

Special points of interest:

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Comet: the Newsletter of the Norman Nicholson Society

MEMORIES OF THE W.E.A. by Norman Nicholson

The following article was written by Norman Nicholson himself and has been submitted by Peggy Troll.

"In November, 1930, when I was sixteen and my sights were set on Higher School Certificate and the University, I was found to be suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis and was sent to a sanatorium in the New Forest. Two years later, when I returned home to Millom, I had put away all thoughts of University and

was prepared to discipline myself to a strict régime of regular rest, fresh air and gentle exercise..."

THE TEXT OF THIS ARTICLE HAS BEEN REDACTED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS.

THE FULL TEXT CAN BE READ BY CONSULTING THE PAPERS OF NORMAN NICHOLSON IN THE JOHN RYLANDS LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER NCN4/1/4/3

The following notes summarize some of the points made by Norman Nicholson in the article.

1. Norman Nicholson's Reading at the Linford Sanatorium

- an average of 10 to 12 books a week including detective novels and works by George Bernard Shaw, Arnold Bennett.

2. Norman Nicholson's Reading at Home in Millom when recovering from TB

- James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, the Jacobean dramatists and T.S. Eliot.

This period of recuperation and being 'totally cut off from

the literary world' lasted about four years.

In 1937 the chairman of Millom W.E.A. (the Workers' Educational Association) invited Norman to attend a course of modern poetry.

Norman says that the lecturer was 'a young man from further up the coast' and that the classes turned into a 'genial argument between him and me'. No one else in the class cared anything at all for modern poetry.

The following winter (1938) Norman himself was persuaded to 'give a course of twelve lectures on Modern Literature'.

He found it physically taxing to do the teaching but hugely enjoyable and received £12.00 in total for the course, the 'first money I had earned in my life'.

In 1939 Norman was asked to give the same twelve-week course in Whitehaven and later this was extended to two twenty-four week courses. Eventually Norman added a short course in 17th century literature to the mix. He taught these

courses in the winters of 1940 to 1943, during the 2nd World War, travelling up and down the coast by train, and teaching in Millom, Whitehaven and St. Bees.

Norman felt that he was providing a special kind of entertainment to 'audiences' and that the people who attended were not really students. The war years were very deprived and these classes gave people the opportunity to meet and discuss interesting issues. In Whitehaven the members of the class were mainly teachers, in Millom a mixture of teachers and elderly spinsters and at St. Bees there was a different crowd altogether. St. Bees was a public school and was also hosting students and teachers from Mill Hill 'so that the membership was made up largely of teachers and wives of teachers of two of England's famous public schools'.

What Norman particularly valued in these classes was the stimulus it gave for his own writing. His poems were already beginning to be published at this time.

Nicholson's Memories of the WEA

(continued from front page)

The classes teaching for the WEA now led to Norman being approached by the S.C.M. Press to write 'a kind of general survey of literature' from 1910 to the 1940s. The result was Nicholson's book *Man and Literature*.

However, Norman felt that the teaching was too taxing on his health and that he needed to give it up, otherwise he would suffer a 'second break-down.'

The article finishes with Norman looking back on the W.E.A. teaching episode as 'one of the turning-points in my life.'

Norman felt that the reading broadened his knowledge and that the interest the audiences showed in his lecturing gave him 'new heart'. He discovered the iron-ore and coal industry of West Cumberland, vital to both his themes and imagery. One of the most important publications of his poetry at this time was in Tamimuttu's *Poetry London*, which published Norman's poem 'Five Rivers'. This poem was based on his weekly train journey up the coast from Millom to Whitehaven.

Norman finished the article by saying: 'The poem now looks juvenile and rather naïve, yet it managed to define, in more ways than just the topographical, the main boundaries of what was to be my life's work'.

Norman Nicholson, Millom

From *Five Rivers*

*Brown clouds are blown against the
bright fells*

*Like celtic psalms from drowned western
isles.*

The slow rain falls like memory

And floods the beck and falls to the sea,

*And there on the coast of Cumberland
mingle*

*The fresh and the salt, the cinders and
the shingle.*

Nicholson Watch: Books About Books . . .

