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Norman Nicholson Day : October 13th 2012

'The world that / belong to nudges back again...' **Norman Nicholson's brief dalliance with High Modernism** **Alan Beattie**

Above Ullswater

Two days of sun –

[...]

And what remains

When the hour-old past flies off like a cloudy comet?

[This poem has been redacted for copyright reasons. The full poem can be read in Norman Nicholson *Collected Poems* (ed. Neil Curry), Faber & Faber: London, p. 143.]

The world that *I* belong to nudges back again.
But still your hair is trembling in the draught of angels' wings,

[...]

NN

The poem 'Above Ullswater', gives a rare insight into a poet at a major turning point. When Philip Gardner interviewed him in Millom in the 1960s (while writing a PhD thesis on his work) Nicholson told him that the person referred to as 'you' in the poem is the poet Kathleen Raine.¹ Nicholson's poem evidently recounts an episode from time they spent together in the Cumbrian fells during the early 1940s. He starts with two lines of brisk scene-setting - the weather, the landscape – then instantly asks an unsettling metaphysical question: what remains of such a moment, afterwards? He moves on to recall, in affectionate detail, an up-close natural history lesson she gave him - a moss, a lichen, a fossil - and he seems to argue that it is just such transient things that remain; whereas when we search for 'the eternal' we are doomed to failure. He then addresses his companion directly in a wonderfully

continues overleaf

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nuanced manner – double-voiced, even triple-voiced – he teases her gently about her different way of seeing the world; he slips in a quiet announcement that he knows that he doesn't belong in the same world as she; but he also admires her – in almost devotional (besotted?) tones.

The two poets – both deeply interested in nature and landscape, both also wrestling with spiritual and theological issues – had met at Cockley Moor in Matterdale. This was the remote and isolated home of Helen Sutherland², a very wealthy collector of modern art, hostess to a circle of elite writers and artists who visited or stayed with her there – including (as well as Raine) TS Eliot, David Jones, Elizabeth Jennings, Ben Nicholson, Winifred Nicholson (Ben Nicholson's first wife), Barbara Hepworth (Ben Nicholson's second wife). In this article I hope to show that Nicholson's encounter with Kathleen Raine and with Cockley Moor left significant traces in his poetry, both in the subject-matter he engaged with and in the style of his writing; but that this was quite a short detour – a kind of brief excursion, from which he returned decisively to a quite different path that he had mapped out for himself previously and elsewhere.

Perhaps the earliest evidence of Nicholson's encounter with Helen Sutherland's modernist friends is his poem 'Cockley Moor, Dockray, Penrith'. Antoinette Fawcett and Phil Houghton have noted the mathematical, geometric precision of form in this poem³; and David Cooper has noted its 'dialectical' structure, the interplay between 'inside' and 'outside'⁴. Three features are of special interest to me here. Firstly, the poem as a whole can be read as Nicholson's creative response to the remarkably rich modernist environment⁵ that Helen Sutherland had set up in her extended farmhouse: where she displayed original works of art by Picasso, Mondrian, Matisse etc, and offered a workplace for visiting artists like Ben and Winifred Nicholson. Secondly, the two verses depicting 'interior' views clearly point to two different strands of modernist art on display there: purist abstract relief constructions⁶ by Ben Nicholson (in verse 2); and landscapes and still life paintings - infused by Spiritualist and Theosophical ideas⁷ - by Winifred Nicholson (in verse 4). Thirdly, these views are counterpointed (in the remaining verses 1, 3, and 5) with Norman's own distinctive gaze on the world beyond the farmhouse windows, picking out melancholy reminders of human transience against the austere Matterdale backdrop of wet weather and 'the cubist fells'. In this poem (published in 1944 in his first collection *Five Rivers*) Nicholson seems clearly to be fascinated (perhaps beguiled) by his first-hand encounter with modernist art – but he also appears to be holding to his own steady vision, his own different and distinctive preoccupations. In fact he had already, earlier in the 1930s, been excited by the way that TS Eliot's experiments in poetry '*burst through the seams of a worn-out and shabby diction*'⁸, and in two other poems from the 1940s Nicholson does show himself willing to try out his own modernist-style explorations of the

Pendulum Poem	[...]	Poem
<p>Leaves fall. The air is full Of the fall of the leaves. [...]</p> <p>The charred leaves Float in the air; And soot is sharp On the dry tongue. Bright memories Fall through the mind: The yellow carpels Of a flowering youth</p>	<p>[...]</p> <p>In the after-evening The leaves fall Slowly as snow, And bury the night Under yellow drifts In the lamp light.</p> <p>[This poem has been redacted for copyright reasons. The full poem can be read in Norman Nicholson <i>Collected Poems</i> (ed. Neil Curry), Faber & Faber: London, p. 154.]</p>	<p>I would make a poem Precise as a pair of scissors, keen, Cold and asymmetrical, the blades Meeting like steel lovers</p> <p>[This poem has been redacted for copyright reasons. The full poem can be read in Norman Nicholson <i>Collected Poems</i> (ed. Neil Curry), Faber & Faber: London, p. 408.]</p>

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form and pattern of poetry. In 'Pendulum Poem' (published in the 1948 collection *Rock Face*) Nicholson plays with the swirling, lurching side-to-side pattern of falling leaves - though characteristically at the same time he paints a darkly melancholic picture of the seasons of a human life: summer to winter, youth to age. In 'Poem' (published in 1949) Nicholson goes so far as to offer a kind of personal manifesto for (something like) constructivist experimentation in his poetry⁹ - but again he connects it up with his other preoccupations: with love and the living world and landscape.

