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**Memories of Norman Nicholson by Peggy Troll**

I seem to have known Norman Nicholson all my life. Not *quite* true, though, like him, I was born in Millom and spent most of my childhood in the town. It was only later when I went to the grammar school that his name kept cropping up: 'You know, the writer, lives in St. George's Terrace. His father has the gent's outfitter's'— (which was where my mother bought my uniform) - and I began to be aware of him as part of the Millom scene.

He appeared tall and fairly old to me then - not surprising since I was the smallest and youngest girl in the school - and he didn't have those characteristic bushy sideburns which made him instantly recognisable in later years. Occasionally in school our attention was drawn to Norman's increasing standing as poet and playwright but not to the work itself - literature rarely ventured beyond Hardy! But birthdays and Christmas were opportunities to bully the family into buying his books as they appeared - not that I got to read them first - they'd often 'gone the rounds' before they reached me! I was an awkward nervous teenager the first time I asked him to autograph a book, but he was so approachable I never hesitated again.

During my time at Nottingham University, Professor V. de Sola Pinto invited Norman to give a poetry reading to the Literary Society. *The Lakers* had recently been published and he talked about that too. I couldn't think of any erudite question to ask him - what did that matter when he seemed so delighted to see a familiar Millom face - as for me, this was Norman Nicholson, *my* poet from my

Millom - I was bursting with pride and lived on reflected glory for the rest of the term!

Some years later, I came back to Millom to teach in the new Comprehensive School: Yvonne, Norman's wife, and I were colleagues in the English department and I came to know Norman as a friend. Conversation with him was an adventure, often witty and humorous, and a learning curve for me in many aspects of literature. He was immensely knowledgeable, too, about geology and botany of which I knew little. He had a passion for wild flowers (see 'Weeds'!) and could identify all the wilting samples I brought him from my walks. He was especially fond of the bee orchid which used to grow at Hodbarrow until the mines closed and the whole area was scooped out to make a marina, after which it disappeared. Norman told me the story of how, a few years later, someone knocked on his

door to tell him that they'd seen a bee orchid. He and Yvonne, in great excitement, rushed down to Hodbarrow, only to find that the rare flower had been driven over and flattened!

Shortly after he died in 1987, I was walking at Hodbarrow and found a bee orchid - a poignant yet exciting experience for me. Since then, colonies of bee orchids have sprung up in several places on the site - and even in the middle of my neighbour's lawn! I like to think that would have surprised and delighted Norman.

*Peggy Troll*

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Decoy queens,  
Honeyed and furred,  
Linger and cling  
To each lolling lobe;  
Nervous, green-veined,  
Lilac sepals  
Prick at the twitch  
Of a pollinating wing.

From: *Bee Orchid at Hodbarrow* by Norman Nicholson

## A Visit to the Norman Nicholson Archive

Some members of the committee were able to visit the Nicholson Archive at the John Rylands Library in Manchester in June, 2006 in preparation for some of the events we are hoping to hold to mark the anniversary of Norman's death in 1987.

We were guided around the library and the archive by Stella Halkyard, Modern Literary Archivist, and her assistant, Fran Baker. We were privileged to be able to see some of the amazing wealth of materials concerning Nicholson's life and work and Fran had sorted out some particular gems which brought us very close in spirit to Norman.

We were able to view the holograph draft manuscript of the poem 'The Pot Geranium' from the "Poems in Progress File"; items from the " 'Comet Come' File" including an annotated typescript of the poem; photographs of Norman in his sitting room in St George's Terrace; and a letter from Ted Hughes to Norman Nicholson concerning the piece Hughes wrote for Nicholson's Festschrift "Between Comets".

From Neil Curry's Papers there was an extremely interesting letter from the poet Kathleen Raine describing Norman as "a good man, a fine poet... he looks like a splendid Cumbrian crag; but not too harsh...".