One of the core aims of the Norman Nicholson Society is to build up, over time, a comprehensive bibliography of material relating to the poet's life and work; and the long-term ambition is to make this information available as an on-line resource. In attempting to assemble this bibliography, we would be most grateful for *your* input. Have you come across Nicholson's name in a book or article? If so, please let us know where and when. In endeavouring to sustain Nicholson's critical reputation, it is vital that we position his work in as many contexts as possible; as a result, all your thoughts, comments and responses would be appreciated enormously.

In 1992, Andrew F. Wilson put together a full bibliography of published material both by and about Norman Nicholson. As Neil Curry acknowledges in the *Collected Poems*, this (as yet unpublished) bibliography is an incomparably useful resource for anyone interested in Nicholson studies. In the first instance, then, the Society hopes to build on Andrew's work by looking for material first published *after* 1992.

Although Philip Gardner's 1973 monograph (New York: Twayne Publishers) remains the only book-length study of Nicholson's writing, his work continues to attract critical attention. Terry Gifford, for instance, examines Nicholson's late poetry in Chapter Two of his critical study, *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), considering his work alongside that of George Mackay Brown, John Montague and R. S. Thomas. Although Gifford's conclusions remain open to debate, his readings open up ways of thinking about Nicholson's representation of urban and rural landscapes, the town and the country.

In 2001, the Carlisle-based press, Northern Lights, published Neil Curry's *Norman Nicholson*, as part of the pamphlet series, 'Modern Cumbrian Classics: New introductions by contemporary writers'. Curry begins the illuminating essay by suggesting that there is a

need to think again about the value and importance of Nicholson's topographical prose books: an argument that he reinforced at the inaugural meeting of the Society in Millom, March 2006.

More recently, three short articles on Nicholson have been brought together in *Hugging the Shore*, the collected essays of the Liverpool poet and critic, Matt Simpson (Nottingham: Shoestring Press, 2003). In all three pieces, Simpson offers characteristically sensitive – and personal – readings of Nicholson's poetry, celebrating the 'rootedness' and particularity of his writing.

Nicholson's work also features in Randall Stevenson's *The Last of England?: the twelfth and final volume in the magisterial Oxford Literary History*, which covers the years 1960 to 2000 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For Stevenson, Nicholson's great achievement is to document Millom's history as an iron town and to attempt to articulate what it means to inhabit a post-industrial community.

Finally, Sue Clifford and Angela King draw upon Nicholson's work in *England in Particular: A Celebration of the Commonplace, the Local, the Vernacular and the Distinctive* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2006). Nicholson is cited as a significant influence in the 'Acknowledgments' and the book's emphasis on the idiosyncrasies of local communities corresponds with the poet's own model of provincial life developed during the 1950s.

Clearly, this does not represent an exhaustive list of books published since 1992 and future issues of *Comet* will draw your attention to other responses to Nicholson's work; we also intend to bring you a list of recent poetry anthologies in which his work is featured. As ever, the hope is to open up the debate; to show that there are different ways of reading and thinking about Nicholson's life and work. The future of Nicholson's critical reputation needs to be founded upon this sort of discussion and disagreement.

David Cooper

The Millom Ironworks Closure – by David Boyd

a response to Nicholson's poem: 'On the Dismantling of Millom Ironworks', prompted by Neil Curry's commentary in 'Comet' Volume 1, Issue 3

David Boyd is a new member of the society with a strong interest both in Nicholson's life and work and in Iron and Steel-making. He worked as Personnel Manager at the Distington Engineering Company for many years, and before that in Personnel at the British Steel Plant in Workington. This article sets Nicholson's poem into a social and historical context and should be particularly interesting for those who do not have first-hand knowledge of the iron and steel-making processes.

These musings are the result of reading Neil Curry's commentary in 'Comet, Issue 3', of re-reading the original NN poem, and of having personally been very much involved with many parts of the West Cumbrian (and wider) iron and steel industry along with many of the upheavals and closures since circa 1970 (although not specifically within Millom).

I know only too well from personal experience how heartbreaking it is to see a once-busy and bustling workplace closed and emptied, bare of workers and equipment, especially if it has been for many years a major part of one's life. To the iron-workers of Millom, having to watch from their very doorsteps the violent obliteration of their former livelihoods – the felling and cutting-up and

taking-away of furnaces and chimneys and equipment – it must have been unbearable. Although Nicholson endured this terrible trauma indirectly, he clearly still felt it very deeply.

