

*Comet: the Newsletter of the Norman Nicholson Society*

**\* *A Match for the Devil:*  
was Norman Nicholson a  
feminist?**

**by Alan Beattie**

**\* *An Afternoon in  
Haverigg Dunes*  
by Chris Powell**

**\* *A Nicholsonian  
Treasure Hunt*  
by David Boyd**

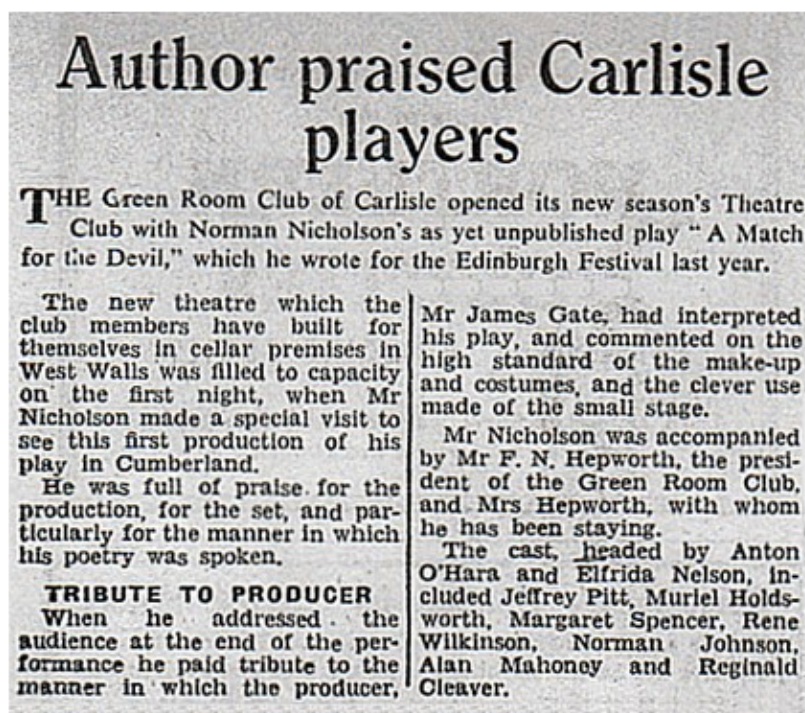
**\* *Norman Nicholson and  
Edward Thomas*  
by Dr. Ian Davidson**

**• Events**

**AGM 17h March 2012**

**A Celebration of Poetry  
Translations—29th  
February 2012**

## ***A Match for the Devil:* was Norman Nicholson a feminist? by Alan Beattie**



The world's first amateur production of *A Match for the Devil*  
- Carlisle October 1954<sup>1</sup>

In 1951 Nicholson was 'tinkering' with a play which drew its plot from the Old Testament Book of Hosea (which he was then reading intensively)<sup>1</sup>. This finally took shape as *A Match for the Devil* in 1952 (partly prompted by a commission from the Religious Drama Society - although his synopsis was rejected by them). For *Match* he had a particular type of 'public' in mind - small groups in local venues (perhaps church halls - 'but not churchy'), rather than metropolitan audiences. He wanted to achieve the close rapport between performers and audiences characteristic of medieval morality and miracle plays - "*played not so much before an audience as for it, on its behalf, in its stead*", addressing and involving audiences directly. Written as a "*seriously-intentioned comedy*", the play draws on folk traditions (the charade; knockabout farce), and its flexible verse-form places colloquial idioms alongside a biblical language of prophetic denunciation and colorful lyricism.

*(continues on page 2)*

## Was Norman Nicholson a Feminist? (continued)

### *The plot*

The action is set in ancient Palestine. Hosea, having been 'beggared by money-lenders' and forced to leave his little farm up in the hills, now runs a bakery in a market place. He is proudly independent, but fussy, innocent and meek, seemingly rather ineffectual. His young assistant David is the grandson of Sarah who runs the next-door old-clothes stall, and when Gomer (Sarah's daughter, David's mother) comes to visit, David schemes to get Hosea married to Gomer. Hosea is infatuated with this beautiful woman, and when the marriage comes about, he – blinded by love – cares too much for her to let her soil her hands on wife-like tasks around the home or the bakery. But Sarah had not told Hosea or David that Gomer's previous 'religious duties' at the temple at Samaria were as a hierodule, a sacred prostitute. She'd grown tired of the emptiness of her profession; but soon in her marriage she is also dissatisfied with being pampered, relegated to the role of a useless ornament. She leaves Hosea and returns to the temple. When he hears that she is a 'mate for idols/A match for the devil', Hosea is bitter, and rails against the official religion that treats people this way. The wily David investigates and once again schemes to get Hosea and Gomer together. In a deliberately bedraggled state he tries to trick Gomer into thinking that he needs 'mothering' by her; he also persuades Hosea to forgive her and to pay the temple to release her. Such declarations by Hosea do not work. Gomer only agrees to return to Hosea when finally he acknowledges that it is not enough for him to love her and to forgive her: he must allow her to forgive him, and allow her to love him, as his equal partner.

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

[The photograph can be consulted in the The John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester, in the Norman Nicholson Papers: GB 133 NCN16/7.]

*Gomer:* So I'm a dirty cup to be rinsed out and set on the shelf again  
While you twiddle your magnanimous thumbs;  
While you preen yourself on your benevolence <sup>2</sup>

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## Was Norman Nicholson a Feminist? (continued)

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

[The photograph can be consulted in the The John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester, in the Norman Nicholson Papers: GB 133 NCN16/7.]

*Hosea:* Let me introduce you, ladies, to a new *partner*.. Hosea & Co...

*Gomer:* I'm taking a new situation...

*David:* Goodbye, Father Amaziah...

*Amaziah:* Tch, tch, tch. A boy like you might make a match for the devil.