But the most charming and revealing

item must have been the recently acquired small manuscript compiled by Nicholson in his youth containing light, amusing rhymes and drawings. What was especially interesting was the fact that this had been written and illustrated in conjunction with Ted Fisher who later became Ted Hughes' English teacher (thereby forging the beginnings of a spiritual link between Nicholson and Hughes, Millom and Mytholmroyd). Some members of the committee thought that they recognized Norman Nicholson's handwriting in this manuscript, but incorporated within the most neat and careful penmanship one could ever wish for. We estimated that Norman may have been about fifteen when this homemade book was compiled - and found it touching to see how he was already so interested in creating verse. And the sense of humour - school-boyish and wicked!

In late 2007 we hope to organize a trip for members to the John Rylands Library in order to view the Nicholson Archive once it has transferred back to its home on Oxford Road (currently under renovation). There will also be a small display of Nicholson-related materials in the Curator's Case in the John Rylands Library at about the same time.

Many thanks to Stella Halkyard and Fran Baker for their hospitality and cooperation. Hopefully this will be the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship between the society and the John Rylands Library.

Antoinette Fawcett

## Irvine Hunt's talk about Norman Nicholson—September 30th 2006

On Saturday, 30th September, members gathered at the Guide Hall, Millom, for the first of our events in this inaugural year.

The afternoon began with a visit to St. George's Church to view the Norman Nicholson Window. Dorothy Hodgson, leader of the committee which steered the project through to the window's installation and dedication in July, 2000, described how the artist, Christine Boyce, drew her inspiration from the poems, so many of which find direct expression in the structure and breathtaking colours of her design. Our thanks are due to Dorothy for her clear and enthusiastic presentation.

Irvine Hunt then shared some of his memories of NN. His deceptively easy, informal style hides a wealth of experience in establishing a rapport with his audience and

his recollections, together with a choice of readings introduced with perception and humour, soon had them responding with reminiscences of their own - Norman's visit to Buckingham Palace to receive the Queen's Medal for Poetry, the letter Norman wrote to the teenage daughter of Harry, the subject of his poem, 'To the Memory of a Millom Musician' - these and many more contributed to our knowledge and appreciation of Norman, the man. Our thanks to Irvine for an enjoyable and inspiring talk.

A measure of the audience's enjoyment was their reluctance to leave - or was it also the truly sumptuous refreshments kindly supplied by the ladies of St. George's Church! Our grateful thanks are due to them and to all who made the afternoon such a memorable occasion.

Peggy Troll

## PLANS FOR 2007

Plans are well underway for an interesting year of celebrations to mark the 20th anniversary of Norman Nicholson's death. For these to work we need help and involvement from our membership, especially in planning for and delivering a successful mini-festival in October.

In the near future we will hold a birthday party for Norman on January 6th 2007 which will launch the celebratory year. We will toast Norman outside his home in St. George's Terrace and then return to the Guide Hall for readings, music, a birthday cake and a buffet. Further details are on the enclosed reminder slip.

A number of events are planned for the year amongst which is the AGM in March at which David Cooper will deliver the keynote speech on Nicholson's Landscape.

Later in the year we will have a talk by Professor Brian Whalley on Nicholson's Geology. There will also be a trip to the Nicholson Archive, as described in the adjacent article.

The climax will be the mini-festival in October which will combine artistic responses to Nicholson's works from local schoolchildren and from Cumbrian artists with lectures, workshops, readings and tours. Further details will be released at the AGM and in the March issue of *Comet*.

Finally, a plea from the editor. Please send in relevant articles or letters to Antoinette Fawcett. Contributions eagerly awaited! Contact details are on the back page.

