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NORMAN NICHOLSON AND SPORT by Charlie Lambert

Considering that Norman either hated organised sport, or found that organised sport was not too keen on him, sport plays a surprisingly significant part in his work. Indeed, few writers have better captured the impact that a successful team can have on its community. Nicholson's description of Millom in the mid 1920s when the town's cricket team carried all before it demonstrates how the triumphs of a sports team can uplift an entire populace.

This was a team that was so good that when the county selectors met to pick a team to represent Cumberland, they chose no fewer than five players from Millom Cricket Club. Cumberland were playing a team made up of the best players from the North Lancashire League, to which Millom belonged. The North Lancashire selectors picked four more from Millom, an astonishing tribute to the talent of that club.

It is surely these cricketers that Norman has in mind in the poem 'Millom Cricket Field', from the 1948 collection *Rock Face*. The poem is a warm evocation of summer and memories of summers gone by:

*Among the champion, legendary men
I see my childhood roll like a cricket-ball.*

The 1920s were clearly a golden era – golden for cricket anyway, at a time of mass unemployment. Chapter Six of *Wednesday Early Closing* dwells lovingly on the status of the team. *They brought the ring of the Sagas, once a week, into the life of what I was already beginning to realise was a small and not particularly distinguished town.* Norman attached himself to this team *with the fierce faith of the born-again Evangelical.*

(continued on pp. 2 and 3)

This is, once again, a double issue of *Comet* and one which I hope will have many things to please and interest our readers and members. We are delighted to have an article from **Charlie Lambert** on the topic of **Nicholson and Sport**, something he is very well qualified to write about, since he has worked in the media for over 30 years as a print, radio and TV sports journalist. He is now passing on his wealth of knowledge and experience to a future generation of sports journalists as course leader and senior lecturer in sports journalism at the University of Central Lancashire.

We are also very pleased to have not one but two responses to Nicholson's poetry, from **Christopher Pilling** and from **Robin Gray**, both of whom read the poems sensitively and show why the Nicholson's work is still full of interest and impact, even, as in the case of the poem Christopher Pilling examines, when the poem is less well-known. **David Boyd** shares with us his thoughts about Nicholson's two novels and makes the interesting suggestion that they could form the basis of a TV drama, or perhaps even a film, whilst **David Cooper's** outgoing chair's report will remind members of the excellent leadership which David has given us over the past three years. We will miss his lively and imaginative leadership but are also very happy that he will remain on the NN Society Committee. We are pleased to welcome **our new Chair, Dr. Ian Davidson**, who is introduced on page 9 and who has also contributed a short article about Nicholson's work on page 11.

Please do continue to send in your articles on and memories of Nicholson. We also welcome writing inspired by Nicholson's work and have two lovely examples in this issue: a poem by **Mary Robinson** on Nicholson's grave and one by **Peggy Troll** on her homecoming to Millom in her holidays as an undergraduate student.

The next issue, taking a hint from David Boyd's article, will be on the theme of **Nicholson and Love**. That theme can be interpreted very broadly and I hope will bring in some interesting responses.

NORMAN NICHOLSON AND SPORT by Charlie Lambert

Frustratingly for me, as a journalist, Norman does not tell us exactly what Millom achieved in terms of sporting success. He does tell us that *we did not often lose*, and that *in those days Millom had what now seems to be an heroic team, the like of which no-one will ever see again*. So I am indebted to Colin Bickerstaffe, honorary secretary of the North Lancashire and Cumbria Cricket League, for filling in the gaps. Colin informs me that, between 1920 and 1927, Millom won the league four times and were second three times. They didn't then win the league again until 1956. When a knock-out cup competition was introduced in 1923, Millom won that too – and didn't do so again until 1947. So for Norman, born in 1914, these players must indeed have been demi-gods. Many of them are mentioned reverentially by name in WEC. Herbert Thomas and Sid Mudge were teachers, Maurice Gill was the club's professional, Alec Rigg was a one-time telegraph boy – names all confirmed by Colin.

This team of heroes imparted a golden glow to the town, when the town had little else going for it. *They gave a boy a glimpse of glory*, recalls Norman. *They helped a whole community to hold its head up*.

Supporters of, for example, Liverpool Football Club would recognise this. When the city of Liverpool went through tough economic and social times in the 1970s and 1980s, the achievements of the city's football teams (I include Everton) had exactly the same effect. Nicholson would probably prefer a different analogy. For him, football was rugby league, not the association code, and the triumphant progress of Wigan RLFC in the 1980s and 1990s would have been a more appropriate parallel.

Wigan, of course, occupies a highly symbolic place in Nicholson's writing.

'He gev it Wigan!' was the admiring verdict of those present when the local baritone – eschewing style for force – made his emphatic contribution to the music festival ('At the Music Festival', *Sea to the West*). Why Wigan? Because while it was

*Barrow for ships. Whitehaven
for coal,
Millom, of course, for men*

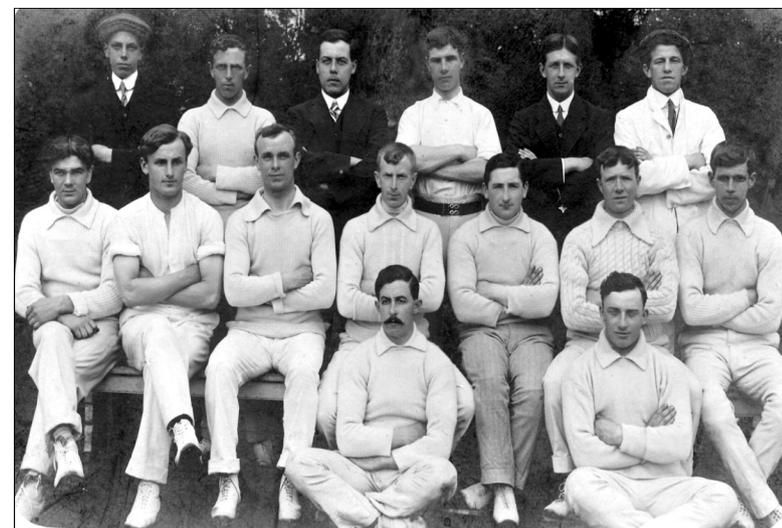
it was

Wigan for a damned good try.