From the outline of the plot<sup>3</sup> it's immediately clear that *Match* is a 'problem play' (like Nicholson's other plays) and that the problem it raises and explores is 'love': what forms it can take, how it can be given, how received, how shown. Programmes for the earliest productions of *Match* in August 1953 and October 1954 included 'Author's Notes' (adapted from a BBC Third Programme talk that Nicholson had given in July 1953: 'The Comic Prophet'<sup>4</sup>). A first 'aspect of love' the Notes refer to is the tension between the idea of a 'sacred marriage between Heaven and Earth', re-enacted in ritual couplings in the temple, and the idea of marriage as a 'holy joke' in which the love of God – seen as the benevolent creator – is reflected in true love between a man and a woman. The Notes say:

*Hosea was one of the first prophets to see the relation between God and man in terms of love rather than of Law, in terms, indeed of a divine marriage between God and His people, at the centre of which lay 'forgiveness'. Forgiveness, however, is not just the concern of the one who forgives: it is the concern of the one who is forgiven. Now Gomer, Hosea's wife, had returned intuitively to the older, more primitive religion which was practised in the land of Canaan before the coming of the Jews – a religion which had a great sense of the wonder of creation, of the miracle and mystery of the natural world, but had scarcely any sense of personal morality. She did not ask to be forgiven; she asked merely to be loved and, still more, to be allowed to love. It was because Hosea (guided in this play by Gomer's son) understood this, because he saw that morality could rise only out of love, that he was able to regain and reclaim his wife. It was because of this, too, that he was given his glimpse of the divine tenderness, even of the divine patience...<sup>5</sup>*

Metropolitan critics talked mostly about this first issue<sup>6</sup> when *Match* was first performed (at the Edinburgh Festival 1953) and subsequently published (Faber, London 1955) – to Nicholson's disappointment. The reviewers missed the second issue that he had hoped to raise: in the Notes he argues that to move-on in his relationship with Gomer, Hosea also had to move-on in his relations with his neighbours – to accept them, and their mocking of him as a

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## Was Norman Nicholson a Feminist? (continued)

*'Comic Prophet': not to defend himself, not to separate himself off, but to remain part of that same community while staying faithful to his own way of seeing and doing. Nicholson thus connects issues of 'loving' and 'being married' to another of his preoccupations: 'being provincial'<sup>7</sup> - staying-put<sup>8</sup> in a small neighbourhood that he knows well and in fact loves (warts and all); and that knows him (and his foibles)<sup>9</sup>. The Notes say: 'The story of Hosea's marriage is usually interpreted as a domestic tragedy. But was it a tragedy? Let us think of it not from the point of view of Hosea but from that of his contemporaries, that of his customers. They would not regard him as a prophet; they would regard him as a fool: as a man who had married in haste, and did not know how to look after his wife. Hosea, in fact, seen from the outside, is that stock comic figure of the stage: the complaisant husband. Yet to my mind it is precisely here that we can see the true greatness of the man. Most of the other prophets were faced with opposition or even violence. But Hosea was faced only with laughter; and not even with a scornful, derisive laughter, but only the casual, pitying, slightly contemptuous laughter of his neighbours. Yet he did not fight against it. He accepted it. He let the people have their joke. He accepted the ribald laughter of his neighbours and transformed it into the divine laughter of creation.'*<sup>10</sup>

This leads to the third issue raised in the Notes, namely how the writer of the play himself relates to the audience, his 'public'. Nicholson emerges as it were from behind the curtain to speak to us directly (like The Wizard of Oz) about his own role as author, no longer remote and omniscient. The Notes say: *'As I pictured that ancient Palestine, with its two kingdoms, south and north, I began to think how much it resembled the England of today - turned upside down, with Judah in the north and Israel in the south. And I imagined Amos walking among our northern hills and gazing scornfully on the lowlands... imagined him standing there and looking south towards this new Israel, this Samaria of the suburbs, this Jordan Valley of Maida Vale. For here too is a people who count civilization in terms of cash and comfort; who rate bathrooms above books, and television above the prophet's vision. Here is a people who have set up their summer houses and their winter houses, who have laid out pleasant gardens and never given a thought to the dusty desert of industrialism which is creeping over half the nation.... For the writer of today, and especially to the poet, the role of Amos is a terrible temptation.... We nearly all like to imagine ourselves as prophets of doom - from Mr Ezra Pound's descent into hell, to the preachifying of little prophetasters like me, calling down retribution on our own backyards.... Perhaps it is time that the modern poet came down from the heights and lived amongst men, suffering their jibes and laughter, but showing them the way; to become less like Amos who went into the solitudes afforded by the mountains - but was therefore out of touch - and more like Hosea who allowed and overcame the laughter of his contemporaries....'*<sup>5</sup>

Sherwood<sup>12</sup> (a feminist Bible scholar) in a study of the entire history of interpretations of the Book of Hosea, examines *Match* as an example of the genre of 'commentary through artistic re-interpretation'. She points out that picturing Hosea as a 'Comic Prophet' - a credulous, foolish, docile figure - is an established Talmudic tradition; but that Nicholson (despite the fact that he is a man, and that his work pre-dates any feminist readings of the OT) portrays Gomer in a far more favourable light than previous commentaries. Indeed he swathes her in an otherworldly angelic aura: it is she who occupies the high moral ground, who audaciously questions patriarchal ideology, who teaches her husband the meaning of forgiveness.