## Flashback to 1977: Norman Nicholson receives the Queen's Medal

Those members who attended the wonderful lecture given by Irvine Hunt on the 30th September 2006 will remember that Doreen Cornthwaite read out extracts from a letter from Yvonne Nicholson about Norman Nicholson's trip to Buckingham Palace to receive the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. The letter is dated 8/12/1977. Yvonne describes in lively detail many elements of the visit, including the warm and friendly reception given to Norman, Yvonne and their two nieces, Liz and Sarah, by Sir John Betjeman (J. B.), the then Poet Laureate. In the extract Yvonne also mentions Sir Rennie Maudsley, Keeper of the Privy Purse. She writes: N. and J. B. came out after fifteen minutes or so. "It went marvellously. He was very good indeed!" reported Sir John, who also told us that before N. went in, the Queen had read aloud several lines from 'The Closing of Millom Ironworks', saying she liked them. Norman confessed afterwards that the first few seconds were lost to him, but after that there was no difficulty in the conversation. As usual, he talked his head off. The Queen kept the copy of 'Stitch and Stone' - "to read when I have some time. This has been such a busy

year, but I have found it encouraging." Her Majesty wanted to know how the volume came about. She said she could see it would be very difficult to write poems to pictures. She was also interested in N's connection with Ted Hughes, whom she remembered from last year and from the investiture about a fortnight previously. He obviously made an impression.

We were then taken back to Sir Rennie's room to large whiskies and more talk. We finally left the Palace at about 1.50 p.m. Sir John took us all to his home (including the girls) for champagne, then to his local Italian restaurant for lunch. We returned to his home afterwards where he invited us to choose one of his books each. I held back because I thought four would be too many.

I managed to drop the medal in the road, getting out of the car.

We did not get away from J.B.'s until 4.30 p.m. and finally reached Barnes, exhausted but jubilant. The medal is a very handsome,

gold-plated Britannia silver coin. On one side is the Queen's head and the inscription 'Presented by Her Majesty, Elizabeth II' and a 1937 design by Dulac representing the poetic muse and inscribed 'For Poetry' on the other side. Round the milled edge is NORMAN NICHOLSON 1977. It weighs about three ounces. It was a very happy occasion.

Another memory contributed by a member of the audience at Irvine Hunt's talk was that of Mrs Majevicz who owned a jeweller's shop in Millom together with her husband. She remembered that the poet had once asked her husband to mend a medal which had been badly dented. To his great grief Mr Majevicz had not been able to carry out this repair.

'Could this have been the Queen's Medal?' we all wondered, 'and had the dent been caused by the amusing little accident Yvonne described in her letter?' What a thought!

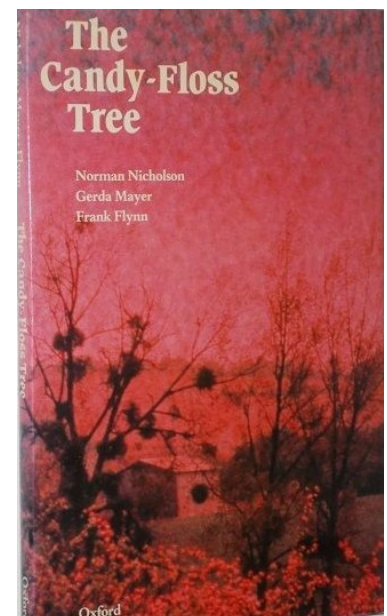
From: *Ten Yards High*

I'm ten yards high.  
The jackdaws fly  
Out from the chimney-pots  
As I stride by.  
'Clumsy clown!  
The mothers cry  
When I push down the  
washing  
With the jut of my thigh.  
'Look where you put  
Your foot!' - but I  
Don't give a hoot...

Part of "Ten Yards High" by Norman Nicholson  
First published in [The Candy Floss Tree](#)

**TEXT OF POEM REDACTED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS.**

THE FULL TEXT OF THIS POEM CAN BE FOUND ON p. 384 of Norman Nicholson (1994) *Collected Poems*, (ed. Neil Curry) London: Faber and Faber.



## Norman Nicholson's Poems for Children

Doreen Cornthwaite has passed on to the editor of 'Comet' an interesting snippet from a letter written to her by Norman Nicholson. The letter is dated February 19, 1984 and it concerns the collection of poems for children: "The Candy-Floss Tree".