Further evidence on Nicholson's reactions to the high modernist culture in Matteredale comes in two of his poems that refer directly to Kathleen Raine herself, and perhaps also in a poem by Raine (all three from the early 1940s).

The First Day of Autumn

For Kathleen Raine

[This poem has been redacted for copyright reasons. The poem can be read in Norman Nicholson *Collected Poems* (ed. Neil Curry), Faber & Faber: London, p. 63.]

Night in Martindale (by Kathleen Raine)

Not in the rustle of water, the air's noise,
The roar of storm, the ominous birds, the cries –
The angel here speaks with a human voice.

Stone into man must grow, the human word
Carved by our whispers in the passing air

Is the authentic utterance of cloud,
The speech of flowing water, blowing wind,
Of silver moon and stunted juniper.

Words say, waters flow,
Rocks weather, ferns wither, winds blow, times
go,
I write the sun's Love, and the stars' No.

[With the permission of the literary estate of
Kathleen Raine]

The Candle

Poetry is not an end.*

The flame is where the candle turns
To smoke, solid to air,

[...]

And the poet follows the rhyme into the darkness
And learns there his new unspoken name.

** This phrase, together with the theme and the imagery of the first stanza, were suggested to me by Miss Kathleen Raine.*

[This poem has been redacted for copyright reasons. The poem can be read in Norman Nicholson *Collected Poems* (ed. Neil Curry), Faber & Faber: London, p. 162.]

'The First Day of Autumn' appeared in the 1944 collection 'Five Rivers' and is Nicholson's first mention of Kathleen Raine by name. The poem seems to be addressed very directly and personally to Raine – not merely in the dedication, but in the content. The phrase referring to 'man ... midway between an angel and a beast' (line 4 of the poem) is a key idea in Rudolf Steiner's writings on Anthroposophy¹⁰, so this looks like a subtle homage to Kathleen Raine's interest in such matters; she was by this time sharing an active involvement in spiritual practices with Winifred Nicholson (who was a committed Christian Scientist: later in the 1940s Winifred wrote to Kathleen saying "what I want to know is why my angels talk differently from yours"¹¹). The last two lines of the poem continue with Anthroposophical imagery; and the phrase 'flower and stone' is perhaps a further small gesture to Raine – the title of her first collection of poetry in 1943 was *Stone and Flower* (Nicholson also uses the phrase 'stone and flower' in line 6 of 'Above Ullswater'). Or – depending on the date when it was written and perhaps given to Raine (rather than when it was published) – it may even have been a prompt from Nicholson towards a title for Raine's first collection. If so, it would have been the return of a compliment: it was Raine who suggested the title *Rock Face* for

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Nicholson's second collection¹² (published in 1948). 'The Candle' is a further explicit acknowledgment of exchanges between Nicholson and Raine (although the mode of address is curiously formal). The image that drives the poem (the candle) is known to have had great personal meaning for Raine: a memorial volume of tributes after her death bears the title 'Lighting a Candle', and several contributors testify that – to the end of her life – she would start every meeting or lecture or reading with the ritual lighting of a candle¹³. Once again 'time' is a theme, along with light and dark, and love; and with a strangely evocative and mysterious phrase about the poet 'learning his new unspoken name' in the darkness. Maybe this refers to the practice of taking a new name to mark a religious conversion – or to the habit of lovers marking their intimacy through new (secret) names.

I'm inclined to think that Raine's poem 'Night in Martindale' (published in *Stone and Flower* in 1943)¹⁴ was also part of the conversation between herself and Nicholson. Perhaps the line 'The angel here speaks with a human voice' is a gentle response to his teasing of her (in 'Above Ullswater', when he wrote 'Oh but you/To whom the angels speak in colours'). Much of the rest of her poem is an evocative wording of the Anthroposophical idea that human speech is 'carved air'¹⁵ and as such is continuous with the forms of flow in nature and the wider cosmos (airs, waters, clouds). Here I suspect we see Raine sharing (with Nicholson?) some of her ideas connecting natural history with metaphysics and 'sacred science', in the same way that she perhaps did in the episode described in Nicholson's 'Above Ullswater'.

To understand why I think 'Above Ullswater' marks a critical turning point in the relation Nicholson was negotiating with Kathleen Raine and with the Cockley Moor circle, we need a bit of background. Kathleen Raine moved north from London in 1939, partly as a safer place in war-time for her two young children, also because she had left her husband (the children's father, Charles Madge) and her personal life was in turmoil; and in 1940 took a house at Martindale (on the southern shore of Ullswater, in walking distance of Cockley Moor).¹⁶ Nicholson was introduced to her through mutual friends: they met at Helen Sutherland's place. On the evidence of the poems above they found much common ground – in writing (and talking about) poetry, in observing nature and landscape in the fells, and in debating metaphysical and spiritual ideas. But there were also some striking differences. She was a twice-divorced mother with two young children; highly educated¹⁷, a brilliant scholar, a sophisticated product of Cambridge University and a member of the cosmopolitan artistic and cultural elite centred on London. He was 6 years younger, unmarried, he'd had no university education and his life had been effectively confined to Millom, the town of his birth. When their very different life-lines crossed in that high modernist milieu in the high northern hills, the impact on Nicholson's imagination must have been far-reaching – dizzying. And in the poems by Nicholson (above), I think we can see him working his way through some heady narcotic attractions – the abstract, purified forms of modernist art, the resonances of the eternal and the numinous in transcendental poetry and in sacred science – perhaps also the beauty of Kathleen Raine herself (which was legendary¹⁸). Perhaps he even contemplated (briefly) becoming a 'fellow-traveller', to 'follow the rhyme into the darkness, and learn there his new unspoken name'.

