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Memories of the Nicholsons by Robin Gray

A Southerner born & bred, I had never heard of Millom, let alone Norman Nicholson before 1959 when I was appointed the first Further Education Tutor at the new Millom Comprehensive School. However, even before removing to Millom, I was intrigued to receive a hand-written note from Gordon Bessey, the innovative Director of Education for Cumberland (as it then was), enclosing a cutting from *The Times* (or was it the *Manchester Guardian*?) written about (or was it by?) Norman Nicholson. My recollection is that its subject was Hodbarrow, obviously a topic germane to Norman's interests. On taking up my post in the September, I quickly discovered that Norman was a Governor of the School, and thus of the F.E. Centre also; and that, furthermore, one of my new colleagues was Yvonne, his wife.

Mainly through Yvonne, contacts with Norman developed. Yvonne drove him everywhere, of course; they would arrive on foot unheralded, at our house at The Hill, having prudently parked on the metalled road rather than risk the rough track. 'We have walked down to the estuary,' says Yvonne. 'And look at this Lesser-Spotted-Mystery-Wort that we discovered,' says Norman, proffering a small, insignificant flower with the triumphant air of a pioneering botanist (*Give me weeds*). It really thrilled him to find a rarity. Then two more deckchairs would come out, and we would all have tea on the lawn, overlooking the Duddon estuary.

He and Yvonne were great crossword puzzlers, and so were we. When stuck for a solution to a clue in the *Guardian*'s cryptic puzzle, I would ring 772024 for help. Yvonne would usually answer, and without any preamble I would say '12 across Tipsy jailor left out wine?' and she would usually have the answer; they were much more adept than we were. Occasionally, she would need to ring us - but not often.

Every time we have coffee in Nicholson House, looking at the fireplace round which we sat with them occasionally after supper, memories are warmed to life. It seems very appropriate that their living room should now welcome the people of Millom about whom he wrote so affectionately, but who never properly appreciated nor honoured him in his lifetime.

Robin Gray January 2010

EDITORIAL NOTE

In the months leading up to each issue of *Comet* I generally start worrying about whether or not there will be sufficient materials to give you something interesting and stimulating to ponder on. This *Comet* appears a little later than usual, giving me the chance both to garner new materials and to give Society members who were unable to attend the AGM the opportunity to read the Letter from our Chair, Dr. David Cooper, which summarizes some of the main issues discussed at the meeting. As usual there is a wealth of interesting articles to read and, especially, this time, images to look at, as a major part of the issue is devoted to reporting on the NN Schools' Competition. The next issue will be themed on **Nicholson and Music**. As always, all articles are welcomed—not only on the theme. In a mathematical fit recently I counted how many pages of *Comet* there had been since the inauguration of the society in March 2006: I made it 112 pages and about 107 articles! I think Norman himself would chuckle at the kerfuffle he is raising. AF

Don't look now, but . . . by Philip Houghton

It seems strange to begin to write this, without first acknowledging the floods in Cumbria and those who are saddened at their hand. Nicholson's *Greater Lakeland* gives us an intimacy with the places we now see thrust into the news and we feel the sudden immediacy of *place* and of our unwanted walk-on part in the so-called 'once in 1000 year event'. To distance ourselves by viewing the district's geography in an expansive time-frame, in which we are such a small part of its being, would fail to see that we are all now suddenly thrust into belonging to an expression of Cumbrian time, which we have never had to contemplate before — previously a *lifetime*, a *generation*, and now a millennial event, which we have at best witnessed and at worst are living with its effects. To suggest that things have changed for ever would be to deny Cumbria's resilience, to venture that things have changed for a millennia, only *thirty thousand feet of solid Cumberland* will ever know.

Looking at landscape is a pretty involuntary thing, whether from the window of a bus, train or car, the framed glimpses of its curves between the regimented rows of houses and streets or merely the facsimile *wish you were here* view on that unexpected postcard. It has not always been so, in fact there was a day when it was positively deliberate, beyond the day-dreaming out of the classroom window — it was the *Picturesque*.