Firstly, and perhaps a little pedantically and unrealistically expecting that Nicholson was well-versed in metallurgy and the process of iron and steel making, I have to suggest a couple of technical inaccuracies in 'On the Dismantling of Millom Ironworks'. Of course, I am entirely open to correction on these points. My first point relates to the reference to 'the Bessemer process' towards the end of the poem. When invented in 1855 by Sir Henry Bessemer this process had been an enormous technological and commercial revolution in methods of bulk steel-making, but as far as I know, [with the exception of ill-fated trials in the late 1960's of a process called 'spray-steelmaking'] Millom was always solely an iron-works or blast-furnace plant, making haematite iron (which Bessemer steelmaking required) but not steel, and never employed the Bessemer process. In contrast, at the nearby Barrow Steel-works they did both, turning their blast-furnace iron into steel by means

of very many Bessemer converters, and it was Barrow rather than Millom which became in its heyday the biggest steel-works in Europe.

The second, smaller, inaccuracy relates to the melting-point of iron [and perhaps Nicholson can be granted some poetic licence here!] - this is in fact over 1,500 degrees Fahrenheit, rather than the single 'thousand degrees' to which the poem refers.

Just to continue briefly in an explanatory metallurgical mode, molten iron had to be either converted whilst still molten into steel, an immensely more useful material than iron for most industrial applications, or, with or without further refining or metallurgical adjustment, cast into user-friendly cobbles, usually into 'pig-iron', for ultimate remelting and use in foundries for iron casting in moulds.

Millom, as far as I know, made pig iron and had an iron foundry typically making cast-iron ingot moulds, which all steel-works worldwide once bought and used in large quantities in order to cast their molten steel output into intermediate, solidified shapes suitable for further processing [usually via rolling mills]

From: On the Dismantling of Millom Ironworks

An age
Is pensioned off—its
hopes, gains, profits,
desperations
Put into mothballs. A
hundred years of the
Bessemer process -
The proud battery of
chimneys, the hell-mouth
roar of the furnace,
The midnight suns ladled
across a cloudy sky -
Are archaeological data, and
the great-great-great-
grandchildren of my
grandfather's one-time
workmates now scrounge
this iron track
For tors and allies of ore
bunkered in the cinders and
the hogweed.
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.

NN

From: "The Lakers"

The Way of Nature, indeed, presents two simultaneous problems—how to avoid perverting the true order of nature, and how to maintain and assert our own humanity. Failure in either will bring disaster. Today, of course, it is perversion which is the greatest and most obvious danger. Everywhere we see the fertility being dried out of the soil like water from a de-hydrated egg. Valleys are dammed to generate electricity to work vacuum cleaners and hair-driers; acres of wood are ripped up to give a few thousand extra tons of open-cast coal; pasture is burnt and concreted to make a kennel-yard for bombers; ploughland is gouged and bricked to site factories for tin-cans and imitation cheese and synthetic rubber. Miles of forest are felled to make wood-pulp to make plastic to make a substitute for wood. Blinds are drawn and lights are devised to make a substitute for sun;...

NN

pp 213-14, *The Lakers*

The Millom Ironworks Closure (continued) — by David Boyd

into finished shapes such as girders, steel plates or rails. Ingot moulding of bulk steel is now almost totally obsolete worldwide, supplanted by the continuous casting process [first pioneered at Barrow in the 1950's, but that's another story entirely.]

Turning away now from these metallurgical meanderings, I'd like to make some observations about the Millom Ironworks closure in particular, and iron-making and ironworkers in general, and to try to relate both to Nicholson's life and work.

The closure of Millom Ironworks was a bizarre spin-off from the Government's nationalization of the UK steel industry in 1968. The operations of all the main UK steel companies, large or small, good, bad or indifferent, scattered as they were at that time throughout Britain, were taken into public ownership, but the curious and surprising decision was taken somewhere in Whitehall to exclude Millom Ironworks from the transfer. This led to its owners [The Cranleigh Group] closing it down, and to a great deal of political protest and controversy.

Whatever the economic and political considerations or

'justifications', Millom had been a relatively modern plant with an excellent and worldwide reputation for product quality. The closure decision threw up to 650 Millom breadwinners out of work [along with a further 300 at the Florence/Ullcoats Iron Ore Mine at Egremont, West Cumbria, which was subsequently taken over by the nationalized British Steel Corporation], tearing the heart out of a small town already suffering a severe decline from rundowns and cessations of local iron ore mining.