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## Was Norman Nicholson a Feminist? (continued)

Sherwood raises an intriguing question about *Match* and its author: *'Although I am reluctant to let a male writer have the last word... poetic licence seems to enable him to step outside the [OT] text's assumptions more thoroughly than some feminist critics... In contrast to the passive and culpable Gomers of some feminist re-readings, Nicholson's Gomer is the most attractive character in the play... Though not a feminist, Nicholson protests against 'ugly relationships' based simply on duty... he characterizes Gomer as an educating force... On one level Nicholson's Gomer is a cliché of womanhood, and her most ambitious desire, poignantly, is not to be content but to be needed. On another level however she represents a 20th century voice... she speaks out about her problems with her marriage... and she defiantly resists her husband's attempts to hem her in. Though the restraint imposed on her is more gentle than that of the original text ... she finds this oppression stultifying and returns to her life as a hierodule. Significantly, Nicholson's Gomer returns to Hosea only after negotiations in which she sets her own terms and radically revises the antiquated concept of forgiveness he offers. She does not want to come back 'to be coddled like a pot plant'...; she does not regret her past, and refuses to become a 'dirty cup to be rinsed out and set on the shelf again' while Hosea 'twiddles his magnanimous thumbs'... Hosea in response revises his distorted concept of relationships; and his realization that he has offered her 'the consciousness of guilt in part-exchange for love' leads him to challenge the concept of divine forgiveness'<sup>12</sup>.*

*'Though not a feminist'...?* I daresay Norman Nicholson would never have claimed to be; but maybe in opening up to debate some of the problems of the nature of love, and in his (reticent) contestation of stubborn orthodoxies, he gets close to it. UA Fanthorpe argues that the "majestic conclusion" of his poem *Epithalamium for a Niece* is *'properly feminist'*<sup>13</sup>. And maybe *Match* is not just a thought-experiment for investigating aspects of love 'in principle'; maybe, when he was reading the Book of Hosea closely, and writing *Match*, he was trying to come to terms with a challenge in his own private life *'as sudden and catastrophic as an earthquake'* (his words in 1953<sup>14</sup>). Ian Davidson has recently brought to light<sup>15</sup> an enigmatic fragment of poetry embedded in a letter Nicholson wrote around this time, apparently ending his relationship with a young Millom woman:

Sweet liar, who say you love me,  
And lie because you love,  
Not me, but the salty-blooded sea,  
The blue below, the green above, -  
Not me, but the unfilled mould of me, -  
That is what you love.

*Inscribed*

To my own dearest and only one,

Norman



## Was Norman Nicholson a Feminist? (continued)

I wonder whether *Match* was his effort to figure out for himself not just a way of thinking but a way of doing, for a real-life 20<sup>th</sup> century man and woman? Shortly after this, in 1954, he met Yvonne<sup>16</sup>, and they married in 1956. A story for another day...<sup>17</sup>

### Notes and References

1. Philip Gardner (1973) *Norman Nicholson*. New York, Twayne, p133-144. Gardner interviewed Nicholson at length in the 1960s and examined drafts and correspondence related to this play: Gardner, P. (1969) *The poetry and drama of Norman Nicholson with reference to contemporary English provincial poetry and the Christian drama of the 1940s and 1950s*. PhD thesis, Liverpool University
2. The photos are of the production of *Match* by the Green Room Club at the West Walls Theatre Carlisle in October 1954, and were taken by the late James Hewson of the Carlisle & Newcastle Journal, and appear here with the permission of his daughter Mavis Lamond. They are reproduced by courtesy of the University Librarian and Director, The John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester, where these and other photos from the same session are held in the Norman Nicholson Papers. A copy of a newspaper review of that production (attended by Norman Nicholson) is at: [http://www.carlislegreenroom.co.uk/joomla/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=49&Itemid=54](http://www.carlislegreenroom.co.uk/joomla/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=49&Itemid=54)
3. My own précis of the plot.
4. Norman Nicholson (1953) 'A Comic Prophet', *The Listener*, 6 August, 222-3.
5. From notes in the programme for the London Club Theatre Group production of *Match* at St Mary's Hall, Edinburgh, 27 August 1953.
6. Based on my reading of all of the reviews (of performances and of the published play) collected in the Norman Nicholson Papers at John Rylands University Library, Manchester.
7. Norman Nicholson (1954) 'On Being a Provincial', *The Listener*, 12 August, 248-9.
8. David Cooper: 'Staying Put': *Norman Nicholson and the poetics of place and space*. PhD thesis, Lancaster University
9. 'Love for your neighbours and your neighbourhood' is a theme in Nicholson's book on William Cowper, also written around this time: Norman Nicholson (1951) *William Cowper*, London: John Lehmann, p164.
10. From notes in the programme for the Green Room Club production of *Match* at West Walls Theatre Carlisle, 7-9 October 1954.
11. From notes in the programme for the London Club Theatre Group production of *Match* in Edinburgh, 27 August 1953, and also in the programme for the Green Room Club production of *Match* at Armathwaite Women's Institute, 15 October 1954.
12. Yvonne Sherwood (1996) *The Prostitute and the Prophet: Hosea's Marriage in Literary-Theoretical Perspective*, Sheffield Academic Press. This analysis drew on her research in Biblical Studies: Sherwood Y (1995) Hosea 1-3 and contemporary literary theory: a test-case in rereading the prophets. PhD thesis, Sheffield University.
13. U A Fanthorpe (2006) *Norman Nicholson versus The Book of Common Prayer*. Comet 1, 1, 4.
14. Norman Nicholson (1953) 'A Comic Prophet', *The Listener*, 6 August, 223.
15. At a Norman Nicholson Society meeting on 15 October 2011, Dr Davidson (Chair of the Society) talked about this poem, which had come into his hands very recently through family connections (the 'young Millom woman' to whom the letter was addressed was Dr Davidson's cousin Sylvia Gendle). It appears here with his permission.
16. 'The WREN who became a poet's wife': Judy Furness interviews Yvonne Nicholson, *Evening Mail*, 20 March 1973.
17. If any readers want to respond to this piece with comments, criticisms, corrections or reminiscences, Alan would be delighted to hear from them. He can be contacted at [a.beattie@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:a.beattie@lancaster.ac.uk) or at Prof Alan Beattie, Centre for Mobilities Research, Lancaster University, Bailrigg, Lancaster LA1 3YT

## An afternoon in Haverigg Dunes by Chris Powell

### How did all this come about?-a short shaggy dog story

I have used Norman's poems a great deal with my Year 6 classes at Haverigg School as part of our local history topic for many years now. I know, like myself, that he took great pleasure and delight in the natural world and all the many diverse aspects of the flora and fauna of our local area. I have always felt it is such a powerful learning aid if you can go out in the local environment and stand where another person has stood and gain an understanding of what they were experiencing. We are very fortunate in Haverigg to be able to do just that and stand where Norman stood and look directly at what he was writing about.