We meet a pretty extensive discourse on the Picturesque movement and some of its protagonists, in Nicholson's *The Lakers* and this is further brought to life in the poem 'Thomas Gray in Patterdale', and, as we enter the pantomime season, I would invite you to indulge me here, over a mince pie, to cries of 'It's behind you...!' (oh, and keep the foil tray handy for later...).

Indeed it was behind you and you could make *it* look however you wanted, but within certain rules — and the tool — the Claude-glass. Water, trees, pastoral scenes and drama, ruins and follies and the odd boat were all respected features, viewed in a glass, held in front to capture what was behind. Sounds familiar to those who traverse the county by car, longing to be out there amongst the fells — clearly, in the *rear-view mirror* we have retained some of the Picturesque ideal, to this day. But keep your eyes on the road.

Whilst considering this poem, I became aware of the artist, Anish Kapoor, drawing a parallel between this Nicholson poem and his public sculpture *C-Curve*, which, set at a prominent location near Brighton, invites the viewer to assemble and disassemble the surrounding landscape, and which changes its form at the movement of the viewer, relative to the reflective surfaces of the piece. Another of Kapoor's public sculptures, *Cloud Gate*, reflects Chicago's skyline, inviting the viewer to consider scale and size, viewing the real landscape indirectly, through the mirrored version. A recent travelling installation — *Drop* — exhibited around Cumbria, similarly invited the viewer to consider the oversized representation of a giant water droplet and to marvel at the reflected landscape held in its surfaces, which could further be distorted by physical contact with the piece, the silvered-skin of which could be pushed in like that of a balloon, dragging and changing the landscape's reflection.

The reflected landscape of mirrors, man-made or natural — still lakes, tarns, the dreamlike rippled reflections of wind-ruffled ponds or trout stream currents, right down to the micro view of the world in a rain drop — draw us in. These captured landscapes seem to create the negatives for memories, for interior landscapes caught up and stored, to be replayed — cameras for the mind.

In the poem, we meet familiar Nicholson imagery — slanting elements, bracken (that echoer of ore, in its autumnal state), the *four inch fells*, with their further echoes of the poem

Don't look now, but... (continued) by Philip Houghton

'Scafell Pike' - *How small it seems ..., No more than a notch On the plate-glass window of the sky!*

Interiorising the scene, the poem develops the Claude-glass containment of the view, abruptly externalised by the line *But outside the glass* – this is the hook, to turn and look and we are moved to the realities of the scene, to the point of the poet becoming even *part of a landscape*—suddenly *self* as landscape, from such a previously contained view (is there an echo of confinement here, of 'The Pot Geranium', of the memorised views, which carried the poet through the Claude-glass of sanatorium window-framed skies?).

A further interpretation of the poem's turning point, here, is that Wordsworth went 'outside the glass'. Nicholson's expression of this may be found in *The Lake District: An anthology* (page 14) where we may compare the turning point of the poem with Wordsworth being credited with a change of direction, from the Picturesque – Wordsworth looking directly on the landscape with his own eyes. Landscape passed from being picture-framed impression to book-bound experience.

We are further engaged in the senses, moving through the second part of the poem, of landscape as sound—the wind, the *frantic thorns*, the whispering – up to the twist in the final line, where *the viewer* in opening their eyes to the visible and possible landscape, becomes *the viewed*, in the eye of the sky-line. To notice the landscape is to see it, to be part of it, to be a visible expression of its existence by providing a human scale to its otherwise indefinable properties of height, depth and texture – to *hold Helvellyn in my fingers*.

Now, carefully screw up that foil mince pie case and step outside, eyes wide.

Phil Houghton - Cumbria

EDITORIAL NOTE

The NN poem which is the basis of this article, 'Thomas Gray in Patterdale', was discussed in the Reading Workshop led by Dr. David Cooper on the 18th October 2009, during the Norman Nicholson Festival Day. Next year the Society is likely to focus on further participatory events of such a nature, putting Nicholson and his writing at the heart of what we are trying to achieve and emphasizing to our membership that a Society such as ours has been founded with the idea of developing and sharing our appreciation of Nicholson's works. We are, therefore, looking for members willing to lead reading workshops and to suggest venues which might help us to move outwards from Millom and into the larger community. There is no reason at all why we could not have more than one group meeting on the same day, or during the same month, in different parts of the county, but covering some of the same ground.