The effects upon the workers directly involved must have been profound and catastrophic, both economically and psychologically. Blast-furnaces were operated by very closely-knit teams of workers or 'crews' on a round-the-clock shift rota system tied to a regular and arduous routine of preparing for and accomplishing the 'tapping' of molten slag and iron from the furnace, clearing all the detritus away and re-instating everything in readiness for the next cast. Many hot, arduous and dangerous maintenance and repair jobs, such as to the furnace cooling and hot blast systems, also fell to the furnace 'crew'. Traditional hierarchies of job roles and remuneration usually prevailed – the top crew

member was the Furnace 'Keeper' who had overall charge of the furnace's 'frontside' manual workers and overall responsibility for the safe and efficient conduct of the furnace's operations. If molten iron and slag came into contact with any moisture whatsoever, the consequences were always explosive and often gravely damaging to human skin and flesh.

Workers started at the bottom of the furnace 'promotion line' as Labourers and worked their way up, by seniority/length of service, into more responsible and better-paid jobs. Particularly for the labourers, the work was tough, filthy, noisy, hot and hazardous, and moreover was totally 'occupationally-specific' – no other industry for example would, or could, ever contemplate employing an expert Blast-furnace Keeper with 20 or 30 years experience except at a small fraction of his former wages, with obvious implications for all kinds of immense human suffering to the unfortunate former blast-furnaceman and his dependants.

It was largely elemental work - with air, water, earth and flame and I think tended to shape the characters of those who did it. Lots of blast-furnacemen were more

The Millom Ironworks Closure (continued) — by David Boyd

than somewhat alarming on first encounter, but few were anything but absolutely honest, moral, straightforward and, above all, kind and caring, individuals. Judging by all the Irish surnames which peppered lists of blast-furnace workers, many had their family roots in Ireland and had once been economic migrants to England.

Seen from a 'macro' perspective, all this perhaps merely amounts to the inevitable consequences of irresistible global economic and technological change, impacting upon a remote and small 'one-industry' town. Even if Millom Ironworks had been made part of British Steel upon nationalization, the plant would doubtless have been closed down sooner or later, along with most other UK iron and steel-plants, just as inevitably as cheap imported iron ore and changing production technologies had closed down the Hodbarrow Haematite Ore Mines. Indirectly, Nicholson, his father, stepmother and their small business owed a big part, if not all, of their livelihoods to the money which the Ironworks' operations pumped into the Millom community. Closure of both the Ironworks and the haematite mines removed from Millom almost every

reason for its continued economic existence, yet it was an established community of people, all with the right to a civilised life, and it would have been unthinkable just to obliterate it from the map, as economic imperatives alone might have so starkly indicated and as Nicholson clearly perceived in 'On the Dismantling of Millom Ironworks', in his references, for example, to 'Wordsworth's vision' and the 'stark depopulated shore' in the poem's closing lines.

Examining Nicholson's image of the dismantled furnace, 'like a fat beast in a slaughter-house', the feelings evoked are extremely intense, but I wonder if he knew just how very apt this 'beast' image was, for any blast-furnace in production, as well as for one in abandonment?

Furnaces were highly temperamental, and difficult and unpredictable for their operators to control [one reason why Blast-furnace Keepers were traditionally very handsomely paid]. The molten and melting state of their contents had to be constantly maintained and monitored, virtually at all costs, otherwise potentially severe problems could quickly creep up unrecognized, and require exceedingly expensive engineering works to remedy. This

unpredictability of the furnace was, indeed, like that of a 'beast'.

The poem refers to 'one last core of clinker, like the stump of a dead volcano' which 'Juts up jagged and unblastable' – this may very possibly have been the 'bear' of iron and slag which had solidified in the furnace from its once-molten final contents, a poignant and lasting reminder of its 'death' when the furnace's gigantic hot blast system was silenced forever and 'the beast' was put down.

I do most fervently believe that all these issues illustrate the pressing need for an accurate and well-researched account of Nicholson's Life, inextricably intertwined as it was with Millom, and before recollections fade and / or fail totally. Nicholson's 'official' life abruptly ends with the conclusion of his own 'Wednesday Early Closing' and a continuation or sequel of his life story is surely very considerably overdue.... **David Boyd**

Editor's note: *Members of the society have had interesting discussions based on the contention that there was no Bessemer process at the Millom Ironworks. David has checked his facts with several people, including Jack Lancaster, co-author of "The History of Iron and Steel in West Cumbria", so his conclusions seem quite possible.*

Any further comments?