Another part of the work I do with the children is to introduce them to the idea of looking at something in a different way. It is a marvellous thing to look on the familiar and then see it in a different way. I have always marvelled at the way Norman could see things in a different way -that is one of the reasons he is so fascinating to read. There is always something tucked away in his poems. He saw the Marram Grass as knitting needles, knitting together the sandy soil. One of the children last year made the comment that images like that would help someone in Manchester to visualize the grasses in the sand dunes.

One of the dreaded letters a school can get is the OFSTED call! Two years ago we got the call at Haverigg and all went into overdrive to prepare. Norman Nicholson came to my rescue when I was observed teaching a literacy lesson. Sue Dawson and I put together a lesson based on Imagery. We used Norman's poem 'Dunes'. The lesson was well received by the inspector and he was very impressed by the responses of the children. A display of the children's work based on the poem is in Haverigg School and is well worth a viewing as there are many wonderful pieces of writing-many, I feel, Norman would have been delighted to see. One of my favourite quotes is 'The bear's back, raked grass...' where the child was looking at the blown Marram grass on the side of a dune.

You might have guessed now where this shaggy dog story is going. Sue asked me if I would lead a session on the Norman Nicholson day in the sand dunes based on the poem Dunes. I was very pleased to do the input as I like to share Norman's work with people. I love the dunes, they are my favourite place. I love to travel the world and see new places but I feel the dunes are my spiritual home.

The group  
gathers in the  
dunes,  
Haverigg –  
23rd July  
2011

Photograph  
by Glenn Lang



## An afternoon in Haverigg Dunes (continued)

Over the years I have accumulated knowledge of the flora and fauna. I like to read Norman's poem and spot the different plants and natural events that captured his imagination. I am always amazed at how he could write about natural phenomena such as the tidal flow in the estuary in such a different way.

### The Dunes Walk



Photograph by Glenn Lang

Having read the poem back at Haverigg School we all set off into the dunes. It was a pleasure to be in the company of such like-minded people who just wanted to share an experience in the dunes. I was able to point out the wild flowers of the dunes and give them a name. We were also able to make our way to where I felt Norman would have stood to get a panoramic view of the dunes and the estuary. I was able to read a section of the poem from an elevated position on top of the main dune. The beautiful summer sun had blessed us so we were able to see clearly the inner lagoon and the shingle bank. We could also see the full transition of the spread: from the sea, to the dunes, to the grassy fields, to the village. Norman called it the blue, the yellow and the green.

Also mentioned in his poem were the Natterjacks—our local endangered toad. As everyone was still enjoying the beautiful weather we made our way to the first scrape where we saw the tadpoles. I had lots of interesting conversations on the way and was constantly being asked questions about the locality.

We could have gone further but the call of Peggy's wonderful cakes back at school seemed to be calling us or should I say me! On the way back we visited Josefina's sculpture 'Escape to Light'. It is through Josefina de Vasconcellos that I got to know Norman. He was also a close friend of Delmar Banner—Josefina's husband. I used to drive him up to see Josefina and Delmar at Little Langdale. I have very fond memories of Norman reading his poems in their ancient kitchen at The Beild sat by the Aga while we supped our tea.

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## An afternoon in Haverigg Dunes (continued)

And so it was with a cup of tea and delicious lemon cake that the dunes wanderings ended. I thoroughly enjoyed being part of a lovely day which was blessed by wonderful weather and I hope everyone else did as well. Also many thanks for the book tokens and children's poems—they will be used to continue the study of Norman's work for future generations.



View of Black Combe from edge of the dunes,  
Haverigg—July 23rd 2011

Photograph by Glenn Lang

*Chris Powell is a teacher at Haverigg School in Cumbria who has always had a love of the natural world and literature. Merging these two loves on the Norman Nicholson Dunes Day was a very enjoyable and rewarding experience.*

**Chris Powell October 2011**

### This Issue

The focus of this issue is Nicholson and Love (note: not Nicholson *in* Love which is a different matter altogether!) and the articles which address this theme have taken it at an unusual slant. The main response to the theme is, of course, Alan Beattie's magisterial article on Nicholson's drama *A Match for the Devil*, in which he addresses the question of the nature of love, and Nicholson's contestation of orthodoxies regarding the role of women, sexuality and marriage. The second article, Chris Powell's 'An Afternoon in Haverigg Dunes', does not directly address the theme at all, but is clearly imbued with the writer's deep knowledge and love for the local environment and for Nicholson's carefully observed and delightful imagery, which in its turn reflects NN's own love for the local and particular. The happiest aspect of Chris Powell's account in my view is the fact that the love of Nicholson's work and his alertness to the landscape and seascape are being passed on to a new generation whose vision about their place in nature will be enriched as a result. That is the cycle of love at its most powerful—a stone thrown into a pool of water, ripples moving outward. Similarly, David Boyd's indefatigable search for the facts of Nicholson's life, is influenced by NN's own love for life and language, and passes on to a circle of readers the most interesting facts about how Nicholson interconnected with others in his lifetime and beyond. The third article in this issue, by our Chair Dr. Ian Davidson, contemplates the links and coincidences between Edward Thomas's poems and those of Nicholson—an interesting and apposite pairing of poets and poetic visions, one melancholic, one genial, but both vibrant with a love of humanity as well as of place. I was glad to see that Ian highlighted the intense little poem 'Coastal Journey' (*Collected Poems* p. 31), a personal favourite of mine, and one which I am convinced, as Ian is, is a love poem. There is still so much more to be said on this theme, so if readers intended to send something in for this present issue, but missed the deadline, please do consider writing something on this topic for the Spring issue.

AF

## A Nicholsonian Treasure Hunt by David Boyd

People tend to use books as impromptu filing cabinets for small pieces of paper, despite the stern exhortation stuck inside every single one of my many 1960s Workington Grammar School textbooks that remains even now imprinted on my mind:

The keeping of pieces of paper within the book weakens the binding, and is forbidden.