But clearly, in 'Above Ullswater', Nicholson pulls back and (in the most gentle and courteous way) acknowledges that the world he belongs to is very different from that of Kathleen Raine and the Cockley Moor circle up in that remote perch in the high fells – and that his choice is to return to a path of his own. In the event, Raine left Martindale in 1943 and returned to London, to take up war-time work as editor and translator for the SOE at Bush House. There is no evidence of subsequent exchanges of correspondence between Nicholson and Raine – although letters from Helen Sutherland did continue to give Kathleen news of his life, health and work¹⁹ (up to 1965, when Sutherland died). Raine went on to become a world-leading expert on the writings of Blake and Yeats (whom she saw as the greatest exponents of the transcendental tradition).²⁰ In 1981 she founded and edited a journal (*Temenos: a Review Devoted to the Arts of the Imagination*), which in 1998 she replaced by the Temenos Academy with its own *Temenos Academy Review*²¹ – devoted to bringing together a world-wide network of scholars and artists interested in 'seeking the spiritual in the whole cosmos'. It is clear that her scholarly and poetic writing (which continued until her death in 2003) constitute a remarkable sustained

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commitment to keeping alive the 'Orphic Voice' in a secular world (Orpheus: wandering poet-musician who could charm the world of nature by his songs; seer and prophet; interpreter of ancient mysteries).²² She aligned her work clearly with the Pythagorean and neo-Platonic search for sacred patterns at the heart of nature and the arts²³; and Grevel Lindop describes her as '*the last of the great high modernist poets*'²⁴. But in her Autobiography Raine observes that there is a price to be paid for undertaking such Orphic journeys: that of social displacement, having to tear up your own roots and be set adrift; she says '*the rootless will always be attracted, as I was, by avant-gardism ...and inhabit The Waste Land*'²⁵. I hope I've shown that for a brief spell (in Matterdale in war-time) Nicholson may have seemed a very promising candidate for initiation into the mysteries and universals of the Orphic Tradition – but that he turned away from that philosophical vision of 'underlying order'²⁶. As we know, he chose to stay put in the West Cumbrian world he knew and loved, to explore and record and celebrate that provincial way of life and its wider resonances. Previous contributors to *Comet* have noted that this 'local particularity' is a defining feature of Nicholson's work²⁷, and, as a way of examining this further, I'm attracted to an idea from Raymond Williams that he calls 'militant particularism': '*Ideals forged out of the affirmative experience of solidarities in one place get generalized and universalized as a working model of a new form of society that will benefit all of humanity*'²⁸. I hope to write about it in a future article.

Alan Beattie

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- 3 The poem was printed in full in earlier issues of *Comet*: 2008, 3:3, 12 and 2009, 4:1, 14 - with comments by Antoinette Fawcett and by Phil Houghton. [Editorial Note, March 2019: The poem has been redacted for the online version.]
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- 15 Schwenk T (1965) *Sensitive Chaos: the Creation of Flowing Forms in Water and Air*. Rudolf Steiner Press.
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- 18 Bernard op cit (pp 21-22).
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- ²⁴ Lindop G (2001) comment in BBC Radio 3 Programme, 'A Note Struck by the Stars' (a profile of Kathleen Raine) 18 November 2001.
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EDITORIAL

At the end of June this year I moved back to Cumbria from my student accommodation in Norwich and will complete my doctoral thesis at home, all being well. Inevitably, the academic work and my duties at the University of East Anglia have demanded the bulk of my attention whilst I was there. This has had an inevitable knock-on effect on 'Comet': I have not been able to produce the newsletter as regularly as I would have liked, and on occasions two issues have been combined into a single issue (as is the case for this one). Hopefully, I will be better able to keep on top of 'Comet'-related work now that I am at home again, and I intend to produce *future issues in January, May and September*. Articles intended for the next issue, therefore, should reach me by **30th November** at the very latest. Please send me an e-mail as soon as you feel that you have something you would wish to send in, then I can start planning.

Although it was announced at the AGM that the current issue would be focused on *Nicholson's Social Conscience*, nothing has been received on that topic to date, so I would very much like to try again for the next issue instead. I am constantly looking for new voices, and the more the membership is involved in the production of 'Comet', the better it will be. Taking a hint from the Poetry Society newsletter, I would like to try a new feature for future issues: *member profiles*. If you think that you might like to answer some questions about yourself, and your interest in NN, please do contact me (and expect to be contacted!). A reminder, too, that letters to the editor are more than welcome, as are reactions to articles. I would very much like to see 'Comet' as a forum, one which promotes and provokes lively discussion amongst members and interested readers.

This issue does *not* contain a report on the AGM, held on Saturday 17th March, since a brief report has already appeared on the Society's website (see Charlie Lambert's article about the website on page 9 of this issue), but instead we have a wonderful article by Alan Beattie about Norman's relationship with Kathleen Raine, based in part on his talk given at the AGM. Members fascinated by the poems presented both at the talk and in the article will have the chance to discuss some of these at the *forthcoming Autumn Event*, the annual Norman Nicholson Day, this year to be held on **October 13th**. Many thanks to Alan for sharing the fruits of his extensive research with us.

This issue also contains two articles which merge personal memories with memories relating either to Norman's writings, or to his general concerns: Ian Davidson's evocative piece on Haverigg Point (pp. 10-11) and Sue Dawson's lively memoir about the Ironworks (pp. 14-15). I hope other members will feel inspired to send in similar work, which helps to set Nicholson in his milieu just as much as a critical article does. I was also very pleased to receive two unexpected articles: one on Nicholson as an adjudicator of local poetry competitions (pp. 7-8) and one on some lost recordings of Yvonne and Norman reading poems for the Lake District National Park exhibition at Brockhole. All in all, I hope that members will agree that this issue of 'Comet' is a jolly good read, and that it has been well worth the wait!

