

Comet

Comet: the Newsletter of the Norman Nicholson Society

Special points of interest:

- Nicholson's interest in Millom School—
Memories by Keith Jackson
- Doreen Cornthwaite's Gift to the Norman Nicholson Archive— by Stella Halkyard
- Nicholson's influence— by Philip Houghton
- Nicholson's Norwegian Trip— an extract from a letter to Doreen Cornthwaite
- Reports on events
- Cowper's Tame Hare — by David Scott

Norman Nicholson and Millom School: Memories by Keith Jackson

It was in the early 1960s poetry, commenting on that I first met Norman its rhythm and saying Nicholson. I had just been how it suited the appointed as Head of occasion for which it was Music at Millom written. I realised straight Comprehensive School and away what a great found myself amongst honour this was! In gifted and committed conversation with colleagues. These included colleagues I had heard Tom Foster and Yvonne about the poet Norman Nicholson, who were in Nicholson and his strong charge of the Middle commitment to the School. It was Yvonne who approached me and got me to organise the music for a drama production, which featured popular songs (including "Hit the Road, Jack") and acted scenes. I recall inventing a scene which involved space travel (popular at the time!) and wrote some verses for the children to recite.

After the performance Yvonne and her husband Norman Nicholson approached me. Norman complimented me on my

location which, not so long ago, returned vividly to my mind on reading "The Pot Geranium". This made me realise the extent and nature of the privations the poet, whose close acquaintance my wife and I had made, had to endure in his earlier life.

Tempted by a career opportunity in further education, I left Millom in the mid-1960s for the urban West Midlands. My wife and I had made several friends and now we were to lose them. Sadly for us, very sadly in retrospect now that we have really got to know and love his poetry, these included Norman Nicholson.

*Gilbert Keith Jackson
Cockermouth, April 2007*

It is just over a year ago now that the Norman Nicholson Society was inaugurated and only six months since the launch of our year of celebrations on January 6th 2007, marking the 20th anniversary of Nicholson's death. In quite a short period of time it has become evident that the interest in Nicholson is beginning to grow again. The society has organized talks by a number of distinguished speakers, including Professor Brian Whalley, Irvine Hunt, Neil Curry and the young scholar and academic, David Cooper. We are particularly excited about our collaboration with Lancaster University's North-West Centre for Regional Studies and the full day of lectures on Nicholson which

A YEAR OF CELEBRATIONS

took place this June at Crooklands, Milnthorpe. A synopsis of the lectures will appear in the next issue of *Comet*

Thanks to Michael Baron's persistence, Nicholson was mentioned at the Words by the Water Festival in March and a reading of the long poem "To the River Duddon" was given. The Duddon Local History Society, again in March, invited a Norman Nicholson Society committee member to give a lecture on his Life and Works— and this was very well attended and appreciated. And the excellent article on Nicholson by Sue Allan in the new Cumbria Arts Magazine **CA** must

have helped enormously to increase the interest.

The Norman Nicholson Archive is growing — a fabulous resource for researchers and for all those who have a real interest in Nicholson's life and art. Please do read Stella Halkyard's wonderful description of the Doreen Cornthwaite Gift.

More events are planned for the remainder of the year, including the **Heritage Open Days in September** in Millom, the **Day Festival in October**, and the **trip to the John Rylands Nicholson Archive in December**. Further information about recent and forthcoming events is inside this issue.

*Quotations from
Nicholson's book on
William Cowper, published
by John Lehmann,
London 1951*

Nicholson is describing Cowper's relationship to the natural world:

... The world ceased to be a view, ceased to be a landscape at all, and became something as real and individual as man himself. (p. 127)

... [hares] caught when young and tamed by the poet. They helped, almost as much as poetry, to distract him from his melancholy... through his tame hares he got an insight into the world of all sentient beings... [he realised that] an animal has a self which is not just a projection of man. (p. 143)

... When he became aware of the objective existence of the world around him, he did not look upon it as material for his mind and his senses to work on. Instead, he felt that he owed a moral responsibility to that world, as if his religion had commanded him to love not only his neighbour but his neighbourhood. (p. 164)