Nonetheless, I'm very glad indeed that people do it, because acquiring a shelf-full of the books of NN has yielded some absolutely fascinating bonuses and insights.

A copy of NN's critical biography of Cowper bore the armorial bookmark of Canon Samuel Taylor\* (illustrated) as well as further treasures, in the form of a short (and characteristically appallingly typed) personal letter dated 10 February 1952 from NN (signed 'Nic') to Taylor himself, thanking him for his gift of an old Furness Railway Prospectus and mentioning that 'The Third has now taken my talk about the bonfire'.

Yet more: a yellowed cutting from *The Listener* of 17 April 1952 contains the selfsame talk in transcript, entitled *The Wheel of Fire* in which NN, in his usual masterly style, discusses human affinity through the ages with bonfires, evoking (but not actually citing) parts of TS Eliot's 'East Coker' Quartet poem.

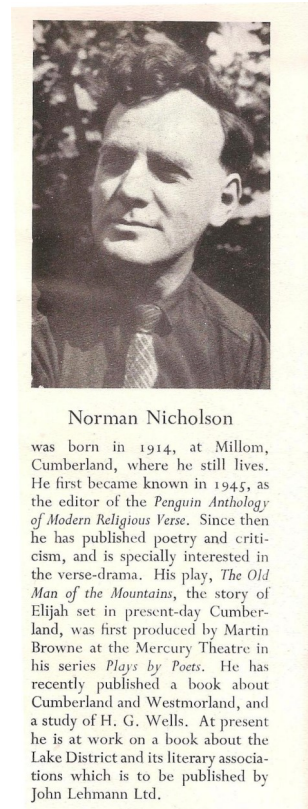
This book was the Crown Jewels, but there were other gems too: a book once owned by NN's lifelong close friend, George Every,\*\* gave up a photo of NN and his newly-wed Yvonne (illustrated), whilst another book (I forget exactly which one) contained a long review of the first Mercury Theatre, London, performance of 'Old Man of the Mountains' cut from 'The Methodist Recorder' of the day.

Treasures indeed to be treasured – especially the personal letter from NN himself – and all for the paltry price of the odd secondhand book !

[The photo of Norman and Yvonne on their wedding day has been redacted for copyright reasons. February 2019.]

Norman aged about 37

(*William Cowper* was published in 1951)

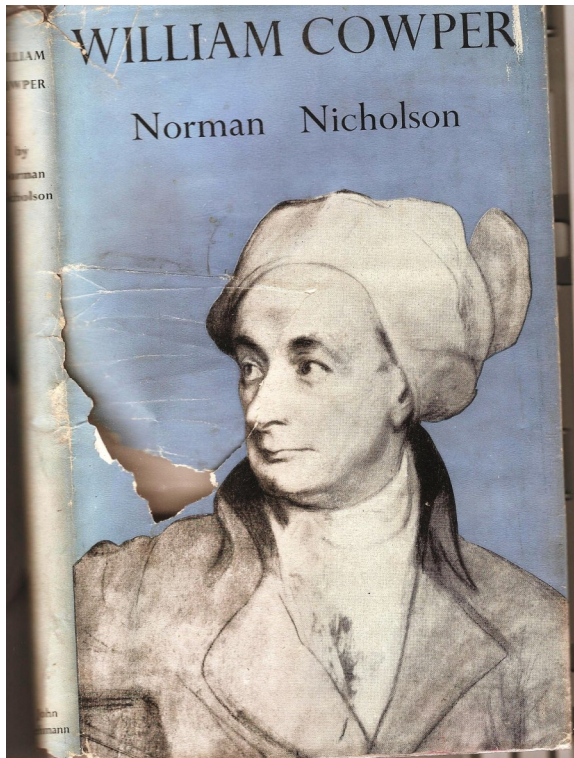


Norman Nicholson

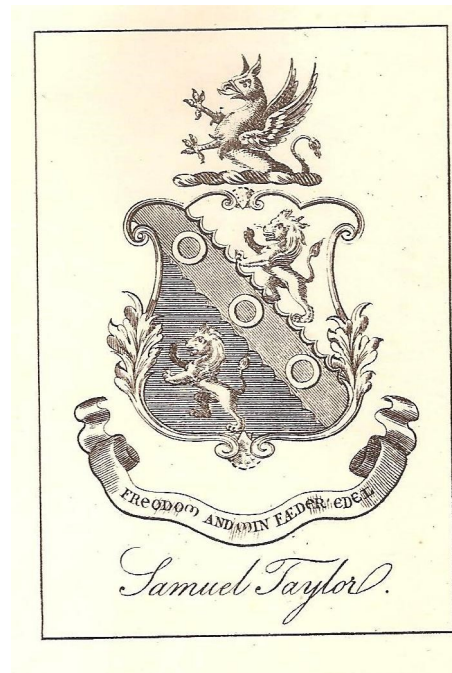
was born in 1914, at Millom, Cumberland, where he still lives. He first became known in 1945, as the editor of the *Penguin Anthology of Modern Religious Verse*. Since then he has published poetry and criticism, and is specially interested in the verse-drama. His play, *The Old Man of the Mountains*, the story of Elijah set in present-day Cumberland, was first produced by Martin Browne at the Mercury Theatre in his series *Plays by Poets*. He has recently published a book about Cumberland and Westmorland, and a study of H. G. Wells. At present he is at work on a book about the Lake District and its literary associations which is to be published by John Lehmann Ltd.

Norman and Yvonne on their wedding day

## A Nicholsonian Treasure Hunt (continued)



David Boyd's copy of  
Nicholson's biography of  
William Cowper



Bookplate in David Boyd's  
copy of the Cowper  
biography

### \* Note on Canon Sam Taylor

Canon Sam Taylor was an intellectual C of E clergyman, Socialist, and relative of Aldous Huxley, who came to Millom as incumbent of Holy Trinity in 1935 and who became a close friend and mentor of the then-young NN.