AF

NICHOLSON, HOPKINS AND I Joanne Weeks

It is always rewarding, would you not agree, to receive the judge's comments on one's efforts in competitions. Since the mid-Sixties, when I first submitted poems to the Cumbrian Literary Group's annual awards, each one in my collection of little slips from the unidentified assessors has been usefully frank.

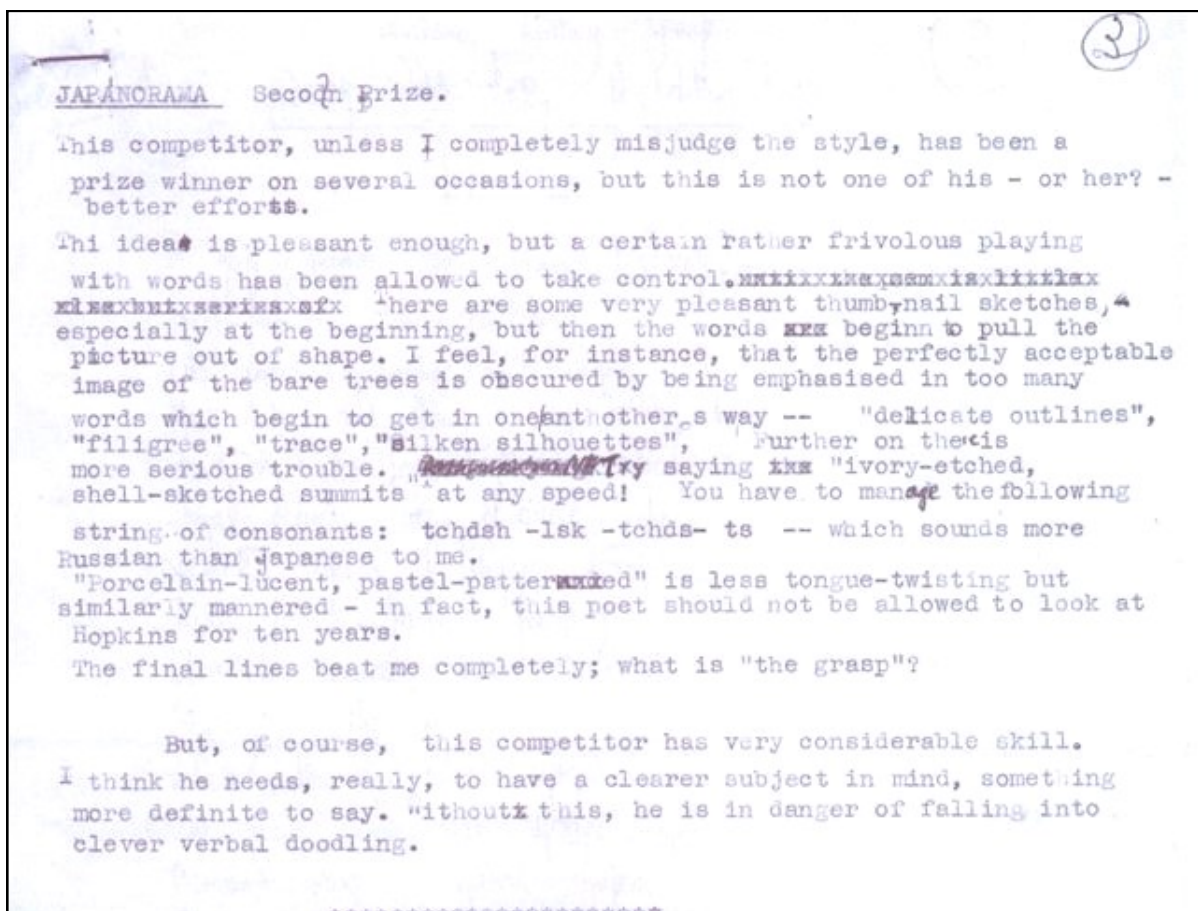
The first such was typed, on thin paper, in that painstaking, one-finger style of someone whose handwriting would be so illegible that the machine was the better option ~ and presumably meant to maintain anonymity.

In 1966, I was specifically admonished 'not to allow his [sic] use of alliteration to lead him into writing unnecessary lines, or stretching out the contents of one line to cover two, e.g.

... *His way over the fells / From coast to Keswick.*"

By 1968, as though warming to the task, the remarks were becoming more lengthy, offering constructive criticism in that same distinctive, erratic fashion. Any fleeting speculation as to the personality behind the keyboard stopped at its being one harassed Head of English in a school somewhere in Cumberland [as it was then].

The appraisal given in 1972 typically showed not only that the speed of thought far exceeded that of execution on to the paper but also that the adjudicator was experiencing increasing irritation as he read through the poem:



Scan of Adjudication Slip (transcript overleaf)

NICHOLSON, HOPKINS AND I (continued)

JAPANORAMA Second Prize

This competitor, unless I completely misjudge the style, has been a prize winner on several occasions, but this is not one of his - or her? - better efforts.

The idea is pleasant enough, but a certain rather frivolous playing with words has been allowed to take control. There are some very pleasant thumb-nail sketches, especially at the beginning, but then the words beginn [sic] to pull the picture out of shape. I feel, for instance, that the perfectly acceptable image of the bare trees is obscured by being emphasised in too many words which begin to get in one another's way - - "delicate outlines", "filigree", "trace", "silken silhouettes", Further on there is more serious trouble. Try saying "ivory-etched, shell-sketched summits" at any speed! You have to manage the following string of consonants: tchdsh -lsk -tchds - ts - - which sounds more Russian than Japanese to me.