If such reading groups could then submit articles to 'Comet' based on the work they might discuss, that would provide a triple benefit (benefit number one being getting to know other members of the Society more intimately than is possible in a lecture-based event; benefit number two being that members would be more interactively involved with the making the events of the Society work—a democratic ideal which Nicholson himself would have surely approved; and the third benefit being that the Newsletter of the Society would have a wider base of writers than it does at present). Ideas, suggestions and offers of help should be sent in the first instance to Dr. David Cooper, Chair of the Norman Nicholson Society at: d.cooper1@lancaster.ac.uk.

NORMAN NICHOLSON FESTIVAL DAY 2009

The Norman Nicholson Festival Day, held on October 19th 2009 in the comfortable surroundings of the Millom Network Centre, was a great success. Members and visitors were treated to a day which was very much focused on the visual aspect of Nicholson's work, its relationship to the visual arts in general, and to the work of a range of specific artists in particular. We were also inspired by Dick Capel's account of his relationship to Andy Goldsworthy, whose well-known Sheepfolds project he helped to bring to fruition. Nicholson's poem 'Wall' has been much quoted in relation to this project, and indeed may have been the initial inspiration for the Grizedale Forest 'Wall that went for a walk'.

The morning started at 10.00 with coffee and biscuits, followed by talks by Charles Mitchell, Martin Greenland and Dick Capel. Charles Mitchell is Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Media & Design at the University of Cumbria and is also an artist in his own right. Charles, who lives near Isel Hall, curated the *Outside the Glass* exhibition last year which, as members will remember, was an exhibition of the works of artists responding to Nicholson's poetry. It was shown first at the 'Words by the Water' Festival in the Theatre by the Lake galleries and later at the Lancaster campus of the University of Cumbria. Charles's talk took us through highlights of the exhibition once more, with slides of the artworks and illuminating comments on the oeuvre of the artists and how their works related to Nicholson's poetry. For those of us who had been able to see the exhibition it was a real treat to be reminded of these varied and vital works, and for those who had been unable to attend the quality of the art and the depth of response of the artists to Nicholson's writings was a real revelation. An exhibition is of its nature an ephemeral phenomenon, so it was also wonderful to see how the essence had been captured in the photographs which Charles had made and, especially, in his illuminating comments. We felt very privileged that Charles Mitchell had taken time from his busy schedule to share his insights with us.

We were also very privileged to have Martin Greenland addressing us as the second speaker. Martin focused his talk on his painting 'To the River Duddon', inspired by, and a response to, Nicholson's poem of the same name. Martin joined us very soon after the close of his London exhibition *Arrangements of Memory*, an exhibition of landscape paintings which included the work 'To the River Duddon'. Greenland was born in Yorkshire and now lives and works in the Lake District. He was the winner of the John Moores 24 exhibition prize in 2006 for the work 'Before Vermeer's Clouds'. His work is strongly influenced by memory and imagination and although his pictures are responses to place they are rarely direct representations of a specific location. The work 'To the River Duddon' is no exception. In its present form it is a dark and mysterious painting in which the water of the river is the main source of light, apart from a tiny signature manmade lamppost appearing near the top left of the painting. It is a remarkable painting not only for its poetic response to the Nicholson poem, but also for its representation of the truth of the landscape as lying within the interior vision of every human, whether artist or not. The story behind the genesis and evolution of this painting was also fascinating, in that in its first form (or draft), as it appeared in the *Outside the Glass* exhibition, it was a bright, sunny, green-toned painting which represented much more literally the sweep of Nicholson's poem, from the source of the Duddon right down to the then-industrial Duddon Estuary. Whilst the original painting was by no means a direct and literal representation of the river, the valley, or the poem, it had perhaps not yet been sufficiently transmuted by Greenland's own imagination and feeling, and still had to find its final dusky form, a step further back from the page, a step nearer to the crucible of making. For the audience, it was both fascinating and poignant to see Greenland's slide of the original painting and to realize that it had disappeared for ever into and under the paint of the new version. Like Charles Mitchell's talk, this presentation was very well-received and enlivened by a range of slides which