### \*\* Note on George Every

George Every (1909-2003) was a somewhat reclusive but nonetheless immensely influential figure both in the personal and literary life of NN and within the UK literary and Church of England establishment.

NN first came to Every's attention in 1937, as a result of his friend Bessie Satterthwaite attending a Conference of the Student Christian Movement (SCM) in Swanwick, Derbyshire.

Every was by then an Anglican Monk at the Society of the Sacred Mission (SSM) at Kelham Hall in near-by Nottinghamshire, where he was a tutor (the SSM operated a theological college for training both home and overseas clergy) and he was what would now be termed their 'outreach co-ordinator'.

At the 1937 SCM Conference, Every was lecturing on modern poetry; Bessie Satterthwaite took to him for comment a selection of NN's recent work, which impressed him to the extent that he asked Bessie for NN's address, and later sent the poems to Michael Roberts, who sent NN a long and detailed letter of criticism and guidance and suggested that he submit some of his work to the magazine *Poetry* (Chicago).

Thus began NN's lifelong friendship, mentoring, close spiritual and literary assistance and guidance and voluminous correspondence, with George Every.

Every's wide circle of contacts included TS Eliot, to whom at Faber and Faber he sent examples of NN's work. Eliot responded with uncharacteristic enthusiasm; this was the precursor to NN becoming, in 1945 with the publication of *Five Rivers*, a member of that select band of the 'Faber Poets'.

David Boyd November 2011



## NORMAN NICHOLSON AND EDWARD THOMAS by Dr. Ian Davidson

Edward Thomas' and Norman Nicholson's lives coincide for four years. Nicholson, born in 1914 was four years old when Thomas was killed on the Western Front. Unlike Nicholson who seems to have been writing poems since adolescence, Edward Thomas' poems were all written in the last four years of his life, and while he was a soldier – an occupation he seems to have found curiously satisfying. It was almost as if he had eventually found a purpose in life, and writing which had been before his over-riding concern, became a way of relaxing and giving his mind free rein to roam.

Norman Nicholson, on the other hand, conscious from an early age of a literary bent, published throughout his twenties and managed to produce his first collection at the age of thirty. Unlike Nicholson who, I guess, always had the solace of religion, Edward Thomas seems often to have felt that he had only himself. His last poem, 'Out in the Dark', written four months before his death at Arras in April 1917 expresses this sense of isolation from humanity but oneness with the natural world:

... star and I and wind and deer  
Are in the dark together, – near,  
Yet far, – and fear  
Drums on my ear  
In that sage company drear.

He has no prop, no comfort but the consciousness of being a part of a natural continuum. He describes how in his early life he was pinched and worn down by drudgery, and in 'The Long Small Room', written fourteen years after the time it commemorates, he pictures

... his right hand  
Crawling, crab-like over the clean white page,  
Resting awhile each morning on the pillow,  
The once more starting to crawl on towards age.

These lines encapsulate the manner and stance of a perplexed, and isolated observer struggling to understand the nature of the life that has enveloped him. However, like Norman Nicholson, he was always able to take solace from being able to live in the country. His father, writing 'Notes on the Life and Ancestry of Edward Thomas' (Cooke, p.32) described him living in 'English villages' and tramping about 'in the open air in all weathers as a recreation from his studies and labour in literature'. And so he did, moving frequently from cottage to cottage across the Kentish Weald, and into Hampshire, eventually coming to rest on the edge of his much-loved South Downs in the village of Steep.

Edward Thomas burst out in poetry in a most astonishing fashion during December of 1914 when he produced ten poems, including 'Old Man' and 'Manor Farm'. In January he wrote sixteen – one every other day – among them 'The Source', 'Adlestrop' and 'Swedes', all drawn from his writings and memories of his country life. Only one of them, 'A Private', was in any way a reflection of the desperate situation in which he found himself. He continued to compose at this amazing rate and by the end of July, seven months later, he had completed a further forty-nine poems, well over half of his poetic oeuvre. Fifteen years after he consciously chose to follow the literary life, he finally began to make sense of it and found his metier.

What Thomas and, later, Nicholson realised was that the plain account of an incident – almost as if it were rendered in prose – may open a reader's understanding of much wider issues, and that a skilfully rendered vignette may convey much more than a broad canvas. 'Up in the Wind', the first poem from his astonishing period of fecundity in December 1914, while he was waiting to be called up, is a long piece which he acknowledges was done from an unpublished prose sketch of a lonely inn called 'The White Horse' (now, such is the fatness of our porsy times, done out as a

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## NORMAN NICHOLSON AND EDWARD THOMAS (continued)

tourist resort with an Edward Thomas Bar). Its prose origins are obvious, though it has been turned into a dramatic monologue, and as it progresses you can imagine how much an improvement it is on its original. Thomas' prose style tends to be flat and fanciful, straying into long descriptions and sentimental effusions, whereas the verse is taut and plain. (The same sort of distinction might be made between Nicholson's verse and prose. Compare 'Five Minutes' or 'St Luke's Summer' with the pages of *Wednesday Early Closing*).

'Up in the Wind' begins with an exclamation:

'I could wring the old thing's neck that put it here,  
A public house! It may be public for birds  
Squirrels, and such-like, ghosts of charcoal-burners  
And highwaymen.' The wild girl laughed.

This bears comparison with the opening of Nicholson's 'Boo to a Goose':

'You couldn't say Boo to a goose,' my grandmother said  
When I skittered howling in from the back street – my head  
With a bump the size of a conker from a stick someone threw.

As well as this frankly narrative mode, which is not at all limited to these examples, what binds Thomas and Nicholson is their sense of the connection between place and occasion which yields to an epiphany, a revelation, an understanding of much wider implications than the circumstances of the poem would seem to allow. For Thomas' in 'Swedes' and Nicholson's 'On Duddon Marsh', the small contemporary world of the individual is linked by the changing seasons to the cosmic movement of other worlds, other gods, another life. The lowly life of the farm is at one with the 'tombs of kings', and revelations 'more gorgeous'. The uncovered clamp of the cattle's winter feed is seen as the newly disclosed glories of grave ornaments.