The pun on *try* being fairly obvious. The effort and achievement of the rugby men of Wigan strike Norman as an honourable example when it comes to the living of life.

*God grant me guts to die
Giving it Wigan.*

There was a family tradition in sport. Norman's father was secretary and instructor at the Gymnastic Class, and sufficiently keen on football (the Association variety) to risk arranging his honeymoon to London because



Millom Cricket Club c. 1926? Courtesy Millom Folk Museum

he wanted to see Preston North End play in the FA Cup Final (WEC, Chapter Four). He was proud of his Uncle Jack, a successful local cricketer and footballer (football as in rugby this time) who was killed in a mining accident before Norman was born. But in Chapter Six of WEC he describes his own time on the school playing field as *the most miserable hours of my schooldays*, and in Chapter Eight gives blood-curdling details of the indignities suffered when forced to play rugby against his will.

If any headmaster wants to induce a lifelong indifference to, or intolerance of, almost all sports and athletics, then compulsory games is the best way of going about it. (WEC, Chapter Eight).

NORMAN NICHOLSON AND SPORT by Charlie Lambert

But actually, it wasn't quite as bad as that. Sport served Norman well. As a young boy it helped him define the world beyond Millom. *London was Wembley...Manchester was the Test.* ('At the Music Festival'). Even the extent of February snow, noted in *Provincial Pleasures*, was set in cricketing terms: *At Old Trafford it was wicket-high.* Sport provided him with a series of waymarkers to chart the rotation of the seasons and the passage of time, concepts which were always important. In *Provincial Pleasures*, Nicholson's month by month journey through the year, the end of April is signalled by the transition from the rugby season to cricket.

Cricket then dominates the June chapter, with an account of the annual grudge match between neighbouring teams Odborough and Oatrigg. This duel is described in immense detail, though not the kind that Wisden might allow:

The fourth side of the ground opens on to the meadows. This is where the strangers sit, because it is the prettiest side, and they do not know that they will get an ache in the back and a draught in the neck.

Nicholson glories as much in the shortcomings of the players as their prowess. The crowd's favourites, he writes, are the *unpredictables...the men who always chuck the ball to the wrong end when then there is a chance of a run-out.*

He would identify with that. Cricket was one game he loved to play, despite a chronic lack of ability. In company with his pal Albert, on their own, all manner of unlikely one-a-side matches would be played *in a rough corner of the Field, where the rushes stuck up out of the grass like the bristles from a worn-out hairbrush....If we managed to keep half the deliveries within two yards of the wicket on either side, we judged that we were in good form* (WEC, Chapter Six).

Later in his school career, he took up tennis and *to everyone's surprise became not bad at the game. Not good, of course; but even to be not bad was a new experience for me* (WEC Chapter Nine).

Sport, and particularly cricket, provides the poet with a useful kitbag of metaphors. His musings on 'The New Cemetery' (*Sea to the West*) are set at the cricket field, looking ahead to *one end-of-season day*, or end-of-life day. The same concept underpins the 1987 poem 'How's That?' published in the year of his death. The cricketing conceit is carried through the entire poem as the typical crises of life prompt a series of appeals by a bowler - 'how's that?' - only for the umpire to repeatedly give another chance by pronouncing 'not out'. Until the final stanza when

*Four score years and ten,
With a gurgle in the bronchials, a growling in the breath
Appealing for a re-play, life over once again -
Out,
Says Death.*

Horrible irony, then, that it was at a cricket match where the disease which defined Norman's life first made its appearance. On holiday in Scarborough he and his father went to watch Yorkshire.

Then, at close of play, when everybody stood up to leave, I staggered as if I were drunk. For a moment, the field swam round me, and, as if a turban were pushed down over my eyes, first the sky and then the field turned black (WEC Chapter Nine).

This was the first indication of tuberculosis. But he bears cricket no grudge. Other sports push their way in, among them, inevitably, Cumberland and Westmorland wrestling which is employed brilliantly to describe a dry-stone wall (*Wall, Sea to the West*). But it is cricket which was the sporting love of his life and cricket which repeatedly finds its way into his writing.

Millom Cricket Club, like Halley's comet, did eventually re-lay its bright trail across the black sky. Colin Bickerstaffe, whose grandson is now captain of the club, reports that Millom were league champions for six years running from 1989 to 1994. Truly another golden age, and it started two years after Norman had finally been given 'out' on his end-of-season day. The umpires might just have had some assistance in making the right decisions.

Charlie Lambert April 2011

On a Norman Nicholson Poem by Christopher Pilling

Coming across a gathering of poems by all and sundry stapled together on foolscap (has that disappeared?) I found one of Norman's that made me sit up. I knew several from *The Pot Geranium* which is where it's from, but not this one. It is so striking I thought I'd try to look at it closely and maybe provoke reactions.

On a Proposed Site for Council Houses, Holborn Hill Ward, Millom Rural District

Many a spring, passing this dyke, I picked the wild cherry,
 Oozing its beads of milk on branches black with soot
 That blows on a straight-from-Lancashire wind from the furnace beyond the quarry,
 Where the town like a bird-nest of roofs lies tucked at the hill's foot.

And often it seemed [...]

That none here but the spinks had ever made their homes.

[The remainder of this poem has been redacted. February 2019]

On a proposed site for council houses, Holborn Hill Ward, Millom Rural District.