NORMAN NICHOLSON FESTIVAL DAY 2009

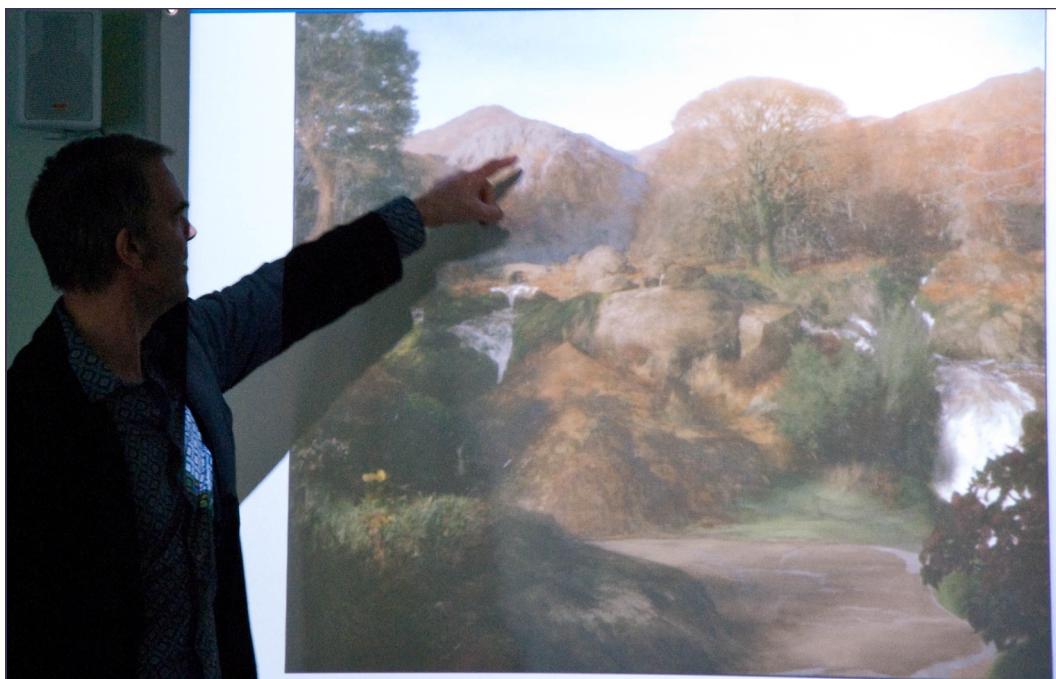
enabled the audience to obtain an overview of Greenland's major works.

The last of the morning's speakers, Dick Capel, gave us an inspiring insight into the work of the artist Andy Goldsworthy, in particular concentrating on the value and importance of art within the landscape, and emphasizing links to Nicholson's own rootedness and sense of place. Dick also inspired us with his account of the 'Poetry Path' project, which combined sculpture, poetry and landscape in ways that could well be emulated in Millom. We could envisage a project which would bring together Nicholson's and other poetry, together with interesting locations in and around Millom, and appropriate sculptural or other artworks. Such a project would not only add interest to the local area, perhaps increasing the numbers of visitors to Millom, but could also prove to be a lasting monument to Nicholson's work and his influence.

After lunch the Festival Day continued with a choice of workshops (a reading workshop led by Dr. David Cooper, Chair of the Society or a creative writing workshop, led by Antoinette Fawcett) and then the results of the Schools' Competition were announced. This year the decision had been to concentrate on artistic responses to Nicholson's work, in keeping with the theme of the day, and we were lucky to be able to view the results of the competition in the wonderful exhibition of children's art in several different media. The display was put together with striking impact by Margaret Forsman, who also organized and administered the competition itself. Images from the competition can be seen on the following pages.

Once again the Society put together an inspiring Festival Day which had events, presentations and workshops suitable for a wide range of ages and interests. Thanks to all involved for their hard work.

AF



Martin Greenland showing a slide photograph of the original version of his painting 'To the River Duddon', inspired by the Nicholson poem of the same name.