Nicholson writes: "The Ten-Yards-High and Five-Inch Tall poems, are both of course, children's fantasies, but they

are expressed in not particularly childlike language. Technically they are quite sophisticated — not that I expect a child to notice. In TEN YARDS HIGH, I've achieved eighteen line endings on the one rhyme, as well as four assonances on the same rhyme, and seven uses of the same vowel sound with a different consonant, e.g. eye and height."

Part of "Ten Yards High" is

printed on this page, so the reader will be able to compare what Nicholson has said about the poem with what he has achieved.

What is interesting is his focus on the technical aspects of the poem, rather than on the innocently naughty children's fantasy which is its subject-matter.

Antoinette Fawcett

## A Favourite Nicholson Poem

### On The Dismantling Of Millom Ironworks

This poem is far too long to print in the Newsletter, but that cannot be allowed to disqualify it. You can find it on page 49 of *Sea To The West* or on page 359 of the *Collected Poems*.

One of the reasons I like this poem is the continuity we see in it: from Wordsworth to early Nicholson and on to late Nicholson. Wordsworth had written in the second of his *River Duddon Sonnets*:

*Child of the clouds! remote  
from every taint  
Of sordid industry thy lot is cast.*

And in his first full-length collection, *Five Rivers*, published in 1944, this had amused the young Nicholson. In his poem *To The River Duddon* he is quite dismissive of Wordsworth:

*But you and I know better, Duddon lass.  
For I, who've lived for nearly  
thirty years  
Upon your shore, have seen the  
slagbanks slant  
Like scree sheer into the sand,  
and seen the tide  
Purple with ore back up the*

*muddy gullies*

This of course was in the days when the Millom Ironworks was the biggest in Europe, but twenty-four years later the government closed it down and in his collection *A Local Habitation* (1972) we have *On The Closing of the Millom Ironworks*. Time passes and by the time of *Sea To The West* (1981) there is hardly any trace of it left. He quotes Wordsworth again, but this time he has to eat his words, "I laughed at those words once," he admits. I like this sense not only of a discussion with Wordsworth but with himself too.

One of the things I admire most about this poem is its honesty. In some of what one might call Nicholson's socio/political poems, such as *Windscale*, *Scafell Pike*, and even *Weeds*, I feel he strives too hard for effect and the result is more like posturing. But here the emotion is clearly felt. We can hear the speaking voice and there is a grim restraint in its language of lament. There is precision in that language too:

*The river seeped from the  
marshes  
In a flux of haematite.*

There is even restraint in the awesome pessimism of the poem's closing lines:

*And maybe the ghost of Wordsworth,  
seeing further than I can,  
Will stare from Duddon Bridge, along  
miles of sand and mudflats  
To a peninsula bare as it used to be,  
and, beyond, to a river  
Flowing, untainted now, to a bleak,  
depopulated shore.*

But what I always remember whenever I think of this poem is the wonderful detail in the following piece:

*They cut up the carcass of the  
old ironworks  
Like a fat beast in a slaughter-  
house: they shovelled my child-  
hood  
Onto a rubbish heap. Here my  
father's father,  
Foreman of the back furnace,  
unsluiced the metal lava  
To slop in fiery gutters across the  
foundry floor  
And boil round the workmen's  
boots; here five generations  
Toasted the bread they earned at  
a thousand degrees Fahrenheit.*

Toasted at a thousand degrees Fahrenheit. What can you say to that?

Neil Curry

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### End-note: Wednesday Early Closing

To me the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks were men like the Watsons of Millom Castle, or the Tysons of Beck Farm, or the Falconers of Water Bleas. I have heard that right up to the time of the eighteenth century, you could find country people who still believed that Jesus spoke in English, and, so far as I was concerned, the shepherds who found him in the stable spoke in the Cumberland dialect.

Norman Nicholson *Wednesday Early Closing*, p. 94