"Porcelain-lucent, pastel-pattered [sic]" is less tongue-twisting but similarly mannered - in fact, this poet should not be allowed to look at Hopkins for ten years.

The final lines beat me completely; what is "the grasp"?

But, of course, this competitor has very considerable skill. I think he needs, really, to have a clearer subject in mind, something more definite to say. Without this, he is in danger of falling into clever verbal doodling.

Not allowed to look at Hopkins for ten years, indeed! My friends at Cumbrian Poets' workshops will chuckle!

The following year, however, it seems he was appeased, that particular entry being 'quite free from the Hopkins-like verbal knots and intricacies which I have complained about in the past. The new verbal restraint [...] deserves commendation and encouragement.'

It was not to last. 'Hopkins-like internal rhymes e g *loops and scoops*' inveigled their way back in but met, I think, with a certain resignation: 'Yes, I confess, it is a fault of mine, too. And when she uses alliteration, she should be careful about bringing in too many 's's. As Tennyson used to say, *Kick the geese out.*'

When I wrote:

*It was bone-freezing, bird-feeding time,
Mid-winter, when days are dipped both ends in
Dairymilking darkness...*

it was with this judge at my elbow, where I have kept him all these years. But who was he? Long after his death, at the turn of the century, George Bott revealed his name to me in strictest confidence ~~~ Norman Nicholson. The significance to me has been immense.

I wonder, did you recognise him?

Joanne Weeks

Joanne is an NN Society member and a prizewinning poet. In December 2011 Joanne won the Olive Lamming Memorial Prize, Isle of Man, for her poem 'Field Names', written in memory of her mother's brother, Norman, who was a member of the RAF Bomber Command in the Second World War and lost his life in service. See <http://www.newwritingcumbria.org.uk/and-the-winners-are/> for more information about Joanne and for one of her prizewinning poems.

ONLINE AGAIN by Charlie Lambert

The Society's website has been revived and can now be found at www.normannicholson.org

The intention is to provide a resource for anyone interested in Norman, his life and work. The website is a contact point for anyone who may be interested in joining the Society, and also a focal point for Society members. It is updated regularly with news of Society activities and information of interest to members.

One encouraging feature is a section called 'Our Page!' which offers anyone the chance to put Nicholson-themed work on view. Over the last few weeks we've been delighted to receive photographic, artistic and poetic work from several Cumbrian schools.

The site is updated regularly, including a monthly feature 'In a Word,' which features a different example of Nicholson's writing every month.

The Society also has a presence on Facebook. If you're on Facebook simply type 'Norman Nicholson Society' in the search box and you'll be taken to our page.

Charlie Lambert

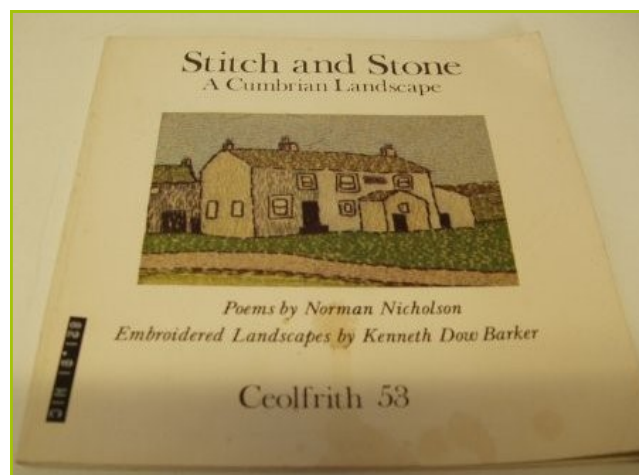
Editor's Note: The website is intended to keep members up to date with news and events and also to provide a forum for discussion. Please do check the website regularly, as the Society will use the website to inform the membership and the general public of any changes in plans for meetings, and so forth.



WHERE ARE THE STITCH AND STONE EMBROIDERIES?

In 1975 Ceolfrith Press commissioned and published a booklet *Stitch and Stone, A Cumbrian Landscape, Poems by Norman Nicholson and Embroidered Landscapes by Kenneth Dow Barker*. Despite extensive enquiries, no trace of the embroideries can be found. If anyone has any information about them we would be very pleased to hear from you.

Neil Curry



HAVERIGG POINT by Ian Davidson

Haverigg Point: a sunny afternoon, silver water filling the estuary. The rip where the salt and fresh combine is a never-breaking comber stretching out towards Roanhead. White gulls wheel above it like spindrift, rising to form and reform like wind-torn clouds. Strangely low on the western horizon as if sleeping, Black Combe heaves his shoulder into the hazy autumn air. Leaning on the trig point by the ruined tower, above the point where the silver-grey limestone slips into the tide, I consider the ancient and the modern.

Rolling down and down the sandhill that reaches almost to the tide line, how many times had the warm grains worked their way through all my clothes – socks full, pants full, sand in my ears, hair full, while my uncle and cousin laughed and laughed with me. Always my uncle who took me to Hodbarrow with my cousin Sylvia, six years older, my mentor, my conscience. I watch now my grandson make his way round the edge of the rocks. Later he will slide down the sandhill. He moves with grace and circumspection, each look round widens his horizons, both inside and out. He will explain it all to me later, the words giving substance to feelings that turn into the story of his life. I remember his mother at the same age, in the same place, cautiously considering this new piece of her world. She moved in the same hesitant way, lifting her foot clear of the water at each step, poised and inspecting before venturing another. So bound up is he now in forming his past, that he ignores the cries, as she did, to be careful, to mind the tide, not to go too far, wherever that is.