You can't possibly have a title for a poem like that! And what a contrast with the first line that seems to belong to another age and register, an age of traditional pastoral and song, though it would be hard finding a song with lines this long. The second line slows the poem down immediately with 'oozing' and you begin to taste the repeated b's, each like a drop of the oozed milk. The emphasis in the rhyming words brings out the contrast between the natural world ('hill's foot') and the blackening 'soot', matched in the other lines by the movement from the natural 'cherry' to the man-made 'quarry' where the half-rhyme brings the two words close after the distancing effect of the awkward alien wind. Who else would dare to have 'straight-from-Lancashire' as an adjective to be said at the speed of a gust? The set-in lines are shorter but don't necessarily take less time to say. The fourth line could be shorter if 'tucked' were omitted, after all, the bird's nest image is sufficiently arresting but to my ears 'tucked' is nicely tangible and a preparation for the emptiness of the subsequent landscape.

The softer s sounds in the first line of verse two before the 'tang' catches the throat don't prepare for the graphic details of the second and third lines, where there are more s sounds but these are stiffened by extra consonants. You can visualise the attractive umbrella-frames before the enjambement tells you they're knapweeds and the burning grass may remind you of the furnace if the cocks striking their matches don't. (Go on, try striking one to see whether there's any similarity in sound!) By the time you reach the fourth line you'll have forgotten how the sentence began (well I had!), so the dialectal word for a finch ('spink') will sound out like a skylark's song over barren countryside.

The audible effect of the single syllable words at the start of verse three ('look', 'deep', 'nap', 'grass') is like stepping stones to the delightful two syllable rush of "puckered pockets of 'dockens' (you say them so quickly and are taken by their humorous sound so you don't have time at a first reading to think how the dockens (a Scottish and Cumbrian? word for docks) can be like puckered pockets. The switch from plosives to k sounds (in 'cobbles', 'concrete', 'kitchen' and 'even 'blackbirds' and "brackens') fit well with the sense of what he's saying — like horses' hooves

On a Norman Nicholson Poem (continued) by Christopher Pilling

on the very cobbles of yesteryear. With ‘pockets’ coming soon after ‘nap’ I am tempted to see a billiard table with ‘cobbles’ for balls – if this is too fanciful, at least it makes me wonder whether a nap can have depth. Use of the word ‘leased’ seems relevant to the timescale and the point of the proposed site, but ‘drafted’, which looks forward too, belongs to the past for the farm was built and has gone. There is an insinuation that the council houses might not last. That isn’t helped by the last line of the verse whose devastating sense is almost hidden by the metaphorical language of ‘lives have dripped from the flags’ and the final simile.

At least the appeal ‘Let voices return’ is more positive and the ‘proud pianos’ is as well but to me they detract from the magnificent second line ‘Let plaster out-dazzle....lime’ with its exhilarating sibilants. The pianos could be a status symbol if the tenants are working class and pride is the order of the day. Norman is *giving it Wigan* here with his repeated *pr*’s and ‘trilled crescendos’, great fun for author and reader perhaps, but these pianos practise and play themselves which doesn’t help the children who are not playing them as they are moody and staring out of the casement windows, stuck in the past like the china rabbit that’s staring out too. ‘The ghost of a hearth’ is more of the past. How can the new houses have any warmth? And what on earth are ‘the lonely bones of time’ a ‘poetic’ final phrase seeming to delete the hope for rebirth that will be there with the dazzling plaster?

Christopher Pilling May 9th 2011



Sorrel

www.aragriculture.org



Knapweed

www.thewildflowerpatch.co.uk

Another Trawl through the Net... (and across bookshelves)

Still keeping an eye on Norman’s many appearances on the Internet the following sites are worth checking out: www.ted-hughes.info/home/news/norman-nicholson-john-fisher-and-ted-hughes.html This features a comment on the links between Nicholson, John Fisher and Ted Hughes—with mention too of our very own David Boyd.

The TLS online has re-published a 1951 review by NN of Jaquetta Hawkes’ *The Land*: http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/the_tls/article7173236.ece. Reviewing work provided a small but important income for Norman—and helped to sustain his national profile.

And there is a wonderfully witty and erudite article about NN and his reputation, and on the question of naming a train after him, on the New Writing Cumbria website: www.newwritingcumbria.org.uk/chuffin-norman/.

Finally, for those of you who can access back issues of *PN Review*, read Peter Scupham’s lovingly penned description of Nicholson’s poetry: *PN Review* 130, Vol. 26: 2, pp. 66-68 (Nov-Dec. 1999).

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NORMAN NICHOLSON SOCIETY: CHAIR'S REPORT by David Cooper

Not all members were able to attend the NN Society AGM in March 2011. Because of this we are sharing the full and unedited Chair's Report with you. We think, with its oral qualities, it will do more to give you the flavour of the event and, indeed, of the whole Nicholson year, than an edited article would do. We hope you enjoy it and that it will remind you of the real achievements of the society at the end of its first five years of existence.

Once again, it is a real privilege to be here in Millom today and to be able to reflect on another successful twelve months in the life of the Norman Nicholson Society. When I last stood here, at the beginning of last year, I predicted that 2010 would be something of a transitional year: a year in which the Society took the opportunity to pause and to evaluate its programme of activities as we collectively look towards the centenary of Norman's birth in 2014. On reflection, I think that this prediction proved to be accurate. 2010 was a year in which we managed to continue our varied programme of events and development projects: activities which I will go on to detail in a moment or two. 2010 was also a year, however, in which the Committee endeavoured to take stock of the first five years in the life of the Society; it was a year in which we attempted to consider just what type of literary Society we would like—and we need—to be as we head towards that all-important year of 2014.

In this report, then, I want to look back at the work that we've carried out over the past fourteen months. At the same time, however, I want to look forward to the exciting possibilities which lie ahead and to point towards some ways in which the Society might develop yet further over the coming years.

EVENTS

In my last annual report, I suggested that the formation of the Norman Nicholson Society had been underpinned by the shared belief that a literary society should be much more than an organiser of events. That is to say, in attempting to fulfil its core aim of celebrating the life and work of a particular writer, a literary society should engage in a range of activities: from collaborating with local schools to liaising with publishers; from encouraging the work of new writers and artists to engaging in cultural tourism projects. There was a collective feeling that, between 2007 and 2009, we had organised a relatively large number of events both in and outside Millom; but the decision was made that, in order to create much-needed time and space for other projects, we would organise a relatively scaled-down programme of events in 2010.