Both poems have a sense of drama and acknowledge the compelling force of direct speech. In many of their poems the main point is contained in a simple utterance.

Another similarity is found in the way both poets take ordinary events and invest them with special and memorable significance. 'On Duddon Marsh' and 'Swedes' each link men with gods, the ordinary with the numinous, the mutable with the eternal as both shore and swedes are bound inexorably to change. Our Cumbrian backyard is linked through the seasons to the wide world, the cosmos; just as in 'Swedes' the lowly life of the farmyard is to the fabulous riches of the tombs of kings. Revelations 'more tender-gorgeous' than the treasuries of Pharaoh, the gold of newly uncovered swedes is at one with 'blue pottery, alabaster and gold'. On wind-wracked, tide-swept Duddon marsh the beginning of the world is re-enacted as 'God laid down on the third day that 'once in spring and once again / In autumn, here's where the sea begins'.

Similarly in 'Manor Farm' and 'St Luke's Summer', Both poets commemorate a time of year and, prompted by a view, provoke a reflection on the kind of creatures we are in the sort of world we live in. Their openings could have come from the same pen: a scene is set, a time, a place casually evoked. Then the conclusion of each reveals an insight which becomes an epiphany. In 'Manor Farm' :-

The rock-like mud unfroze a little and rills  
Ran and sparkled down each side of the road  
Under the catkins wagging in the hedge.

'St Luke's Summer' sets a similar scene as :-

The low sun leans across the slanting field,  
And every blade of grass is striped with shine

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## NORMAN NICHOLSON AND EDWARD THOMAS (continued)

And casts its shadow on the blade behind.

In 'Manor Farm' the picture is localised to show how :-

The church and yew  
And farmhouse slept in a Sunday silentness.  
The air raised not a straw.

Similarly in 'St Luke's Summer' :-

Roses exhausted by the thrust of summer  
Lose grip and fall; the wire is twined with weed.

What is the poet to make of this scene? Leave it as an evocation of the pastoral? Draw some Calendar conclusion – a thought for the day? Both Thomas and Nicholson resolve the problem in the same way by personalising the emotion and revealing something of themselves and their own peculiar worlds. For Thomas :-

... 'twas not Winter -  
Rather a season of bliss unchangeable  
Awakened from farm and church where it had lain  
Safe under tile and thatch for ages

For Nicholson the scene, the time show that

The soul, too, has its brown October days -  
The fancy runs to seed and dry as stone,

with

Rags and wisps of words blown through the mind;

Maybe it is the proper function of the poet to make us more aware of our natures and stations in relation to the ineffable. Both Thomas and Nicholson are adepts at turning the apparently ordinary into something deeply significant without investing the occasion with the portentous gravity of Wordsworth when he felt that 'the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.'

In Thomas' 'Cock Crow' and Nicholson's 'Five Minutes' there are highly successful combinations of close observation, local manners, delicate evocation of time and place. In 'Five Minutes', Nicholson manages to avoid the religiosity that mars for me so many of his poems. The apparent awkwardness of its last line, 'having five minutes at the end of time', makes me wonder when ever I read it, if it should have been changed or omitted. But then I always reflect that it is somehow in keeping with the tone of the poem, and by ending with a purely local whimsicality, it enshrines a Cumbrian locution, that would soften sad or serious news with a half joke.

As in 'Cock Crow', descriptions of the ordinary and the momentary acquire a particular significance. Such lines as 'Two cocks together crow / Cleaving the darkness with a silver blow' and 'The winter wind / Whined in the ashes like a saw' combine sound and image in a way that reveals each poet's sensitivity to the possibilities inherent in that particular time and place. Just as phrases like 'the sharp axe of light' and similes such as 'grey as the whiskers round an old dog's nose' display a vivid sense of the potentialities inherent in the actual reminding one that this moment is part of eternity and reveal the glory of the ordinary. Cocks are 'heralds of splendour', briars and thorns shake 'their red badges of hip and haw'. The drama of the mundane is exposed in figures like these. After these flights, the ordinary resumes its sway: 'The milkers lace their boots up at the farm', 'And the next day I heard that he was dead'.

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## NORMAN NICHOLSON AND EDWARD THOMAS (continued)

Nicholson recognised his affinity with Edward Thomas, in a late poem, 'Do You Remember Adlestrop', recalling that much anthologised poem, probably the only one of his that is at all widely known. Thomas' 'Adlestrop', more than most sonnets is a monument to a moment, except it is very consciously not intended as a monument, but has become almost the apotheosis of the trivial. An incidental halt in a summer afternoon's train journey has been transfigured, the momentary has been immortalised and become for the poet a 'moment of being' – one of those occasions identified by Virginia Woolf when the normal state of living and partly living becomes electrified by meaning and significance.

Norman Nicholson's reply is almost rueful 'Do you remember Adlestrop?' :-

Someone, somewhere, must have asked that question – Robert  
Frost, may be, or Abercrombie.

It is a poet's poem, written for other members of the craft, almost ruefully acknowledging the eclectic nature of the calling and the trials of composition. Nicholson turns it into a reflection on the nature of memory, the ineluctable meanings that it attaches, involuntarily to the mundane as well as the esoteric and invests them with vitality, but which cannot be compelled :-

'Do you remember? ... sorry'  
The trap door bangs down tight ... 'No.'

The ending of 'Do you remember Adlestrop' echoes that of 'Old Man', Thomas' haunting poem about recall and the involuntary acts of memory. They make him 'try / Once more to think what it is I am remembering' and conclude that he has 'mislaid the key ... for what it is I should, yet never can, remember'. As with Nicholson, nothing has 'unsnecked the trapdoor of his memory' and he is regretful, almost as if it registers as a failing, that he has lost the ability to crystallize the momentary experience which he once had.