The elements present in the poem were quite closely followed in this version. Both poem and picture are essentially landscapes of memory and invention. The Duddon Estuary can be seen in the foreground.

The picture no longer exists in this form.

The Norman Nicholson Festival Schools Competition

WINNERS AND HIGHLY COMMENDED



*And dandelion clocks are held like
small balloons of light above the
ground...*

Martha Armstrong
Haverigg School
3rd prize
7–11 years old



Taleesha Pennington
St James' School
Highly Commended 4–7 years old



Tasha Pennington
St. James' School
Highly Commended 4–7 years old

*With a frothing of bladderwrack
They bluster and topple*



Rachel McCartney
Haverigg School
2nd Prize
7–11 years old

*St. Luke's Summer
The poppy shakes its pepper-box of
seed...
And dandelion clocks are held...*



Courtney Blackburn
St. James' School
Prizewinner 4–7 years old

Eels of sunshine rip and writhe

The Norman Nicholson Festival Schools Competition

WINNERS AND HIGHLY COMMENDED



Zara Nicholas
St. James' School
2nd Prize 7–11 years

*When born in the shadows of the
Combe they always return*

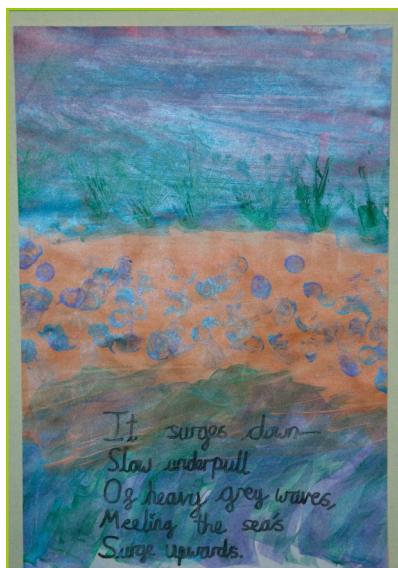


Lia Newton
St. James' School
Highly Commended 7–11 years old



Emma Holmes
St. James' School
Prizewinner 4–7 years old

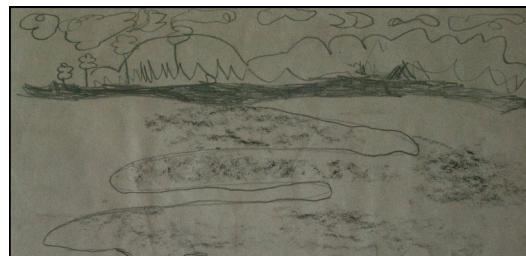
*Where once the bogies bounced...
a new lake spreads its edges.*



Jordan Brumby
St. James' School
First Prize 7–11 years old

*It surges down
Slow underpull
Of heavy grey waves,
Meeting the sea's
Surge upwards.*

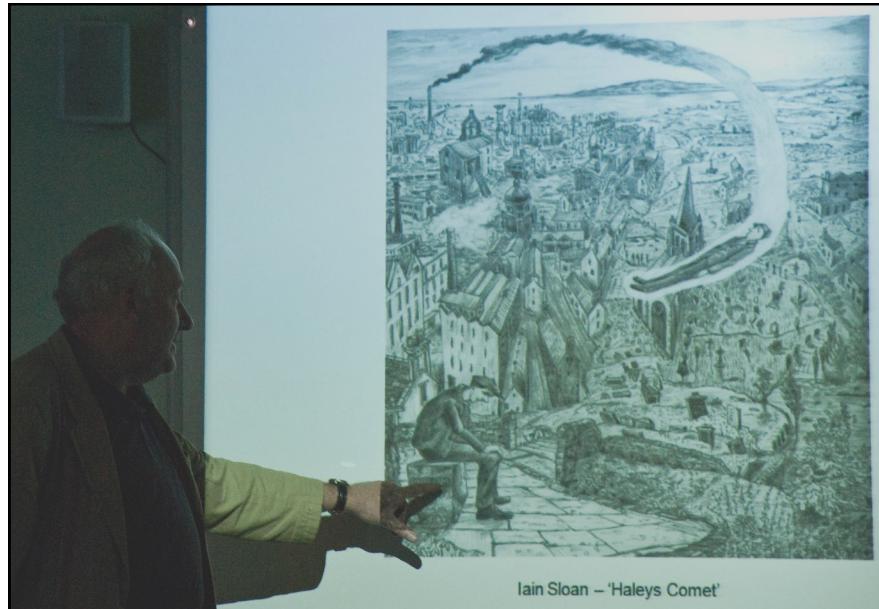
*Turfed,
cobble-dashed
dome,
herring-bone
masonry of
slivered stone*