The links to Nicholson's own philosophy are, I believe, very clear here and it is interesting to perceive the possibly unexpected influence on Nicholson of this 18th century poet. See pages 4 and 5 for extracts from Cowper's own writing on hares — and page 8 for David Scott's interpretation of Nicholson's beautiful poem "The Tame Hare", which is also known as "Cowper's Tame Hare", and is the second of two poems that Nicholson wrote about William Cowper. There are references to both Nicholson and Cowper on Ruth Padel's web-page about hares: http://www.ruthpadel.com/pages/Hare_Hunted.htm AF

Reading off "concealed energies"

In *Winter Pollen* (ed. William Scammell), Ted Hughes talks about how "works of imaginative literature" can be "a set of dials on the front of society, where we can read off concealed energies", and how "What happens in the imagination of those individuals chosen by the unconscious part of society to be its writers, is closely indicative of what is happening to the hidden energies of the society as a whole."

When one tries to track Nicholson's work and reputation on the Internet, it is extremely interesting to see how his poems and other writings can be used to "read off concealed energies" and how Nicholson's thought is related to that of other writers, past and present.

One website I have been led to by searching for references to Nicholson is

that of the **Common Ground** organization, "internationally recognised for playing a unique role in the arts and environmental fields, distinguished by the linking of nature with culture". They have published an anthology of poetry about rivers, *The River's Voice*, which includes two of Nicholson's poems ('Beck' and 'To the River Duddon'), placing his poems in an extremely interesting and broad literary context. Further searching of their website leads one to *England in Particular* "a kind of encyclopaedia of LOCAL DISTINCTIVENESS". I "read off" the same energy in these words, as I have done for many years in Nicholson's writings. AF

Websites: <https://www.commonground.org.uk/archive/rivers/>; <http://www.englandinparticular.info/>

Rocks to the East— a talk by Professor Brian Whalley

Clad in black leathers, helmeted, and gleaming with scientific enthusiasm, Professor Brian Whalley, of Queen's University, Belfast, zoomed down the winding roads leading to Millom in order to spend the afternoon with the NN Society, and demonstrate to its members the geological foundations of much of Norman Nicholson's writings. It was Saturday, May 12th, a bright and sunny day, the Sea to the West glittering and the Rocks to the East (Brian Whalley's clever title for his talk) clearly visible as fells and mountains on the horizon.

Although this was not the best attended event the society has organized, those of us who were able to be there were temporarily transformed into eager students as we were initiated into the marvels of the everyday geology which forms the fabric of towns such as Millom. On a tour round the town, guided by Professor Whalley, we saw and touched examples of sedimentary, igneous and metamorphic rocks, and began to understand more deeply how Nicholson's view of the local led him literally into the universal, how time and space coalesce in the rocks of public and private buildings, in paving stone and slated roofs.

Back in the Guide Hall for the illustrated lecture, Professor Whalley unfolded millions of years of

geological time with masterly concision and clarity of language, simultaneously showing us how deeply Nicholson understood the science of geology, and how accurate his geological images and perceptions are.

Although Professor Whalley made a disclaimer at the start of his lecture, saying that he was by no means a literary critic, his knowledge of Nicholson's work was profound, and not only set in the context of the science of geology but also against the writings of other poets who have used references to stone and rock in their work (Edwin Morgan, Miroslav Holub, W.H. Auden, Arnold and Pope were all mentioned).

Nicholson understood the deep time of geology, and set our human lives against this as "misty minutes", not insignificant but incomprehensibly tiny, unsolid and unclear in comparison to the rocks on which we are based. Nicholson's geological and geomorphological understanding of landscape is so precise that, as Professor Whalley stated, many of his poems could be used in geology textbooks.

The Society is very grateful to Professor Whalley for spending time with us in such an illuminating, entertaining and informative manner. AF

Nicholson and Norway

Norman Nicholson was fascinated by certain aspects of his inheritance, especially the strong links with a Nordic past which he perceived as surviving in the Cumbrian culture and dialects. On the rare occasions when Nicholson travelled abroad he chose to visit Norway, first going there in 1965 for a coastal tour and then again in 1974, after being awarded a Travelling Scholarship worth £500 from the Society of Authors.

