nation's long and proud heritage can be allowed to fall into such neglect and decrepitude rather than be preserved on behalf of the entire community. And this applies as much to Calder Abbey House as to the venerable ruin to which it is so perilously attached, rather like a very sad pair of Siamese Twins.

Back to NN's contemplations of Calder Abbey, this time in his topographical prose, in *Portrait of the Lakes* [pp 102-104]. Here, I think we can very readily discover, with considerable satisfaction and delight, the lie to Philip Gardner's uncharacteristically and seemingly peremptory dismissal of NN's prose as work of little literary consequence. I'm with Ezra Pound when he rather more perceptively referred to Thomas Hardy's poetry as 'the harvest' of having written [not in NN's case anything like 20 novels, but still very much prose] first.

For just one example:-

[The river Calder] rises very near Ennerdale, but flows south-west, receiving the beck which come from the Haycock, Steeple and Pillar Group. The country is desolate, shapeless and monotone. Then, a few miles above the abbey the river cuts into the St. Bees sandstone. There is no instant change in the landscape, but the river flows in deep ravines and you can see the red buttresses and slabs under the water, with grey and blue cobbles at the water's edge, washed down from the upper fells. The river now slices down into its narrow valley, where trees bubble up to meet it and farms and walls are all of sandstone. Below Sella Park the land flattens and the river frays out into a pebbly delta with willows growing on little islands in mid-stream. The runnels unite again and flow under the railway on to the sands where the channel of the Calder meets that of the Ehen, coming from Ennerdale, so that at low tide it might almost be regarded as a tributary of the longer stream.

Very clearly, I'd contend, this represents both material that is utterly ripe for harvest into fine poetry and which transcends mere travel-writing. NN's intense feeling and empathy for the underlying rock [and consequential drainage!] of his region is particularly and characteristically apparent here, as in most of his work.

It seems that NN was never treated to a tour of Calder Abbey House, for he continues:

.....the chief appeal of Calder is not architectural, but, as it were, literary. It might have been the setting for a ballad by Scott or a novel by Ann Radcliffe.....it is.....a place for assignations, murders and ghosts, and it is told that a monk occasionally appears in photographs, looking out of one of the windows of the mansion built over the abbey foundations.

Moreover, NN was moved to observe, even so long ago, that:-

.....the owners continue to take great care of their stupendous heritage. It is, nevertheless, a very great responsibility for any private person, however conscientious, and one cannot but wonder – even at the risk of giving offence – whether a monument of such importance should not be in the care of a public body.

Hear, Hear, Norman! – and, as for Calder Abbey, same for Calder Abbey House too !

And thanks so much for the memory, all those at Calder Abbey, for even though the effect was more than a little disturbing, it was nevertheless something I for one, aided by NN's insights, shall never forget.

David Boyd January 2009

NICHOLSON IN THE PRESS AND ON THE INTERNET

Nicholson in the Press :1

Familiar faces are often seen in a crowd and in June this year, one such face stared out from the Lakeland-filled pages of *Cumbria* magazine; walks, bee-keeping, Wainwright, events and attractions, and then, in their midst *Norman* - thoughtful, side-burned and suave, in cravat.

Cumbria's "Essential Lakeland Library" feature presented a four page article in the June 2009 edition, entitled "Man of Millom's insight into provincial pleasures", by Steve Goodier.

A history of Millom, Nicholson's life and his writings are all featured, with images of the "blue plaque" from his home, the commemorative window in St George's and some of his books.

Provincial Pleasures is singled out for specific attention, citing Nicholson's writing style, his observations about the familiar (PP- "November", opening paragraphs) and a simplicity, which captures the human emotion of things many of us have experienced (in this case, bonfire night).

The article closes by quoting the Nicholson epitaph. Outlined by *dazzle*, keep looking out for that familiar face in the crowd, when you thumb through magazines, browse the local bookshop or library.

Phil Houghton

Nicholson in the Press: 2

Fell-walkers in the Society may be interested in a short article in the Feb/March issue of *Lakeland Walker* (Issue 69 2009). The article is by Lucie Goodwin and is about Nicholson and Black Combe. It is the first of a series on Poet and Place.

Margaret Forsman

Nicholson on the Internet

I have been trawling the Worldwide Web once again for samples of Nicholson-related materials. My eye was caught this time by a number of sites which suggest that Nicholson is being read in rather unconventional ways by a young audience. Hurrah!

One of the most fascinating images I have found is a rather beautiful photograph of a carefully tattooed foot on which a quotation from 'Rising Five' is written in a flowing script that carefully follows the line of the foot from heel to toe. We can clearly read: "The dust dissected tangential light", described as "a line from Gemma's favourite poem". Who Gemma is cannot be discovered, as the blog which was linked to the photograph has been shut down, but the picture immortalizes her love of the poem. It can be viewed at this address: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/97188231@N00/211656940>.

Another unconventional take on 'Rising Five' can be viewed on You Tube. A mini-film has been made of the poem, making use of graphics, still photos and Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony. While feet feature in Gemma's reading of the poem, this response makes effective use of hands and faces. See it here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VEA91dS-BQ>.

'Rising Five' is, or has been, a set poem for several exams, including the IGCSE (International General Certificate of Education), which may explain its popularity amongst younger people across the whole world. There is yet another artistic response to this poem in Zaina's weblog, featuring a hand, once again, and an eye. View it here: <http://zainaline.com/?p=22>. Zaina is a designer who lives in Jordan. She will say no more about herself than that. But that Nicholson's poem is important to her we can deduce from the care with which she presents it.