Amber Forrest
St. James'
School

Prizewinner
4–7 years old

More from the NN Festival Day



Charles Mitchell
Dean of the Faculty of Arts,
Media and Design at the
University of Cumbria
discussing Iain Sloan's print
'Haley's Comet', inspired by
Norman Nicholson's poem of
the same name

Iain Sloan made this print for
the 2008 exhibition *Outside
the Glass*, curated by Charles
Mitchell and exhibited at the
Theatre by the Lake, Keswick,
during the Words by the Water
Festival and also at the
Lancaster Campus of the
University of Cumbria.



Amy Rice
Black Combe School
1st Prize 7–11 years



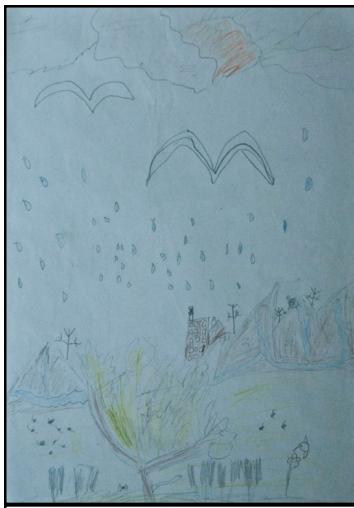
Maddy Roskell, Khanya Turner, Sophie Willis
Special Award for Group Work
Haverigg School

Roses, exhausted by the thrust of summer

Jake Wilson
Black Combe School
2nd Prize
7–11 years category

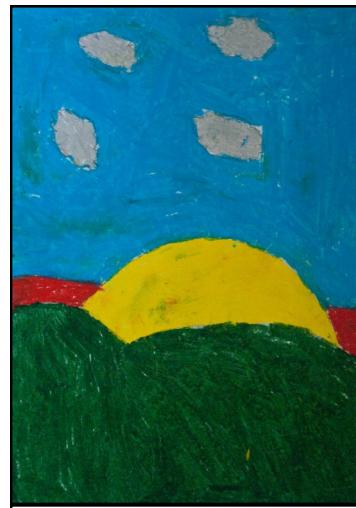


More from the NN Festival Day



Aiden Woodburn
Black Combe School
Joint 3rd Prize

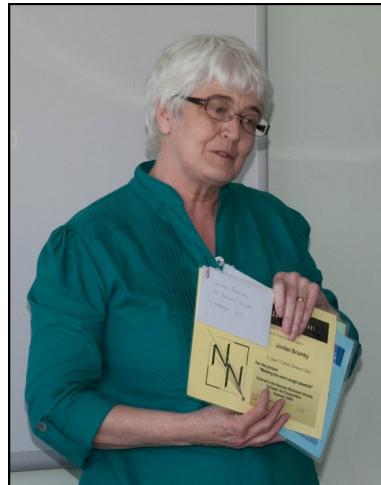
There's room for you
Under that sprawled, green
burial mound,
Under the round,
Turfed, cobble-dashed dome,
Herring-bone masonry of
silvered stone,
Where a crag-faced, shovelled
-away entrance
Gill cracks back
To some before-man-made
cavern, some
Ordovician catacomb -
For you,
For all the thousand millions
of the earth,
Black Combe has room.