I leave him to find out and go beyond the quarry, freaked with tufts of yarrow, golden with ragwort. Two bikes lie across the path, haphazard as their riders left them. In the cleft on the shoreward side, looking across at Askam, they sit discussing tackle as they put their rods up and wait for the tide.

'Much sport, chaps?'

Startled they look at each other, then at me, then one replies, almost defiantly.

'Wi've not started yet.'

Their heads drop and I am banished. Looking like figures from another age, they could be illustrations from a Book for Boys. Brown tousled head next to fair smooth head, bent studiously over a bucket of lugworms. Around them, nodding blooms of cranesbill, red as ore, make blotches on the wind-smoothed turf.

With Sally I was here, five hundred years ago. Cycling along the blocks to the Point, to hide our bikes and head for the sunny dip, wind-free, turf-lined, with purple thyme and tormentil. Over her smooth head, hair twined in a plait, I gaze across the shining mirror of the sea to where the cranes of the Ship Yard scratch the eastern horizon. I hug her as she sits between my knees, shrivelling the flowers of tormentil between a finger and pink thumb. I brush her plait aside and kiss her neck. I love her so much it hurts.

The place is strewn with childhood memories, sinking, sinking under the sensations of the here and now. The wind is whispering half-forgotten tales: fishing boats, the ironworks, the engine with the spike on front they called 'Snipey', my grandmother's grave by the wall of the old church. My uncle's tales of his childhood and my mother's. Was she ever here, I wonder?

Her sisters had little to say about her, but they were much older. Her brother had little more. 'She was a bit wild, your mother,' he would say. 'I always thought it best not to know. An she nivver told me nowt.' He switched from English to Cumbrian and back as he talked.

Fishing, myself at another time and on the way back, empty-handed but soothed by the evening glow of the sun behind Black Combe, I meet Sylvia 'keeping company'.

'This is Norman.'

HAVERIGG POINT (continued)

He smiles and nods. They have just come down from what's left of the windmill. Cheeky, as the undergraduate I was, slightly peeved to see my favourite cousin with a man, I make some witless, graceless remark that doesn't merit a reply. They smile, the condescending, secret smile of lovers who don't care what you say.

'Must get on,' I mumble in the quiet, becoming awkward. 'Don't get dewed on.'

I notice, in her free hand, flowers: grey of yarrow, yellow of vetch and the glowing red of cranesbill.

Back to the now and where the car is parked, steady on my stick over the uneven ground, I find Jacko and his daughters lifting yellow canoes from the roof of his Land Rover.

'Hamazin wat ye see when ye hevent yer gun,' he grins a greeting.

'Now then, Jacko! All this your team?'

'Sum on em. Set off wi two and ended up wi this lot.'

Big and burly, brown arms bursting from his sweat-shirt, surrounded by laughing, excited girls with bags and paddles.

'Cum on, ower Dad!'

I watch them slip and slide down the sandhills.

Along the blocks, like the ramparts of a Mediterranean town, the folk of Millom and Haverigg process slowly while the sun goes down beside a glittering sea.

Ian Davidson



THE NICHOLSON TAPES: LOST OR MISLAID? by Roger Bush

Back in 1968 I was much concerned with the setting up of this country's first National Park Visitor Centre, on the shores of Windermere. The Lake District Planning Board (LDPB) had acquired Brockhole, a large house which had been used as a sanatorium, and the Countryside Commission had budgeted for it to be fitted with a major exhibition by the Central Office of Information (COI). With a Director for the Centre still to be found and appointed, it fell to me, as the Commission officer in charge of the COI project, to do a lot of the scripting of the exhibition. For a time I was commuting regularly between London and Windermere.

How do Nicholsons come into this? Well, firstly, the LDPB assigned Danny Nicholson, a very knowledgeable planner and a local Westmorland man, to assist me and the COI team. Secondly, I had included in the exhibition a literary section in which we were using recorded readings from the works of local authors and poets, from Wordsworth through to Beatrix Potter and Arthur Ransome. Danny suggested something from his namesake, Norman Nicholson, as a modern representative of the literary traditions of the area. I agreed, and a COI sound recordist was sent down to Millom to record the poet reading one of his poems. (Regretfully, I cannot now recall which of his poems he read - but I would guess it was one from the 'Seven Rocks' sequence.) 'How did it go?' I asked the COI man on his return. 'He's a bit of an awkward customer, isn't he?' was the reply.

It seems that Norman had turned a bit mulish, reluctantly agreeing to make the recording only if they would also record his wife reading Robert Southey's 'The Three Bears'. Did we want that too? Indeed we did! I was simply delighted to have Yvonne's contribution, which was promptly included in the exhibit.

The exhibition referred to above was loosely described as 'permanent', but clearly it wasn't going to remain in place for ever. Not long ago I made some enquiries as to what had happened to the Nicholson tapes. Unfortunately no-one at the National Park headquarters in Kendal could remember or trace them. Sadly, archiving nowadays is little regarded, and somehow or other the tapes seem to have been mislaid or even destroyed.

A pity - but there it is. I would dearly love to have heard them again.

Roger Bush
April, 2012

Note: I worked for the National Parks Commission (later the Countryside Commission) from 1967 to 1973, and subsequently wrote *The National Parks of England and Wales*, Dent, 1973. Brockhole is still attracting large numbers of Lake District visitors, and I hope they are still being informed about the rich literary heritage of the area.