October Event

That said, the Society's events programme remained both diverse and highly successful. As in previous years, the principal event in the Society's calendar was the day-long gathering at Millom Network Centre which, this year, was held on Saturday, 16 October. The overarching theme for this year's event was 'Nicholson's Millom: Places and People'; and, once again, I feel that we managed to put together an engagingly diverse programme of activities. In the morning session, members were invited to take part in a clay plaque-making session which was kindly run by Simone Faulkner and Stan Towndrow in the adjacent School. Working from historic photographs of Millom, participants created a relief clay 'tile' in an artistic activity which opened up thinking about the spaces and places which dominate Norman Nicholson's poetic and prose writings. The Society is extremely grateful for the generous help and support of both Stan and Simone—and, of course, Millom School—as the plaque-making session proved to be an incredibly popular addition to the Society's programme of events. For less practical members of the Society—including your outgoing Chairman! – the morning session was spent watching Melvyn Bragg's 'South Bank' documentary on Nicholson's life and work; and members were also invited to browse through an exciting range of books and archival material which had been made available.

After a characteristically excellent lunch, the afternoon session was primarily spent reading and discussing Nicholson's poetry as Glenn Lang and I ran two parallel reading groups: a participatory activity which I believe should be integrated, wherever possible, in the events that the Society runs. The programme for the day was then brought to a climax with Sue Dawson's presentation of

NORMAN NICHOLSON SOCIETY: CHAIR'S REPORT (continued)

a creative project run at Haverigg Primary School: a project to which I will return a little later on. Many thanks to everyone who attended this special event and contributed to our ongoing discussion, and celebration, of Nicholson's writing. I would also like to pay particular thanks to Paul Stewart at Millom Network Centre as, once again, I think that the success of the October event was due, in no small part, to the excellent facilities and resources which are provided at the Centre.

Ian Thompson

The Society's next event was an excellent talk by Dr Ian Thompson: a landscape architect from Newcastle University and the author of the popular new book, *The English Lakes: A History*, which was published by Bloomsbury last year. This event was held at Barrow Library on Friday, 26 November; and, in spite of the weather, attracted a good crowd. Ian Thompson offered a witty slide-show presentation on the Lake District's cultural history and then engaged in a lively question and answer session with members of the audience.

For me, the event was important for three different, yet connected, reasons. First of all, we were delighted that Dr Thompson agreed to deliver a talk for the Society as, in the preface to his prose book, he explains the profound influence that Norman Nicholson's work has had on his thinking about place and environment and, more particularly, those landscapes situated on the fringes of the Lake District National Park. Secondly, it was the Society's first event in Barrow and it provided a great opportunity to bring Nicholson's writing to the attention of a wider audience. Finally, the event provided the Society with a chance to work in partnership with a range of people. Through the tireless assistance of Glenn Lang, we were able to work with Helen Towers, Reading Promotions and Stock Co-ordinator for Cumbria County Council. Alongside this, we were able to establish a relationship with the publishers, Bloomsbury, who generously provided free refreshments to support the event.

All in all, it was an excellent event which served to highlight the benefits of working in partnership with other organisations and institutions.

The Wordsworth Trust

I mention the next event in the risk that I will be accused of shameless self-promotion! But, last September, I was invited – in my role as Chair of the Society – to take part in one of the series of Bindman Talks at the Wordsworth Trust in Grasmere. I was joined in Grasmere by Michael Baron, who has edited a collection of poems by another twentieth-century Cumbrian poet, Tom Rawling; and, together, we discussed the problems and possibilities faced by post-Romantic Lake District writers. Yet again, the event provided an opportunity to introduce new readers to Nicholson's poetry and, also, to alert more people to the ongoing work of the Society.

2010 PROJECTS

Sue Dawson / CLEO

In spite of the success of these events, perhaps the Society's most important work in 2010 was the development of a series of projects. First of all, Sue Dawson has been involved in an incredibly exciting partnership between Haverigg School and CLEO: an online educational resource for schools in both Cumbria and Lancashire which is part of the National Education Network. At Haverigg School, the staff try to enhance the understanding of poetry by establishing links between the writing on the page and the landscape outside the classroom. Focusing, in particular, on two Nicholson poems – 'Dunes' and 'On the Closing of Millom Ironworks' – the pupils were taken outdoors and, whilst at Haverigg beach and sand dunes, engaged in a range of activities including the development of similes and the production of art/collage work. This innovative cross-curricular approach was then filmed by CLEO. In addition, some of the children interviewed people who knew Norman, thereby creating a video history of both personal and collective memories. Those of you who attended the October event would have been privileged to have found out much more about this particular project. I hope that you agree that this is an exemplary project and is

NORMAN NICHOLSON SOCIETY: CHAIR'S REPORT (continued)

precisely the type of developmental work which the Society ought to be supporting and facilitating; and I'd just like to take this opportunity to congratulate Sue on all of her hard work and creative thinking.

Projects

We have also been involved with a number of ongoing discussions – with Mark Holroyd and Canon Wendy Bracegirdle here in Millom and the Society's great friend, Professor Brian Whalley – exploring ways in which Norman's writing might be used in cultural tourism projects in and around the town. Collectively, we very much hope that we have more concrete information to report on this particular front over the coming months; and I would like to thank Mark Holroyd, in particular, for his enthusiastic support of the Society's work.

Millom Network Centre

Returning to an issue I raised earlier, I am also pleased to report on the excellent progress which Paul Stewart is making with the development of the Norman Nicholson Garden at Millom Network Centre. If any member of the Society has yet to visit the Garden, then please feel free to pop along to the Centre and to introduce yourself to Paul. More specifically, Paul is extremely keen to hear from Society members with any ideas of ways in which that space might be developed and enhanced in the future. Connected with this, the Society is presently exploring the ways in which the clay-plaques, which were made at the October event, might be placed on permanent display at the Centre.