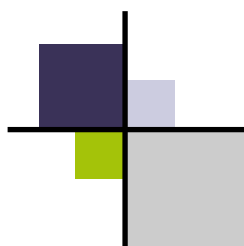
But from Nicholson's first published collection is a poem that does just that. 'A Coastal Journey' has several similarities with 'Adlestrop'.

A wet wind blows the waves across the sunset;  
There is no more sea nor sky.  
And the train halts where the railway line

For the poet 'in the blue dusk of the empty carriage / There is no more here nor there'. Only the moment and the company – 'No more now nor then. There is only us and everywhere and always / The train moves off again.' A significant moment – like that when Marcel rediscovered Albertine, and perhaps as romantically laden.

I think it unlikely that Nicholson was unaware of Thomas' poem – poets feed on other poets, gorge on anthologies, especially pore over the works of their immediate forebears, but I wonder if he knew that it was composed on 8<sup>th</sup> January 1915, which was Nicholson's first birthday.

*Ian Davidson November 2011*



## *Forthcoming events*

The next NN Society event will be the **AGM** to be held on the **17th March 2012** in the **Bradbury Centre, Millom at 1.00 pm**. After AGM business, Dr. Alan Beattie will speak on the topic of **Journeys of hope? Norman Nicholson and glimpses of a Cumbrian utopia**. Discussion during the AGM will undoubtedly be centred on plans for the centenary celebrations in 2014, for which we would value your ideas. We will also be presenting our plans for meetings and events this forthcoming year. Please do contact us in advance of the AGM with your suggestions, either by writing to Dr. Ian Davidson, our current chair, or by contacting Peggy Troll or Glenn Lang. The relevant e-mail addresses are: [i.s.davidson@btinternet.com](mailto:i.s.davidson@btinternet.com); [peggytroll@clara.co.uk](mailto:peggytroll@clara.co.uk); [glennlang50@hotmail.com](mailto:glennlang50@hotmail.com). Further information about the AGM will be posted to members in a separate mailing.

## **A CELEBRATION OF POETRY TRANSLATIONS**

Readings at The St Herbert Social Centre, High Hill, Keswick by 4 poets, French speaking ladies and Keswick School sixth-formers on Wednesday February 29th 2012 from 4.00 till 6.00 p.m. Doors open at 3.30, entry free, fruit juice or wine, books half price, box for donations for Parkinson's research.

**Timothy Adès**, born 1941, has degrees in classics and international business. As a translator-poet he tends to use rhyme and metre. His books to date are a translation of: Victor Hugo's: *How to be a Grandfather* (Hearing Eye) which won the John Dryden Award in 2003, "Often one forgets that one is reading a translation at all" (Glyn Pursglove) and two by the French Resistance poet Jean Cassou: *33 Sonnets* (Arc Visible Poets), the John Dryden Award winner 1996 "He captures the true heart of each poem" (Harry Guest) and *The Madness of Amadis* (Agenda Editions). He translates Brecht and Sikelianós, among others, and his *Desnos* was runner up for the John Dryden Award 2002. His translations of the Mexican Alfonso Reyes won the TLS Premio Valle-Inclán Prize.

**Alistair Elliot** (born Liverpool, 1932) was a vegetable invoice clerk in Covent Garden market, night sterilizer in a food factory, waiter, film critic, supply teacher, actor (with the English Children's Theatre under Caryl Jenner) and finally librarian in Kensington, Keele, Shiraz, and lastly at Newcastle University. He received a Cholmondeley Award in 2000 and his translations include *The Lazarus poems* by Heine (1979), Verlaine's *Women-Men* (1979), from Bloodaxe: *French Love Poems* (1991), *Italian Landscape Poems* (1994) and *La Jeune Parque* by Valéry (1997). *Roman food poems* came out in 2003. His translation of Euripides' *Medea*, with Diana Rigg in the leading role, was performed in London and New York and in 2008 he completed a version of Euripides' *Phaethon*, reconstructed from fragments.

**Peter Rafferty** writes "I must have done something terrible in a past life, as I support Carlisle United in this one. I was in the Paddock when Jimmy Glass scored, and in orbit one second later. Born within earshot of Brunton Park in 1952, I read Geography at Manchester, followed by research at Durham on Late-glacial slope development in northwest Iceland. And in Carlisle I remain, earning my corn by running a betting shop, while my wife runs the branch down the road. Formerly also a part-time wine importer, I remain a full-time Italophile. I have belonged to Cumbrian Poets for nearly 30 years, with a full-length collection, *Eoliths*, from Arrowhead Press (2002). I translate from French (mainly Laforgue) and Italian (mainly Carlo Felice Colucci), and have had a translation included in the Faber Book of 20th Century Italian Poems."

**Christopher Pilling** has lived in Keswick for 33 years. His first collection of poems *Snakes & Girls* won the first New Poets Award and his first play *Torquemada* the first Kate Collingwood Award. *These Jaundiced Loves* (1995) is his translation of Tristan Corbière's *Les Amours Jaunes* - "a work which nobody who cares about poetry can afford to be without" (John Lucas) and a Sunday Telegraph Book of the Year. His other translations are: Max Jacob's *The Dice Cup* (with David Kennedy) shortlisted for the Weidenfeld; Lucien Becker's *Love at the Full* (a PBS recommendation and shortlisted for the Popescu); Maurice Carême's *Defying Fate* (John Dryden Award runner-up) and *Springing from Catullus* (John Dryden Award winner 2006). *Coming ready or not*, his selected poems, also includes translations.

Having this get-together in Keswick to read from our translations reminds me that it was at Mirehouse, near Keswick, that James Spedding invited Tennyson and Edward Fitzgerald for weeks at a time. On 15 January 1859, an anonymous pamphlet was published as *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyam*. It attracted little attention and could soon be found in the fourpenny or even (as the author afterwards boasted) in the penny box on the bookstalls. In 1861, Rossetti discovered it, and then Swinburne, but it was not until 1868 that Edward FitzGerald was encouraged to print a second edition. It is now one of the most famous translations ever.

*Christopher Pilling*



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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.