Roger Bush is a member of the Norman Nicholson Society and spent his working life in publishing, journalism, public relations and, for 30 years, the Government Information Service. Roger is the author of three books, the National Parks book (Dent, 1973) mentioned above, a guidebook to Scarborough Castle (HMSO, 1979), and a history of the Friends Ambulance Unit post-war existence, 1946-59 (Sessions of York, 1998). He first came across Nicholson's work not through his poems but through his critical study of William Cowper (1951). Roger writes:

'Towards the end of last year I attended a 'Day of Poetry' at the Geological Society of London's home in Burlington House. Very enterprisingly they had devised a programme of speakers and readings around the subject of rocks. Dr Eric Robinson contributed a short talk based on NN's poem 'Millom Old Quarry' (24th April 2012). In a later e-mail Roger adds, 'Although I have had an interest in geology since my schooldays and did first-year geology at UCL in the early 1950s, my only contact with the Geological Society of London is that I know a few of its members. Their Poetry and Geology Celebration last October was a one-off event inspired by the coincidence of National Poetry Day and Earth Science Week and was largely organised by their excellent Library staff. I got to hear of it through Poet in the City, a go-ahead charity with the aim of attracting new audiences to poetry, making new connections for poetry and raising money to support poetry education. I get to some of their events, and have read some of Norman Nicholson's work to their 'drop-in' evenings on more than one occasion.'

If any member can help Roger in his search for the missing tapes, do get in touch via the editor.

NN SOCIETY SUMMER EVENT

This year's Summer Event took place on Saturday 14th July, 2012 and was attended by a group of members coming both from the area local to Millom and from further afield.

The day started at noon with tea and coffee at Haverigg Primary School and with the chance for members to examine the interesting project work produced by the school-children on several themes, including 'The Shape of Clouds', which had quotations from Nicholson's poem at its centre.



After lunch Sue Dawson gave an extremely well-researched and lively talk about Millom Ironworks and the impact of its closure on the town and people.

This was followed by discussion of the set of 'Ironworks' poems, in two separate groups led by Neil Curry and Antoinette Fawcett.

The group then moved to the Ironworks site in Millom where they were guided round the site—now a nature reserve—by Jack Park of the Friends of the Ironworks Nature Reserve. Jack pointed out key locations and surviving buildings, and also drew our attention to the abundance of rare plants and flowers growing on the site. The lime-rich slag and the stony ground-cover promotes the right conditions for particular plants to grow. What seems, from a distance, to be an almost barren moonscape turns out to nurture life-forms of many kinds.

As can be seen from the photographs (all taken by Charlie Lambert), a number of Nicholson's poems have been printed on information boards relating not only to the Ironworks site, but also to its amazing setting: a panorama which includes the Duddon Estuary, the Lake District fells and mountains, and the 'paternal presence' of Black Combe.



After the event the group returned to Haverigg Primary School for light refreshments and a further chance to look at the displays of children's work.

It was an interesting and inspiring day—and led some members, at least, to imagine how the



Ironworks Site would make an interesting venue for an Open-air Nicholson Reading. The site may not quite be a Greek or Roman amphitheatre, but the view is as good as any view in England. An event for 2014, perhaps?

Thanks to Sue Dawson and other members of the committee for organizing the day, to Jack Park for his guided tour, and to Janice Brockbank, Head teacher of Haverigg School for the use of the premises.

Antoinette Fawcett

IRONWORKS MEMORIES by Sue Dawson

These memories are personal ones and are intended to add to the social history of the period when Norman was writing about the closure of the Millom Ironworks in 1968. I was a teenager growing up in Millom during this time.

When I researched the background information for my presentation at this year's summer event, I interviewed a number of people who had worked at the Ironworks leading up to its closure in September 1968. The overwhelming feeling after talking to them, even after all these years, was one of their disbelief. I don't think anyone really imagined that the Ironworks would actually close and that it would cease production just as quickly as it did. Many redundancy notices were given just two weeks before the Ironworks closed for the last time. With being the town's main employer, worries for the future of Millom and its people was a very real concern for families who had lived here for generations.

This sense of disbelief and fear for the future are ones which I am sure Norman would have sensed during that time. Local businesses could be badly affected and the potential fracturing of the community was another real possibility. Norman had connections to both the business and local community.

Millom Ironworks shaped the town of Millom not only in terms of the industrial landscape but of the human one as well. The sound of the Ironworks buzzer formed the pattern of the day, not only for the workforce but the townspeople too. When you heard it sounding out over the town you knew that it was marking particular times in the day. My strongest memory is of the 12 o'clock buzzer as I sat in the Girl's School classroom situated above the town library. My seat was right at the back of the classroom nearest to the window and closest to the Ironworks. I knew that once I heard that buzzer then it was pencil down, books away and lunch wasn't long afterwards. I guess I must have been pretty hungry by this time and the 12 o'clock sound was a very welcome one for me.

If I remember correctly, if the wind was in a different direction then the sound of the buzzer was much fainter as it blew the sound away from over the town.

Reflecting on Norman's poem 'On the Closure of Millom Ironworks' during my recent research, it made me think again about the significance of the wind-direction blowing over the town. I have mentioned the sound of the buzzer being fainter if the wind was in a different quarter but another memory concerns washdays. Traditionally washdays were Mondays when all the washing was hung out in long lines across the backstreets to dry. We were living in Market Street which is one of the long rows of terraced houses leading down towards the Ironworks site. If the wind suddenly changed direction it blew back the smut and grime from the furnaces over the town. I can recall much mumbling and grumbling by the housewives as they gathered together in the backstreet to survey their now grimy washing on the lines! Then the washing would either have to be brought back in for another wash or for very vigorous shaking out to try and get rid of the grime. This was not popular with the busy housewives.