2011 Projects

We are currently planning a number of projects for 2011. These include the rearrangement of a talk by Professor Brian Whalley which, unfortunately, had to be postponed last year; Sue Dawson is hoping to carry on with the creative use of Nicholson's work in local schools; and, connected with this, Chris Powell has kindly agreed to lead a guided walk across the dunes on 23 July. We are also hoping to organise another day-long event at Millom Network Centre in October; and the Society is similarly keen to organise an event in Carlisle.

COMET

In spite of her own incredibly busy life in both Norwich and Utrecht, Antoinette Fawcett has, yet again, spent the past twelve months working tirelessly on the editing of *Comet*; and I am sure that I speak for the Society's membership when congratulating her on her editorial achievements. In preparing for today's AGM, I looked over my notes from the 2010 meeting; and, in short, I can simply repeat that which I said last year! *Comet* continues to be a – perhaps the – key strand to our work as a Society and, miraculously, Antoinette somehow manages to pull it all together from her current base in Norwich. I know that 2010 was a demanding year for Antoinette and we, as a committee, are deeply appreciative of all her hard work.

THE FUTURE

I apologise for the length of this report but I am conscious of the fact that this is going to be my last report as the Chair of the Society and I feel as if there's much to say! Having served for several years as a committee member, I have now served just over three years as Chair of the Society; and, due to work commitments at Lancaster University, it is with regret that I am not in a position to stand for another term. Clearly, this is a vacancy to which we will necessarily return later on in the AGM; but I just wanted to thank everyone for their support and help over the past few years. [I'm not going to resort to an Oscars-type acceptance speech.]

NORMAN NICHOLSON SOCIETY: CHAIR'S REPORT (continued)

This time last year, Margaret Forsman stepped down from her role as Secretary; and, more recently, Margaret announced that she was no longer able to attend committee meetings, although she remains a great friend and supporter of the work of the Society. Naturally, I would just like to thank Margaret for all of her hard work and enthusiasm over the past few years and I want to acknowledge the vitally important role that she has played in the development of the Society.

In spite of these departures, I am delighted to announce that new members have joined the committee: Sue Dawson and Stan Towndrow. Already, both Sue and Stan have drawn upon their professional expertise in tapping into the creative and educational potential of Nicholson's writing and their involvement represents excellent news for the future of the Society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, I feel that, building on the foundational work that has been put in place over the past twelve months – the partnerships with Cumbria County Council, publishers, Mark Holroyd, Brian Whalley and so on – the Society has many reasons to be optimistic as we move through 2011 and beyond. I appreciate that there are some areas in which our work needs to be enhanced: I am thinking, in particular, about the ongoing development of the Society website and the need to ensure that Nicholson's writings are as widely available as possible. But I am deeply encouraged by what I have detected to be a growing – and national – interest in Nicholson's work. For example, the poet, Paul Farley, discusses Nicholson's poetry in his new topographical prose book, *Edgelands*, and I have learnt that Paul will be visiting Millom next week to broadcast for BBC North West Tonight. I am also aware that the 'Words by the Water' Literature Festival in Keswick is keen to organise a day-long event to celebrate the centenary of Nicholson's birth in 2014; and, of course, our own member, David Boyd, continues to work on Nicholson's life. I gather that the word is even being spread by Northern Rail who are naming a train after Norman Nicholson!

It is with a continued sense of enthusiasm, then, that I hand over to a new Chair who, hopefully, will be able to steer the Society through the next stages of its development. I want to end, though, by thanking one person, in particular, for her all of her hard work in supporting the work of the Society; and that is Peggy Troll. It is the source of great sadness that I am unable to say that I knew Norman; but, obviously, Peggy had that pleasure and she, more than anyone else, has been instrumental in ensuring that Nicholson's prose and poetry continues to be read in the twenty-first century.

Dr David Cooper
January 2011

Dr. Ian Davidson New Chair of the Norman Nicholson Society

It is with great pleasure that we announce that the new Chair of the Norman Nicholson Society is Dr. Ian Davidson, taking over from Dr. David Cooper. Ian Davidson is a local – his mother was born in Millom – and he has lived in Broughton Mills, just outside Broughton in Furness, off and on, but mainly on, since 1938. He was educated at Manchester Grammar School and St Catherine's College, Oxford where he read English. His working life was spent as a journeyman academic in various colleges and universities, finishing at the University of Bolton educating Rita. Since retiring he has published three books: *Dynamiting Niagara* (2005), *A Hatful of Crows* (2007) and *More Like London Every Day* (2011). These are about growing up and living in Broughton Mills – some of what's in them is true. His memories of Norman Nicholson date from teasing him in the early 1950s when Norman was 'courting' his favourite cousin.

AF

Members' Poetry

St. George's Church

As I circle the estuary,
Speed along Foxfield level,
It spires up from the headland -
Gaps in hedges and gaping gates
Framing its blurred image,
Fleeting, familiar,
Tiny but unmistakable -
St. George's on the hill.

Long ago, a student
Homing for the holiday,
Home-sickness assuaged,
Excitement building to the pulse and rhythm
Of train wheels, scream of whistle,
Belying steam obscuring the curve
Of the line and my patience,
I chafed for Carnforth,
For my first clear sight of Blackcombe
And that sword of a spire
Daring the world.

Life, time - the equation
Tempered that ecstasy of expectation.
For there have been many homings,
To quiet joy, or gnawing grief,
Uncertainty, a promised peace -
Always the same road,
Never the same journey.

Almost there!
Castle and spire, dancing silhouettes,
Circle each other on the December horizon,
Vying for precedence.
I enter the town, sensing again
That familiar lurch and lift of the heart
Sighting the spire
In its rightful place -
My place defined
By a lifetime of homing.

Peggy Troll



The Station Field

Norman Nicholson 1914-1987

Loosed from their loose boxes, their breath mists
the early dawn, their iron hooves thud
the meadow turf as the great horses
race into their Sabbath freedom.

