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Cornthwaite, 'the clearing of corn',
My mother's maiden name—whose umpteenth great-grandfather,
Off-come from a northern voe, hacked thorn,
Oak-scrub and birch from rake and beck-bank
To sow his peck of oats, not much of a crop...

Now in my own day's dale,
under the slant
Scree of unstable time, I lop,
Chop and bill-hook at thickets and rankness of speech,
Straining to let light in, make space for a word,
To hack out once again my inherited thwaite
And sow my peck of poems,
not much of a crop.

Norman Nicholson

From *Cornthwaite*, p. 354 COLLECTED POEMS

My Cousin Norman

By Doreen Cornthwaite

"Oh! Look! There is a cousin of yours. I'll introduce you," said Jennifer Riley, another cousin, on my mother's side.

Walking towards us, arm in arm, was a couple dwarfed by the huge sea defences at Haverigg. I was introduced to Norman and Yvonne and after a brief chat we went our separate ways.

This was way back in 1968. I know this for the following week a typed letter arrived at my office addressed to 'My Charming Cousin' (the flirt).

This was the start of almost twenty years of correspondence (some dated and some not) for Norman didn't have a phone. Those twenty years were the most wonderful period, for Norman and Yvonne

involved me in all the minutiae of their lives.

They often had me to stay—sometimes in the library or attic where he wrote. In the mornings I would take Norman out in their car and in the afternoons, while Norman rested, Yvonne took me out.

Norman's three great 'loves' were wildflowers, music and cricket—not necessarily in that order. When I eventually bought a car, Norman and Yvonne would come to stay and we explored the area north of Carlisle. Driving them could be quite a nightmare for if Norman saw an unusual plant he would shout "Stop" and, no matter how dangerous it was, I had to while he got out to examine this rare plant! I found a letter where he mentioned such an incident and the flower turned out to be Water Chickweed and reasonably common!

His life after Yvonne was just as busy as before. This surprised him for he gave no thought that people admired him and enjoyed his poetry and prose.

His housekeepers, Jean and Margaret, looked after him wonderfully well. The weekends were lonely though, so I would go down to do odd jobs and take him out for a pub lunch, or have him to stay.

Whenever Norman received exciting news of an award or TV programme etc., he could barely contain himself to keep quiet, so he would tell me and thus relieve himself of the responsibility until the news was made public!

I was saddened to read in WEDNESDAY EARLY CLOSING that Norman had no memory of his mother nor a picture.

[article continues overleaf]

My Cousin Norman (continued)

I asked Aunt Sally Wilson if she had a photo and she produced one of a pretty, delicate-looking woman that I framed and gave to Norman. That was an emotional moment for him and us. He was pleased he did not get the photo before publishing WEC though!

I miss him very much and feel privileged to have had a famous poet for a relative and friend.

Doreen Cornthwaite

From: *The Lakers*

*Man will once more
be an integral part of
his own environment.
He will know the
rhythm of the sea, the
sun, and the seasons;
he will eat, drink and
breathe the natural
vitality of the earth
in food, water and
air. And at the same
time, he will modify
that environment by
the action of his own
intellect, living in a
continual reciprocity
of challenge and
response, giving and
taking, shaping and
being shaped.*

NN The Lakers 214 - 215

Norman Nicholson: The Poetics of Place and Space by David Cooper

My interest in Norman Nicholson and his writing first developed during my time as Arts Officer at the Wordsworth Trust, Dove Cottage. I vividly remember picking up a copy of *Greater Lakeland* from Sam Read's Bookshop in Grasmere and I was quickly drawn in by the physicality of Nicholson's prose and the sensitivity of his understanding of the Cumbrian landscape. From the topographical books I soon moved onto the poetry, the plays, and even the two novels, getting my hands on texts whenever and wherever I could.

I was absolutely staggered, though, by the fact that Nicholson's work has received relatively little scholarly attention. In 1973, Philip Gardner's excellent monograph was published in New York as part of the Twayne's English Authors Series; and, over the years, there have been various articles and essays printed in literary magazines and journals, with the poets, William Scammell and Matt Simpson, endeavouring to position Nicholson's writing within appropriate critical contexts. But, astonishingly,

Neil Curry's characteristically illuminating pamphlet (*Northern Lights*, 2001) is the only study of Nicholson and his writing to be published in the UK. There is clearly a critical gap to be filled.

For over two years I have been working on Nicholson within the Department of English & Creative Writing at Lancaster University, exploring his work as a poet of place and space. Anyone interested in Nicholson's writing cannot fail to notice its defining features: the celebration of the local and the particular; the resolute commitment to place; the ceaseless interest in geology, or what Nicholson calls 'the thirty thousand feet of solid Cumberland' ('To the River Duddon') on which his native county is built. But, for all its specificity, Nicholson's poetry also raises important, wider questions. How does a writer deal with earlier poetic representations of a particular landscape?

How does a poet represent the provincial com-

munity of which he is a member? What does it mean for a writer to spend (virtually) a lifetime in the one location? I know that my thesis won't provide definitive answers to these questions, but, instead, my principal ambition is to offer new ways of reading, and thinking about, Nicholson's poetry of place and space.

It is not even crucial that others agree with my analyses and assertions, since the ultimate aim of any piece of criticism must be to stimulate, to open up debate: it is this type of ongoing dialogue which is vital, I feel, if the Society is to bring Norman Nicholson's poetry to the attention of a wider, twenty-first century audience.

David Cooper

For more information on David Cooper's research, please write to him at the Department of English & Creative Writing, Bowland College, Lancaster University, LA1 4YT; or e-mail:

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The Cock's Nest

The Spring my father died—it was winter, really,
February fill-grave, but March was in
Before we felt the bruise of it and knew
How empty the rooms were—that spring
A wren flew into our yard...