Perhaps the most vivid memory for me of this particular time was of the final day of Millom Ironworks. I was on my way home from school and always passed through the Market Square. On this particular day, Friday 13th September 1968, it was the sound which attracted my attention first. I could hear a drum beating in the distance from somewhere along St George's Road. The slow, steady beat of the drum gradually got louder and louder and a crowd of people were gathering, making it more difficult for me to walk across the Square easily: a small procession of people were making their way along St George's Road and into the Market Square. To my surprise the group of workers from the Ironworks were carrying a fake coffin and were shouting out to the passersby. Not being very old, or very aware of the significance of the situation, I watched for a short time but continued on my way home a bit puzzled by what I had witnessed and keen to report to my family the latest events regarding the Ironworks.

IRONWORKS MEMORIES (continued)

Soon after this I attended a public meeting in St George's Hall and found I was standing next to Yvonne Nicholson. People were having to stand all around the edges of the room and even sitting in the deep window sills because there were so many there. I remember Yvonne explaining to me that Norman wanted to know everything that was being discussed in the town at that time but because of concerns for his health he wouldn't attend such a large gathering with the associated risk of picking up an infection. Yvonne was obviously Norman's eyes and ears around Millom at such a critical time and would have probably made a valuable contribution to his understanding of events.

After the Ironworks closed my parents bought Marsh House, one of many properties previously owned by the company, and sold off soon after the closure. The garden boundary was right next to the Ironworks site, in fact the large greenhouses were kept warm in the winter supplied by a system of piped warm water which was redirected from cooling the furnace!! Due to the proximity of the house and garden to the factory site we were in a prime position for observing the gradual demolition of the many buildings. I can recall that my father would be notified by the man responsible for blasting every time there was to be an explosion and the family would go and stand in the garden and watch as various structures were demolished. The noise was often deafening and the earth tremors felt strongly underfoot. It was quite an exciting spectacle to begin with until my parents started to notice cracks appearing in various walls of the house! Gradually the buildings were flattened, the furnaces dismantled and the slagbank lowered and grassed over leaving few reminders of the industrial activity which had taken place on the site for over a hundred years.

Finally one of my favourite memories connected with the Ironworks was as a little girl walking out with my father on a dark Sunday evening and walking along the embankment (the Banking) to watch the slag being tipped. I can still remember vividly the sight of the hot slag lighting up the dark night sky as it was tipped out of the side of the wagons and then watching as it flowed in dazzling runnels down the sides of the slagbank. The glow of the bright colours – yellows, reds and orange – contrasted against the night sky is a memory which lingers long after the event.



**The Ironworks Core—which couldn't be blasted away
Summer Event 2012 (photograph by Glenn Lang)**

Forthcoming events

The next NN Society event will be the **Norman Nicholson Day** to be held on the **13th October 2012 in the Millom Network Centre, Millom**. Further details in separate information sheet, and on the website.

The day will start with registration and coffee between 9.30 and 10.00 a.m., with the first event, a talk by Neil Curry on Norman Nicholson and William Cowper, starting at 10.00 a.m. This will be followed by a refreshment break and then by the reading and discussion of some of the poems linked to Kathleen Raine, which Dr. Alan Beattie first discussed in this year's AGM and which are also presented in this issue of *Comet*. After lunch the focus will be on Nicholson's life in words and music. The event will take the shape of a 'Desert Island Discs', with readings from Nicholson's writings and extracts from music mentioned in those writings.

There should be plenty of chances in the course of the day to meet up with other members of the society and of the committee and to present ideas for the 2014 centenary celebrations, still very much at the forefront of our minds.

Further information about the event is included in a separate information sheet, to be sent out with this issue of *Comet*.

This will be the last official event of this year. Ideas for next year's events are very welcome and can be conveyed by e-mail to any member of the committee. Our contact details are as follows:

Dr Ian Davidson, Chair of the Norman Nicholson Society: [...]
Glenn Lang, Secretary: [...]
Peggy Troll, Membership Secretary: [...]
Dorothy Richardson, Treasurer: [...]
Antoinette Fawcett, Editor of *Comet*: [...]
Dr David Cooper: [...]
Sue Dawson: [...]
Stan Towndrow: [...]
Neil Curry: [...]
Wendy Bracegirdle: [...]

Another important Society contact is Charlie Lambert, who has set up and is running the new Norman Nicholson Society website, and who welcomes items of news suitable for publishing on the website, as well as any suggestions for improvement. The aim is to keep the website fresh and relevant, and to act as a initial contact point for people interested in Norman Nicholson and his work. Charlie can be contacted at the following e-mail address: [...] [**Editorial Note:** March 2019: The current email address for the Society is norman-nicholson@gmail.com]

On **Saturday 20th October** the Cumbria Industrial History Society will hold its Annual Conference at the Victory Hall, Broughton-in-Furness. The topic for the day is 'Some Industries of South-west Cumbria', and will feature several talks relevant to those interested in Millom's history and that of the local area. The day starts at 9.30 a.m. Further information can be found on the CIHS website: <http://www.cumbria-industries.org.uk/2012autumnconf.htm>.

[**March 2019:** all the personal email addresses above have been redacted.]



Comet: The Newsletter of the Norman Nicholson Society. Editor: Antoinette Fawcett
3, Burlington Street, ULVERSTON, Cumbria LA12 7JA. antoinettefawcett@hotmail.com
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. Letters to the Editor, Members' news, and notice of events may also be sent in.