Here in the Station Field on flowery afternoons
they stand nose to tail, their feathered fetlocks
dusted with pollen. Allotment men forage dung
from the field corner. Here, in the new graveyard

that was once the Station Field, he lies
under the shadow of Black Coombe,
his bones to the east but his heart to the west,

and in the grass - dandelions, plantain,
cat's ear, persistent pearlwort, as if
his words are breaking through the earth.

Mary Robinson

Mary Robinson first read Norman Nicholson's poetry
in her O level anthology *Six Modern Poets* - and she was
hooked! She teaches English literature in adult and
higher education and has enjoyed teaching Norman's
work on several occasions. She's not sure if she should
admit to this but she even had the temerity nine years
ago to accept an invitation by Millom Historical
Society to give a talk on Norman's poetry in Millom!

She is also a writer and her poetry collection *The Art of
Gardening* was published by Flambard Press last year.



St. George's Church January 2010
Photograph by Antoinette Fawcett

A Favourite Nicholson poem by Robin Gray**Norman Nicholson by Ian Davidson**

The streets, houses & people of Millom, the fells, rocks, rivers & screes of the Cumbrian landscape and the flowers and sedges of fellside, ditches and roadside verge gave Norman a plenitude of subjects for his poetry. His words illuminate what his—and our—eyes see. He helps us to see our environment, our friends and neighbours and the minutiae of daily life in ways not available to us without his help: 'with black umbrella finger' (a preacher); 'the toadstool towers' (the hated Sellafield); 'Decoy queens, Honeyed and furred' (the bee orchid); and a thousand more verbal felicities.

That alone would be remarkable & memorable poetry, but there is of course more—much more. For so often, from the prompting of the material & the personal, his understanding of our universe emerges, bursts forth, sometimes blazes and we can share it. In the last stanza, the last few lines, the last few words even of the poem, the images transmute into perceptions, insights or revelations which surprise and astonish by their suddenness and their absolute rightness. 'Five minutes' is one such poem, and a favourite of mine.

'I'm having five minutes', he said,
Fitting the shelter of the cobble wall
Over his shoulders like a cape.

[...]

[The poem has been redacted for copyright reasons. February 2019.]

'Just five minutes', he said;
And the next day I heard that he was
dead,
Having five minutes to the end of time.

What more is there to say about mortality ?

Robin Gray Winter 2010

From our earliest acquaintance, I realised that Norman Nicholson and I were different kinds of animal, yet I saw through his eyes an enhanced picture of the countryside I loved. It was as though he explained it to me in ways which made me understand it better, and why I loved it so. From my earliest readings I rejoiced in the vividness of his descriptions. As a fisherman I often dropped my line into pools where the running water seemed to bring the rock to life; now I saw how the green water wound like bindweed round the rocks, and burst into buds and elderflowers of foam. That was my Duddon, that was my Lickle. At Birks Bridge, our favourite picnic spot, I'd often wondered about those mounds of moulded stone thrusting themselves through the sheep-cropped turf. I'd often thought of them, ragged and seamed, as the bare bones of the valley, now I saw them striding about like legs in armour. On Spring days when we huddled in the hollows, persuading ourselves that the faint yellow sun was really quite warm, I watched the birches buckle and bounce their lithe, steel-grey shapes against the sharpening wind.

Images like these explained my country to me in a simple direct way that was better than any of the grandiloquent pronouncements of the great William. My ears were haunted by the sounding cataracts, but not passionately. I heard and saw the speaking face of nature but could not conceive of it as my prime teacher. I felt it little short of sacrilege to regard a fishing rod as a vain symbol of hope's foolishness. For me there was always something rhetorical about Wordsworth: he pronounced, he lectured, he laid down the law. In his poetry I sensed a consciousness of his own importance, and that put me off.

In contrast, I realised from the very beginning that Norman Nicholson's poetry was simple and direct. It wasn't poetry about philosophy, the high and intellectual life of colleges somehow transferred to the countryside, but about back streets and small gardens, normal lives of ordinary folk, and really written in a selection of language actually used by men. The aptness of his images, the spare but striking diction, revealed often something new and unsuspected about life, where 'clicked from the knuckle / The marble rolls along the gutter of time'. How 'slagbanks blow / Away in the whoosh of the wind' explained the dusty corner at the bottom of Market Street where my great uncle had a grocer's. In my grandmother's winter garden 'rusty iron brackets of sorrel stood / In grass as grey as the whiskers of an old dog's nose'. In these vivid pictures the fine conjunction of sound and sense combined to say something fresh about the commonest things. This I saw as a sharp-eyed school-boy, not yet able to give voice to what he thought or felt, but realising that here were words that would help him.

Ian Davidson July 2011

NORMAN NICHOLSON'S NOVELS by David Boyd

Norman Nicholson ('NN') is best known for his poetry, but his poetry in a way is just the distillation of a lifetime of all kinds of literary output, from book reviewing and broadcasting; topographical guidebook writing; making carol / song lyrics; stage playwriting; and even two, published, full-length novels.

This piece focuses on his novels, which date from the mid-1940s, when NN was a youngish man of around 30. *The Fire of the Lord* was the first to be published, in 1944, followed by *The Green Shore*, in 1947.

Now long out of print and largely overlooked if not forgotten, even by literary academics and NN enthusiasts, these novels seem to have glimmered only briefly in the world of published fiction and quickly faded away.

Even NN himself seems to have virtually disowned them in later life.

I'd suggest, though, that they are still very much worth seeking out and reading. Although they are both rather in the genre of 'kitchen sink' dramas, as opposed to anything grander or more wide-ranging in scope, they are nonetheless reasonably gripping stories in their own right. In addition, they represent hugely interesting (albeit thinly disguised) portraits of NN as a young man, and, as such, are the foundations which underpinned his more acclaimed poetry and stage drama.

The characters of both novels are humble working-class young inhabitants of the small coastal industrial town of Odborough – very obviously representing the real town of Millom, in southwest Cumbria, which grew (or was rapidly thrown) up around the mining of rich deposits of haematite iron ore and its smelting in giant blast furnaces.