TEXT OF POEM REDACTED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS.

THE FULL TEXT OF THIS POEM CAN BE FOUND ON
p. 310 of Norman Nicholson (1994) *Collected
Poems*, (ed. Neil Curry) London: Faber and Faber.

News from the Society and Future Plans

Those of you who attended the inaugural meeting of the Norman Nicholson Society, on March 31st, 2006, will know that it was a tremendous success.

Approximately 50 people attended, many from other areas of Cumbria, particularly from the north of the county. We are pleased to report that we already have a membership of more than 70 and we hope that the numbers will continue to grow as the society develops and a programme of events takes shape.

The business of the evening was centred on the passing of a constitution and on the election of a committee.

After the discussion of financial matters and possible future plans, the rest of the evening was spent in listening to Neil Curry's witty and scholarly presentation on *Norman Nicholson: West Coast Poet*. We hope to publish the text of that speech in a future issue.

Members may be wondering what is happening now that the Society has been launched.

Plans are underway for a possible mini-festival in 2007 to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Norman Nicholson's death, with the hope that this may grow to something bigger in future years. Members are warmly

***I hack and hammer
At the handiwork of verse...***
from Norman Nicholson's
poem 'Caedmon'

***Work in progress from
the Norman Nicholson
From the Nicholson
Project***

...I hear in the distance
The soft swash of tide on
shingle.
Starlings slip silently
Across the slate sky...

Peggy Troll

If a daisy chain snaps
it can't be fixed –
unbridled sunburst
promises delight.

Brendan Thompson

encouraged to contribute ideas for this event. Nearer the time we will also need to draw on volunteer help to get this project off the ground.

As part of the festival we hope to hold an exhibition of materials relating to Norman's life and work, as well as a complementary exhibition of poems, creative writing and photographs which will come out of the Norman Nicholson Project—a Community Project funded by Millom TIC, Cope-land Borough Council and English Heritage.

Finally, please do contact the editor of this newsletter with suggestions, or material, for short articles relating to Nicholson's life and work: for example, memories of Nicholson, creative writing, discussions of his poetry and prose, articles relating to his interests, letters — all are warmly invited.

Antoinette Fawcett

*It is said that a
child's use of
language depends, to
a great extent, on
his verbal
relationship with his
mother during the
first five years of his
life. So maybe the
very fact that I am
writing this book is
due to the influence
of the mother I
cannot remember. I
have no photograph
of her; no visual
image whatever.
All I have is a few
dates and data.*

*She was thirty-nine
when she died in
March 1919. Like
my father she was
one of the first
generation to be
born and bred in the
town of Millom.*

Norman Nicholson
"Wednesday Early Closing",
p. 14. (Faber, 1975)

A Reading of 'The Cock's Nest' by Matt Simpson

It would be invidious to say that this is my one-and-only favourite Nicholson poem; it is however true to say it is a favourite. Singling it out here does not in any way carry the implication I think it his best poem. It is of course a beautifully written poem, one that confronts loss in an unsentimental and very individual (human) way. The emotion is held in check by matter-of-factness (the 'homebred gumption' Norman claimed as a characteristic) and a brightly focused poet's eye always delighting in detail. It is a poem that wears its carefully sustained ambivalences with touching honesty.

It opens with a subtle confusing of seasons: spring (traditionally a season of renewal), the one in which Norman's father died in 1945, is remembered as a kind of winter and a sense of delayed reaction is conveyed as March comes in with a rush of energy before anyone can register their (Nicholson significantly uses the word 'we') loss or, in that marvellous word, feel the 'bruise' of it. February's 'fill-grave' (is this a local expression?) has to make way for the gambolling lambs, brassy daffodils and nest-building wren. The fatherless and – unless we count poems as progeny – unfathering poet is witness to the fathering processes that go into creating springtime renewal. The Freudian associations of the title are obvious. A tension is established between active bird and passively observing poet... movement and stasis.

Where there is life there's hope: the poet follows the nest-building activities of the diminutive wren with a tender fascination. It is all happening close to home, in Nicholson's familiar world of Millom: the poem anchors itself affectionately in the realities of Walter Wilson's Warehouse, the school playground, Nicholson's own house with its bathroom outflow pipe, the old allotments, where old and new try to live side by side, but where change is also observable: the allotments, like the great Millom Ironworks of other poems, have fallen into disuse or gone. As ever, we are carefully brought to a realisation of the universal through close observation of the particular.

Nicholson admires the doggedness of the wren and if he doesn't exactly cherish the hope implied in its activities he does allow readers to sense something of it for themselves. It is largely because of this that the poem's ending is so poignant. It catches us off-guard. The nest-building of the wren in this particular instance and in this location does not father anything: the hen bird 'didn't choose our yard.'

We start to anticipate April as March goes out to a 'tinny' fanfare; there are 'new-dug potato beds' but the 'still bare creeper' carries a fine ambivalence – 'bare' reminds us of winter and death while 'still' tells us it will soon sprout leaves. The poem ends with the matter-of-factness we noted earlier. Two simple statements, both poignant and true:

The cock's nest with never an egg in it,
And my father dead.

End-note: PROVINCIAL PLEASURES

This is the time when the year looks dead and done for. Greenness has gone out of the world and fruitfulness has not yet come. Everywhere there is a dry, mean-looking seediness. The grass is brown as leather, and down by Oatrigg Pool the pink restharrow is in pod... even in the allotment the flowers look tired and neglected—heavy marigolds, fat overblown roses, and sweet-peas like birds exhausted after a long migration. From PP, p. 153— *August*