From: "The Lakers"

... windows are sealed and the atmosphere is reconditioned to make a substitute for fresh air. Even the animals are infected with a disease of unnatural living. Cows calve without knowing a bull; hens, imprisoned in batteries, secrete eggs in their sleep as an oyster secretes a pearl. And now, at last, the earth itself is no longer safe, no longer solid, no longer dependable. The very flowering of matter, the creative fission by which all energy and life comes into the universe, even this has become our greatest and most terrible danger.

In the face of all this, Wordsworth's teaching is vital and urgent. Yet of itself it is not enough, for the challenge of nature has to be met. Those who would ignore it, who would ask only that nature should be left as she is; those who want the countryside to be untouched, unaltered, are as much in error as the more obvious despoilers. They are exploiting the countryside for their pleasure, for a sentimental escape, just as the industrialists are exploiting it for power.

NN

pp 214, The Lakers, 1955

From 'The Lakers'

It will be clear by now, I hope, that these modern cults of nature—the Picturesque, the Romantic, the Athletic—are all symptoms of a diseased society, a consumptive's gasp for fresh air. They have arisen because modern man has locked himself off from the natural life of the land, because he has tried to break away from the life-bringing, life-supporting rhythms of nature, to remove himself from the element that sustains him. Because, in fact, he has become a fish out of water.

The cult of nature in a predominantly urban society is, however, not only a sign of disease; it is also a sign of health—a sign, at least, that man guesses where the remedy can be found.

N.N. *The Lakers*, 1955, p. 208

Editor's note: I have recently been re-reading Nicholson's prose book, "The Lakers" and was struck by his comments, near the end of the book, on the interdependence of human beings and the natural environment. More quotations from this book are on pages 4 and 5 of this issue.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY AND FUTURE PLANS

The Norman Nicholson Society is celebrating its first anniversary this March.

Please remember to come to the AGM if at all possible as we continue to make plans to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of Norman's death in 1987.

DATE OF AGM: Friday 30th March 2007

TIME: 7.30 PM

VENUE: The Guide Hall, Millom (behind the Public Library).

SPEAKER: David Cooper—Nicholson, Wordsworth and the Lake District

Other confirmed events for this year are:

SATURDAY, MAY 12th: Professor Brian Whalley—a talk and (optional) walk about Nicholson's Geology. Professor Whalley teaches geology at Queen's University, Belfast and has long used Nicholson's poetry as part of his teaching materials. He has commented on the unusual scientific accuracy of Nicholson's geological vision. This promises to be an extremely interesting and important lecture. Please do come. The cost of entry to

this event is included in your membership.

WEDNESDAY, 12TH JUNE in cooperation with the Centre for North Western Regional Studies of Lancaster University there will be a study day on Norman Nicholson with distinguished speakers in a range of Nicholson-related fields. There will be a cost for this day in the region of £30.00, to include lunch and refreshments. Full details of speakers and venue will sent out to the membership as soon as possible.

On September 6th—9th Millom will once again hold its **HERITAGE OPEN DAYS**. The work of Nicholson will be honoured in displays in St. George's Church and in his bedroom at Nicholson House.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 20TH— Mini-festival to celebrate Nicholson's life and work in this the 20th anniversary of his death. Plans include several speakers, poetry readings, a poetry walk, a guided walk of Nicholson sites, the display of the commissioned work of an artist in response to

Nicholson's writings, the results of the Nicholson Festival Schools Poetry Competition with an Award Ceremony, master-classes and workshops. We hope to get good media coverage for this event and to raise Nicholson's profile considerably. More details will follow as speakers and funding sources are confirmed.

Additionally:

At the **Words by the Water Festival** Antoinette Fawcett will read a Nicholson poem to open the Poetry Breakfast event and posters will be displayed to inform the visitors to the festival of the anniversary celebrations with Society Contact Details.

Antoinette will also give a lecture to the Duddon Local History Group on the topic of Nicholson's lifelong interest in the Duddon, its valley and people. This will be on the **27th March**.

In **December 2007** we will offer members the chance to visit the Norman Nicholson Archive at the John Rylands Library. Transport may be arranged for this trip, although obviously there would be a charge.

Please support us in all these events by volunteering and, most importantly, by your presence and ideas.