For those unfamiliar with Millom, start by imagining all the grimy and unlovely terraced back-to-backs of Coronation Street incongruously transplanted into a remote coastal estuary hidden between the high mountains of the English Lake District and the sweeping expanses of the Irish Sea. In its heyday in the mid 19th and early 20th centuries, Millom was a boom town that sucked in a very mixed population of industrial workers from all over Britain and Ireland, but it now appears as something of a decaying, anachronistic, bygone relic; still a discrete, significant, community, but isolated and impoverished.

Nicholson himself was a son of Millom in its heyday: his own father derived a reasonable living from clothing much of the town from his small men's outfitters shop in St George's Terrace, and Nicholson grew up with and was educated alongside the children of farmhands, miners and iron-works labourers, even though he was soon recognized as uniquely extraordinary and intellectually gifted. University, followed by a teaching (or similar) career beckoned for the young, teenage NN, but he developed tuberculosis and his family had little choice but to place him in a TB Sanatorium in rural Hampshire, where he was confined to a bed virtually in an open field for fifteen months during which he was forbidden to speak, other than in a whisper.

Nicholson during this time seems to have devoured and digested most of English Literature; he referred later in life to this enforced teenage exile from Millom as 'my university' and it doubtless widened his intellectual and social horizons, such that his eventual discharge and return (still in a pretty delicate state of health) to the very different environment of Millom and of his family came as a considerable shock to the young man who was still a teenager.

This (the early 1930s) is where Nicholson's late-flowering (not published until 1975 when Nicholson was in his 50s) autobiography *Wednesday Early Closing* rather abruptly ends, but his novels must have emerged from this subsequent stage in his adult life (as did his first steps in published poetry) and represent some of the only surviving clues as to how the adolescent Nicholson eventually came to make sense of his life in Millom, both socially and spiritually.

Turning to the actual novels, the first, *The Fire of the Lord*, emerged in the latter part of wartime, in 1944, and the second, *The Green Shore*, in 1947.

NORMAN NICHOLSON'S NOVELS (continued) by David Boyd

By then, Nicholson's love life had involved firstly his very close friend since childhood, another academically gifted schoolmate, Bessie Satterthwaite, who did eventually tread the conventional path to university. This relationship (for reasons as yet unknown) ended, and he began another with a school teacher from well beyond Millom, named Enrica Garnier (to whom his first Faber book of poems, *Five Rivers* [pub. 1944] was dedicated. However, this relationship too was later to fizzle out.

The two novels are very similar indeed in theme and technique, as well as in style. Both have allegorical, symbolical, Christian themes, the earlier one concerning both the cleansing, fertility-restoring nature of Pentecostal Fire and the Biblical verses relating to Elijah's sacrifice at I Kings 18 verse 38, whilst the latter uses as its epigraph a William Morris poem, 'A Garden by the Sea', and specifically the lines

*Dark shore no ship has ever seen,
Tormented by the billows green
Whose murmur comes unceasingly
Unto the place for which I cry.
For which I cry both day and night,
For which I let slip all delight,
That maketh me both deaf and blind,
Careless to win, unskilled to find
And quick to lose what all men seek.*

Nicholson's two novels are so similar, that in many respects they form a seamless saga of the lives, loves and spiritual journeys of selected inhabitants of Odborough/Millom. At the same time, they recount closely and vividly a picture of life in a small, industrial community in the early to mid years of the 20th century.

And, quite unlike NN's poems, both of these novels positively throb with passion. Nicholson's fictional male and female characters are attracted like magnets to one another; those so attracted indulge in sensual TOUCHING, no less – tame, perhaps, to contemporary tastes, yet still, in these novels, electric and thrilling touches between elbows and forearms or other ordinarily innocuous bodily appendages, but sometimes in moments of intensity going so far as to involve the groping of bosoms, and so forth: all surely very seriously sexy stuff for the 1940s?

However, these basic urges clash inevitably with the protagonists' religious faith and moral principles – a challenging scenario, indeed, and one which the young Nicholson may have experienced himself, acutely.

The Fire of the Lord, in a far less raunchy but otherwise similar way, anticipated by a decade or so the small-town goings-on of, for example, *Peyton Place*. It focuses on two interlocking love-triangles. One involves Maggie Birker, a middle-aged but nonetheless comely small businesswoman, who runs a successful bakery from her home, supplying bread and pies and cakes to the townsfolk. Maggie had married when very young a much older man, Benjamin Fell, who not long afterwards experienced a conversion into a form of non-conformist Christianity, which made him into the religious zealot who walked out on his young wife Maggie and his Odborough home in order to become an itinerant preacher. Many years passed with no contact whatsoever so Benjy was eventually presumed dead, and Maggie took up with and married Jim Birker, a skilled pattern-maker by trade, and a lot younger than Maggie, employed in the nearby industrial centre of 'Furness' (Barrow), whom Maggie placed firmly under her thumb, whilst Jim lost himself in his (shift) work; he and Maggie lived under the same roof, but seem to have led rather separate lives in spiritual terms.

Maggie employs a young girl, Elsie Holliwell, who is disabled (deaf) and a devout Anglican church-goer. Elsie and Jim move from a relationship of mutual indifference to one of intimacy and

NORMAN NICHOLSON'S NOVELS by David Boyd

passion, as a result both of Jim's dissatisfaction with Maggie and their affinity as young people.

Meanwhile, Maggie's first husband, Benjy, returns to the town, and to the farm where he was brought up, which has since been bought by the Odborough Ironworks Company, in order to tip blast furnace slag on its land. Benjy's family farmhouse has fallen into dereliction, but he clandestinely moves himself into it, and immediately makes a nuisance of himself with the town policeman (a bumbling character who is the comic relief of the book but who also lusts after Maggie), by raising fires, etc. (this is set in wartime, so there were strict blackout rules in force).