Kyle Elphick
Black Combe School
Joint 3rd Prize

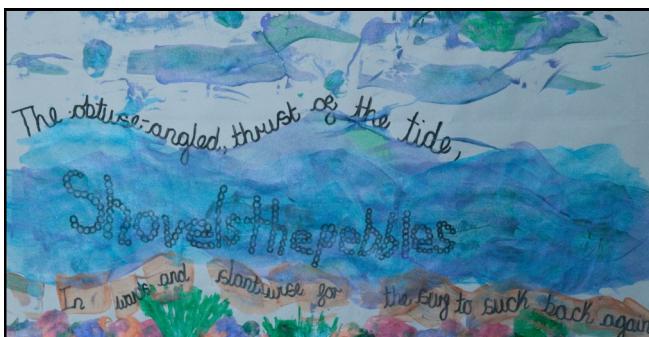
Society Secretary
Margaret Forsman
giving out the
certificates to
prizewinners of the NN
Schools Competition

October 18th 2009



Many thanks to all involved in the competition, especially to the teachers of the schools which entered the competition, to Margaret Forsman, for her brilliant organization and for the wonderful displays of the children's work, and to Karen Forster and Stan Towndrow who so ably judged the pieces. We are only sorry that we do not have the space to share all the entries with our readers.

*All the photos were taken by
John Troll*



Skye Mitchell
St. James' School 3rd prize 7–11 years

The obtuse-angled thrust of the tide



Jack Sowerby
St. James' School
Prizewinner 4–7 years

Roots

Report on the Norman Nicholson Festival Schools Competition 2009

There were over 100 entries for our first Nicholson Art competition. We were fortunate to have two expert judges in Karen Foster and Stan Towndrow and we send them our grateful thanks. Pupils in the Millom Federation of Schools were asked to produce pictures in any media on the theme of Nicholson and Nature. It was particularly pleasing to have so many entries from a new competition category – pupils under seven years. The quality and range of techniques was excellent and the judges were impressed by the design planning which was obvious in many entries. Pupils from both age ranges incorporated quotations from Nicholson's work in their images.

Competition winners

Age-group: 4-7 years – 6 equal winners, all at St. James' School: Courtney Blackburn, Amber Forrest, Aidan Crellin, Jack Sowerby, Emma Holmes, Caitlin Minter

Highly commended: Josh Drehorn, Tasha Pennington, Josh Gill, Leah Cosgrove, Grace Hulse, Luke Ivison, Taleesha Pennington

Age-group 7-11 years: St. James Catholic Primary School

1. Jordan Brumby
2. Zara Nicholas
3. Skye Mitchell

Highly commended

Lia Newton
Elliot Gardner

Age-group 7-11 years Black Combe Junior School

1. Amy Rice
2. Jake Wilson
- Joint 3. Aiden Woodburn & Kyle Elphick

Age-group 7-11 years Haverigg Primary School

1. Sophy Leece
2. Rachel McCartney
3. Martha Armstrong

Highly Commended

Lauren Horsfield
Gavyn Chesher



Leah Cosgrove and
Grace Hulse
4–7 years
St. James' School
Highly Commended

Special Award – 3D Collage by a group: Haverigg School

Maddy Roskell, Khenya Turner, Sophie Wills

Highly Commended

Thomas Hawden, Lewis Dixon, Lauren Horsfield, Kathryn Phillips,
Lewis Bawden, Ellis Marr, Rachel McCartney

Margaret Forsman December 2009



Adrian Crellin
4–7 years
St. James' School
Prizewinner

Carol

*Mary laid her Child among
The bracken fronds of night -
And by the glimmer round His head
All the barn was lit.*

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

Norman Nicholson

Collected Poems p. 68



Guest speaker Dick Capel at the Norman Nicholson Festival Day addressing the audience about the importance of Art in the Environment

Dick is portrayed in front of one of the children's pieces

A FAVOURITE NICHOLSON POEM

Roberta Ritson lets it sing

Roberta Ritson spent her childhood in Furness and is now settled with husband Chris and two daughters in Northumberland. Here she tells of her first encounter with Norman Nicholson and explains why she set the text of his 'Carol' to music.

*

'Mary laid her child among the bracken fronds of night.' I first read Norman Nicholson's 'Carol' in December 2008, about ten months after my father's death. Here, Christ's nativity is depicted 'at home', perhaps even around that 'miry, frozen farm' in Low Furness, a real place holding my very roots.