You'll need to scroll down Mahima Shrestha's weblog to find her portrait of Nicholson along with the hand-lettered words of his poem 'The Safe Side'. This is what she says: "Drew this portrait in the library while reading a book of his poems. I always like to have a face to a name. However, to be 100% honest, I have to admit, what made me draw this man was the pronounced curve of his upper lip." Mahima describes herself as "an artist who needs to write or a writer who needs to draw". You can see her version of Nicholson at: <http://meetmahima.wordpress.com/page/2/>.

And finally, two sites which suggest that quite a number of school students may be meeting Nicholson's work in stimulating circumstances: the March 2009 Watford Festival Verse-speaking Class F10 (Years 11 to 13) features Nicholson's poem 'Wall' as one of the set pieces (http://www.watfordfestival.co.uk/festival/pages/Speech_And_Drama_Classes/); whilst the website for Andy Goldsworthy's Sheepfolds Project carefully suggests cross-curricular work, including working with the enriching technical vocabulary of wall-building, citing the same poem, 'Wall', as an example of the wonderful descriptive use of such words: <http://www.sheepfoldscumbria.co.uk/html/educate/ed02d.htm>.

Lively, exciting, personal, creative and energetic responses! Norman would have approved.

AF

A Favourite Nicholson Poem by Melvyn Bragg

When Neil asked me to do this, I thought first to go back to the beginnings as Norman himself liked to do. In 'Scree', for example, he writes:

A million centuries it grew like a great tree
 Under the sea,
 The wrack-ringed rock, lifting its branches higher
 Than the fire
 Of black volcanoes burning in the green water. Coal
 Sprang from its bole
 Like a parasitic plant...

And then there are the town portraits most ambitiously described in 'The Seventeenth of the Name' and, of course, in 'Nicholson, Suddenly', the opening line of which is "So Norman Nicholson is dead!"

But all in all I think I would settle for 'On the Closing of Millom Ironworks':

Wandering by the heave of the town park, wondering
 Which way the day will drift,
 On the spur of a habit I turn to the feathered
 Weathercock of the furnace chimneys.
But no grey smoke-tail
 Pointers the mood of the wind....

This is not only a poem about the place he made his own but it is a bleak elegy for a time of hard, dirty, poorly rewarded work but work which bound together a community which somehow achieved independence, pride and character despite heavy odds.

It is also the epilogue to a century and a half of Northern British Industry which led the world for a while and powered the Empire for a while and then was dumped.

They stand, by the churchyard gate,
 Hands in pockets, shoulders to the slag...

And the boat is beached:

Not a crack in her hull
 Lacking by a loan to float her off...

And the final four lines in magnificent plain English:

For what does it matter if it rains all day?
 And what's the good of knowing
 Which way the wind is blowing
 When whichever way it blows it's a cold wind now.

Best wishes

Melvyn Bragg

London
 July 21st, 2009

MATT SIMPSON (1936 – 2009) – an obituary by Neil Curry

With the death of Matt Simpson on June 8th, the Society lost a distinguished and influential member, and many of us a dear friend. Matt had been a close friend of Norman Nicholson for many years and as well as being an admirer of his poems, he had an erudite appreciation of them, as was evident from his talk on “The Early Poems” which he gave to the Society in 2007.

Matt was born in Bootle and never lost his Scouse roots, accent or sense of humour, but he was never a *Liverpool Poet*; he was far too accomplished for a label such as that.

His father had been in the merchant navy most of his life and later worked as a rigger on the docks. Matt won a scholarship to Cambridge and worked as a university lecturer. This tension is present in many of his poems, but he did not go around carrying it as a chip on his shoulder as some have done, nor was he self-obsessed as far too many poets have been since Robert Lowell wrote *Life Studies* fifty years ago. He was his own man, a man of sensitivity, compassion and learning.

He wrote wittily and vividly about his family, but in so doing he spoke to and for a whole class and generation. He wrote about Bootle but was no more *provincial* than Nicholson.

One good thing to have come out of this is that it has sent me back to Matt’s poems and if you don’t know them, then accept this as a little taster.

First Day at the Grammar School

... and the black-gowned vulture at the front declared

‘Today, boys, we are going to have
our first grammar lesson!’

to which Eddie Williams, snotty-nosed, undaunted
in sempiternal wellies, answered back,

‘Ah, eh, sir, we already done grammer at ar other skew!’

Sempiternal wellies... Oh, Matt!

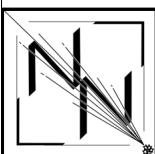
Neil Curry 2nd July 2009

Comet, Events, the Future and much more!

Although my editorial work is now being carried out at some distance from Cumbria, making it much harder for me to travel to Society events, it is clear from the range of articles carried in this issue of *Comet* that the members of the Society are an involved, imaginative and expressive bunch of people whose love of Norman Nicholson’s work, and the themes he dealt with, has led them to create an interesting series of events which for more than three years now has continued to draw new members into the Society and to publicize Nicholson’s work to the wider public in engaging ways.

The next issue of *Comet* will cover the October 17th Festival Day and look forward to the January NN Birthday Party, fast becoming a welcome tradition in the NN Calendar. As usual, I am looking for articles which deal both with Nicholson’s Life and Work—memories of Nicholson and contributions to the favourite poem column are always welcome, as are photos, creative writing and reports. I will also be collecting articles towards a themed edition, to appear in March 2010, on **Nicholson and Music**. If you know of anyone who might be interested in contributing, please either ask them directly, or contact me and I will make the request. Similarly, please contact myself or one of the committee members with suggestions for future events and outreach work. And 2014?

AF



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Many thanks to all our contributors. Please do keep sending in articles, photos, and responses to Nicholson’s work to the above address or e-mail address. Thank you.