'Old Benjy' is passed-off by Maggie as the uncle of her first husband, and he goes along with the subterfuge, but all the time proclaiming that 'the fire of the Lord' must consume and purify all the (useless and unclean) dross before new life and fertility can begin to grow. This Biblical, prophetic, 'Green' theme, relating in particular to responsible land use and the perils of greedy, intensive farming practices, is echoed very frequently in NN's later works, for example, in his successful play, *The Old Man of the Mountains*.

The novel is set in darkness – during the blackout and in the dark winter months of the year, whilst the characters symbolically strive each in their own way to find a way through their personal darkness, into the light, exemplified by the fire of the Lord.

Elsie and Jim ultimately become an item, (but not without much soul-searching on Elsie's part), whilst Benjy (appropriately and symbolically) meets his end cremated by the fiery slag as it is being tipped upon his ancestral lands.

Benjy's fiery death indeed has repercussions. Jim's marriage to Maggie wasn't lawful or valid, given that Benjy had been still alive then, so he and Elsie are freed to pursue their lives together, but, significantly, the book closes with Jim suggesting that they start a new life together 'somewhere where nobody knows us'. A lyrical, descriptive passage follows, packed with vivid images of Nature and the earth's fertility and fulfilling community life and even resurrection. Elsie, witnessing all this, firmly declines to go away.

Elsie's fictionalized thoughts of course very much mirror NN's personal mission never to leave Millom, and his reasons for valuing 'belonging' and being a part of a universal plan. Later, as quoted by Daniel Hay in an article, citing an undated radio broadcast by Nicholson, (*Library Review*, Vol. 21 no. 1 (1967), he expressed this overtly:-

The universe is not just a huge mechanical coffee-grinder, ticking over and over without aim or purpose. It works to a pattern; it works to a plan. And part of the sheer enjoyment of being among mountains comes from our sometimes feeling swept up in the plan, where every end is a new beginning and every death a new birth.

The Green Shore similarly has a young and rather passionate but disabled central character (this time with a leg iron), in the form of Alice Dale, as well as a strange, older, prophetic figure who shuns conventional society, in the form of Anthony Pengwilly ('Old Pen') in the old lighthouse by the wide, gleaming ocean, replacing Old Benjy in his dark, desolate slag-bank. Anthony's chosen hermit-like ways of living and feeling are challenged by his swelling affection for Alice, and, similarly, Alice herself has to reconcile her deep religious and spiritual principles and society's conventions with her stirring and compelling personal passion.

Concurrently, too, there's another love story playing out, in the form of Alice's ambivalent relationship with a fellow adolescent suitor, in the form of Alan Grisebeck.

The novel closely, subtly and delicately observes and builds up these growing passions, always in the context of the grand, sweeping landscape in which Odborough and its inhabitants are set and all the way towards its dramatic conclusion.

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The wider world, outside Odborough features, via Alice's excursion with her pals in the back of a motor van, to 'Blackport' Music Festival (obviously, the seaport Whitehaven, further up the coast) and mention of 'Burnet Scales', or the nearby little Victorian seaside resort of Seascale.

Prof. Philip Gardner, a lifelong admirer of Nicholson's works, has mentioned that Nicholson had originally intended to call *The Green Shore* (for obvious reasons) *No Man is an Island*, but that the title had been used up elsewhere (see 'Ariel' Vol 3 no. 1 (1972)).

To conclude, a critical appraisal of NN's novels cannot realistically acclaim them as in any way blockbusters or masterpieces – they are indeed flawed, and, in parts, rather heavy-handedly over-written, but I'd contend that they don't deserve their present, almost complete, obscurity. They do indeed stand as very significant pointers towards NN's further personal and literary development, and, on another level, are in their own right very well-plotted and written sagas of small town life, which I am sure a present-day script or screenplay writer could transform into compelling drama.

David Boyd
June 2011



An iron-ore bogie—a little truck used for transporting iron-ore from the Hodbarrow mines at Millom.

Late 1960s?

Courtesy of Millom Folk Museum.



Colin Telfer's memorial sculpture to the Millom iron-ore workers. Millom Town Square.

Photograph by Antoinette Fawcett

NICHOLSON MEMORIES—AND MEMORABILIA



This delightful photograph is of Norman Nicholson receiving the Honorary Freedom of the Borough of Copeland scroll, on 18th September, 1984, from Councillor Oswald James Coyles, Mayor of Copeland. It was sent in to *Comet* by Irvine Hunt, Norman's literary executor and a well-known and well-loved author in his own right, and is the photograph printed in the brochure which was used to set up the Norman Nicholson Literary Fund. Irvine suggests that other members of the Society may have similar photos, or other memorabilia, of Norman which they may wish to share with us. Irvine managed to scan this photograph for us, as can perhaps be detected from the way it lies on its background. So, search out your attics and store-rooms, actual and virtual (there being plenty of untold memories as well as unshared images) and send your treasures in to the editor, Antoinette Fawcett, at the address or e-mail address given below.

RARE NICHOLSON BOOKS FOR SALE

The following books are available for purchase from David Boyd, NN Society member and regular *Comet* contributor:

Collected Poems (scarce 1994 hb first ed. with dj) £35.00 plus p&p
Man and Literature £8.00 plus p&p
Between Comets (scarce NN 70th birthday Festschrift) £12.00 plus p&p
Provincial Pleasures £8.00 plus p&p
Old Man of the Mountains £8.00 plus p&p
The Lake District - an Anthology £3.00 plus p&p
County series - Cumberland and Westmorland £5.00 plus p&p
Portrait of the Lakes £3.00 plus p&p
Greater Lakeland (paperback) £3.00 plus p&p
The Fire of the Lord (very rare NN novel but no dj) £13.00 plus p&p

David can be contacted at the following e-mail address: oncebubbles@googlemail.com



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Grateful thanks to all contributors without whose efforts there would be no newsletter.
We are always searching for new articles and new contributors. Memories of Norman and Yvonne Nicholson are particularly welcome, also reflections on specific poems or prose-pieces. We also welcome creative writing on themes inspired by Nicholson's work.