Norman Nicholson came to read to us, the nine to eleven year old class of Urswick Grammar (primary) School, during the 1970s. The music of 'Nobbut God' stayed with me, and since that day I've been wary of dandelions (don't pick them, or you'll wet the bed).

As soon as I read the text of 'Carol' I wanted to let it sing. There is always the danger that melody trivializes the natural force of words; to avoid this I used a simple structure, yet made the most of the upper and lower reaches of both voice and my English folk harp. The mystery of the incarnation touches everything, connecting with the most homely things we know, including our pain.

At one level the story shows Mary, the mother of God, in a Cumbrian landscape. At the same time her vulnerability is universal and the poet speaks very directly of Christ's presence transforming the darkest of human experiences.

I hope that what I have made is a beautiful harp-voice song in traditional idiom—an easy, familiar form infused with gentle power.

Roberta Ritson, December 2009



The Norman Nicholson Society: The Next Five Years

Dear Members,

Thank you to all those hardy members who battled with the challenging weather conditions in order to attend the Society's Annual General Meeting – and Norman Nicholson birthday celebrations – in Millom on Saturday, 9 January.

In my Chairperson's Report, I reflected on the Society's varied programme of events and activities for 2009. I also suggested that, as the Society moves into its fifth full year, it is vital that we continue to ask ourselves important questions about the role and nature of the Society. How do we want the Society to evolve over the next five years? What are our overarching aims and ambitions? What type of literary society do we hope to be?

We have begun to address these questions at recent committee meetings and, at present, we are working towards the development of two interwoven strands of activity. On one level, we hope to host a series of further events in Cumbria over the next year or two. In response to feedback from members, we envisage that these events will be much more participatory than some of our earlier meetings and will include reading days, discussion groups and creative writing sessions. As a committee, however, we have always been sensitive to the fact that the role of a literary society should involve much more than the organisation of events. The second strand of our work, then, will involve working with other individuals and organisations as we explore ways of celebrating Nicholson's centenary in 2014. Perhaps most importantly of all, it is imperative that the Society ensures that Nicholson's work remains in print and readily available to future readers.

As ever, we would be delighted to hear your thoughts and ideas as to how the Society should continue to develop over the coming months and years. At the same time, we would be delighted to hear from you if you are interested in helping to shape the Society by joining the committee.

Many thanks for your continued support.

With all good wishes for 2010,

David

Dr David Cooper
d.cooper1@lancaster.ac.uk

Species and Habitat: Heritage Open Days In Millom, 10-13 September 2009 **by Wendy Bracegirdle**

Millom is nationally known for its annual Heritage Open Days Festival, which is, of course, part of the long-established Heritage Open Days promoted in September each year by English Heritage and the Civic Trust. This year among a wealth of local events, we held a Festival of Flowers at St. George's Church, Millom, to commemorate and celebrate the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Darwin. An extraordinarily rich series of floral designs brought a completely new angle to 'The Origin of Species' as well as aspects of Darwin's life and work.

It seemed a natural extension to this theme that we should also celebrate Norman Nicholson as botanist. It was therefore arranged that Bill Shaw from the Herpetological Conservation Trust (locally 'our man' for natterjack toads and other conservation matters) and Robert Bracegirdle would give an illustrated talk on flora in Nicholson's writings.

Their presentation, given at the Bradbury Centre, Millom, on Friday 11 September, took a range of habitats as the structure for a series of pictures illustrating the landscape and specific plants. Many of the photographs were taken specially by Bill for the talk, and they were accompanied by readings from Nicholson and some commentary from Robert.

All who attended were fascinated by the range of material, and we were all reminded of the depth and quality of Nicholson's botanic knowledge. We think there is ample scope for at least one doctorate on this subject, and it is a theme to which it would be very good to return at a future Society meeting.

Wendy Bracegirdle January 2010



Comet: The Newsletter of the Norman Nicholson Society. Editor: Antoinette Fawcett
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Grateful thanks to all contributors without whose efforts there would be no newsletter. The theme of the next issue is NICHOLSON AND MUSIC. Please send articles on this and on any other Nicholson-related themes to the editor at the above e-mail address or by post. Deadline: March 31st 2010.