Finally, a reminder that 'Comet' is always looking for good contributions— letters, articles, creative writing, debates, memories, all are welcome! **Antoinette Fawcett**

Nicholson in the news

We aim to make Nicholson's work accessible to a new audience, so it's really gratifying that a number of articles have appeared in local newspapers and magazines about the society, about the related work of the Norman Nicholson Project and the exhibition of work which came

from the work of the group involved in the Norman Nicholson Project. Watch out also for Sue Allan's article on Norman Nicholson, and on the society, in the Arts supplement to the April / May issue of "Cumbria Life". This should be well worth reading!
A.F.

Happy 93rd Birthday, Norman!

January 6th this year saw the launch in Millom of a year of commemorative activities to mark the 20th anniversary of Norman Nicholson's death. But it was also a joyous celebration of Nicholson's life and work — a birthday party attended by about 40 people and a chance for society members to get to know each other socially.

After the official welcome by Peggy Troll, the guests walked to Nicholson House, 14 St George's Terrace, armed with champagne glasses and bottles of bubbly, ready to toast Norman's 93rd birthday. Neil Curry proposed the toast and glasses were raised in defiance of the cloudburst which rained

down on our heads at exactly the crucial moment. It almost felt as if Norman's mischievous spirit had turned on the heavenly taps in a burst of gleeful energy, or as a sardonic comment on our enthusiasm — although rainfall is, of course, life-productive so, as the raindrops watered down the alcohol, it seemed a highly appropriate blessing to the start of this year.

Back in the Guide Hall the party commenced. David Cooper kindly acted as the Master of Ceremonies and invited Doreen Cornthwaite to open the first of two reading sessions by sharing with us one of the interesting letters which Norman had sent her. Doreen read from the letter about his trip to

Norway in 1974, made possible by an award from the Society of Authors for "travel abroad". Doreen has generously donated these letters to the Norman Nicholson Archive at the John Rylands Library.

The readings from Nicholson's work were lively and varied and included a very touching rendition of "Hard of Hearing", as well as the closing paragraphs of "Wednesday Early Closing".

A beautiful birthday cake, a rousing rendition of "Happy Birthday, Dear Norman", a scrumptious and eagerly devoured buffet, as well as the chance to talk to and meet other members, made this a very joyful and sociable occasion. **AF**

We're on the Web!

Check out the Poetry Society Website and look for the Poetry Landmarks section (which is well worth exploring). There are now entries for Millom (Associated Place), *To the River Duddon* (Poem), and The Norman Nicholson Society (Poetry Organization). There is also an entry for 14, St. George's Terrace (at present, the very first in the list of Associated Places). This is an excellent virtual presence to have in this year of celebrations.

The Poetry Society web address is: <http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/>. The Poetry Landmarks page is: <http://more.poetrysociety.org.uk/landmark/front.php>

From *Five Rivers*

*The EHEN twists and flicks
its fin
Red as rhubarb beneath the grey
skin,
For its veins are stained with
the blood of the ore
Of the mines of Egremont and
Cleator Moor.
Here drill and navy break the
stone
And hack the living earth to
the bone;
Blood spurts like water from the
stricken rock,
Seeps into drain and gully and
trickles to the beck.
Green herringbones of
watercresses ride
On the tilt and tug of the red
tide;
Bladderwrack, thrift and salty
turf
Crust over cobbles at the edge of
the pink surf.*

N.N.

'My ways are circumscribed....' a letter from Brenda Thompson

I was interested to read David Cooper's article in Volume 1, Issue 2 of 'Comet'. I had spoken to him some time ago about his thesis on Norman Nicholson. The reason for this was because in 1989 I had completed my own dissertation, entitled *A Biographical Study of the Poet Norman Nicholson*. It was set out in four chapters dealing with Nicholson's early years and the influences surrounding him, the later years and his literary achievements, comparisons with his contemporary writers and finally questioned why his place amongst the Lakeland Poets was not so universally recognized.

My personal interest in Nicholson began when I was studying for my English Literature O' Level. I was a mature student trying to obtain more qualifications to enable me to take my teaching degree. Part of our course work was from 'Poets of our Time' compiled by F.E.S. Finn. Amongst Nicholson's poems in this set book was 'The Pot Geranium'. I felt I identified with this poem in particular as my father had been in a T.B. sanatorium for four years when I was a young child and I was hospitalized for a few months years later with the same condition. I decided to write to Norman about this poem and some of his other ones in this book. Not knowing his address I wrote on the envelope: 'Norman Nicholson, Poet, Millom, Cumbria'. Fortunately it reached him and he kindly replied, referring to 'The Pot Geranium' as his 'key' poem and advising me to read 'The Whisperer' and some of his later poems, as well as his autobiography "Wednesday Early Closing". I duly did so which increased my interest and prompted me to write my dissertation on Nicholson a few years later.

Like David Cooper, I too read the Philip Gardner book, many newspaper and magazine articles and as many books by and about Nicholson as I could. I also watched as many taped interviews as the BBC and London Weekend Television had.

LETTER CONTINUES OVERLEAF

...confined as a limpet...' a letter from Brenda Thompson

(continued from page 7)

My initial research took me to Millom where the owners of Nicholson House kindly showed me the attic room which had been Norman's bedroom—the one referred to in 'The Pot Geranium'. Sadly, Norman had died the previous year but I was advised to make contact with his good friend, Bessie Schiff. My second visit, as a guest of Bessie, for further research, allowed me to meet other of Nicholson's friends, including Peggy Troll whose help was invaluable. I am pleased to say that I received a straight A for my dissertation and, encouraged by my tutor, I tried to get it published, but was turned down by Northern Arts, Faber and Faber and many others. As I was now teaching full-time, had a family to consider, and lived in Surrey, I could not pursue it any further.

A couple of years ago I thought I might try again, if I updated it and improved it, but needed some encouragement. I spoke to Neil Curry, who suggested that I contact Northcote House Publishers who were publishing the 'Writers and their Work' series, but unfortunately they were not taking any more proposals. I tried Bookcase, Carlisle, thinking that a local publisher might be interested — but to no avail.

This lack of interest has deterred me again and now that I have moved even further south, distance also plays its part as well as work commitments.

In the words of Norman Nicholson: 'My ways are circumscribed, confined as a limpet'.

Hopefully, through the Norman Nicholson Society something will be achieved in his own territory. In Norman's letters to me he told me that all his enquiries came from the Home Counties as his poems for the O' Level syllabus were set only in the South of England and never in the North. Have things changed since then?

Brenda Thompson

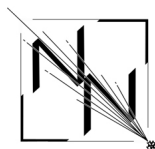
Brenda is now working as the Education Officer at Arundel Castle

Comet: The Norman Nicholson Society Newsletter

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A Favourite Nicholson Poem

Having worked intensively with Nicholson's poems during the year in which I was Creative Writer for the Norman Nicholson Project, I can say with absolute conviction that his poetry is fresh and inexhaustible, and that, because it ranges over such a wide field of subject-matter and in such a variety of styles, there is something of worth and peculiar genius in it at every stage of his development. Moreover, it is clear that Nicholson's verse is broadly appealing — a little bit of searching on the Worldwide Web will turn up quotations from Nicholson's poetry by gardeners and wild flower enthusiasts, by the Peace Pledge Union, by Cumbrians Opposed to a Radioactive Environment, by composers, by people who have bothered to translate facts about Nicholson into a Low German dialect, by tourism organizations and scientists, by English Nature - and much more.

I will echo Matt Simpson's comments (Volume 1, Issue 2) in saying that it would be invidious to single out one poem as being an especial favourite. What I will do is point out, in opposition to Nicholson's own remarks in his memoir about his time teaching for the WEA, that the poem *Five Rivers* does not strike me at all as being "juvenile and naïve" but rather as being full of genial liveliness, well-chosen and original visual images and comparisons, and, especially, interestingly controlled rhythms which mimic the flow of the different rivers he describes, now fast and rollicking, now slow and humming, now bounding and breaking. Listen to the way in which the words present history in the movement of water:

*The introspective CALDER hums to the pebbles
A memory of plainsong and choirboy's trebles...*

I particularly like the word "introspective" in this context: it not only slows down the line with its lengthiness but is appropriately Latinate and, moreover, conveys the idea of the river looking inside itself to the reflections of its own past. The visual and the aural are intricately entwined because the river sees inwardly what it previously heard and then hums what it has seen in memory. The whole poem is full of gems like this, whilst the rhyming couplets used throughout are handled in a supple and amused manner which for me makes the verse highly memorable. As Nicholson says, the poem defines in 'more ways than just the topographical, the boundaries of [his] life's work'.

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