The following extracts from a letter which Nicholson wrote to his cousin, Doreen Cornthwaite, show him engaging with the landscape, with the language and with the customs of the people. At every point he is not only attracted to what is unusual and foreign but is also searching for similarities to his own place, people and language. Notice in particular his pointing up of the Nordic origins of "thwaite" and "tarn":

July 27th 1974

We could scarcely forget you in Norway: there were tveits, i.e. "thwaites" in nearly every valley... [...]

The four weeks in Norway are never to be forgotten. To begin with, after a first week of fresh, blowy weather, with some showers and a couple of wet mornings, we enjoyed the longest period of brilliant, serene, warm weather I have ever known on a holiday.

Down in the valleys it was like an oven, and on the uplands, where we spent most of our time, it was still hot enough for people to be sunbathing on rugs, lying out on the snow. Nobody under sixty, in Norway, wears anything but a bikini for sunbathing, of course, and down by the coast we had the impression that the young married women come down to sun-bathe for an hour or so each mid-day. The first part of the holiday was spent chiefly among the valleys of the south—deep, long valleys with many lakes, like Ullswater though longer, and all the steep granite sides wooded right up to 2,000 ft—thick conifer woods up to about that level where the birch takes over, gradually thinning out to the dwarf birch—a separate species only six inches high—at 3,000. Then on our second week we spent five days on the coast of the Skaggerak, which is a maze of fjords with thousands of small islands and skerries. Two merchant seamen took us out for a five-hour trip in their launch, visiting island after island, and peremptorily refused to take any payment. In the middle of this first fortnight we spent four days at the

top end of Settersdal, about 2,500 feet up, at a place that was almost Alpine, with a famous wooden church, old wooden houses, and, in a fir tree just outside our bedroom window, a pair of fieldfares nesting. We were able to watch them feeding their young... [...]

Finally we had ten days shared among three different places among the mountains of Telemark, and these, in spite of all that had gone before, were the highlight of the month. In our last place we were staying at a Turist-stasjon, a rather primitive, but not too uncomfortable ski-ing hut, just at the very level of the snow-line. In the hot sun the snow was being stripped off the mountains and was pounding down in waterfall after waterfall. On the higher passes, however, there were still snowdrifts ten to twenty feet high at the side of the road—the roads themselves were quite clear—and the ice was just beginning to melt on the tarns—they call them 'tjerns'—and was floating about in little ice-floes.

Doreen Cornthwaite read out extracts from this letter at Birthday Party event on January 6th 2007 (see "Comet" March 2007). More on Nicholson and Norway in the next issue.

From William Cowper's "Account of the Treatment of his Hares" - first printed in the Gentleman's Magazine, May 28th 1784

Puss grew presently familiar, would leap into my lap, raise himself upon his hinder feet, and bite the hair from my temples. He would suffer me to take him up, and to carry him about in my arms, and has more than once fallen fast asleep upon my knee. He was ill three days, during which time I nursed him, kept him apart from his fellows, that they might not molest him, (for, like many other wild animals, they persecute one of their kind that is sick), and by constant care, and by trying him with a variety of herbs, restored him to perfect health. No creature could be more grateful than my patient after his recovery; a sentiment which he most significantly expressed by licking my hand, first the back of it, then the palm, then between all the fingers, as if anxious to leave no part unsaluted; a ceremony which he never performed but once again upon a similar occasion...

William Cowper 1784

“My Charming Cousin”

News of a Recent Nicholson Acquisition — by Stella Halkyard

On a day in December, rimed with frost and muffled in fog, my train pulls out of Carlisle Station, into the pitch of early evening, heading for Manchester. Alert, I sit bolt upright, jealously guarding a suitcase stowed with a precious cargo. Arriving in Manchester I leap into a taxi and in minutes am safe within the precincts of the John Rylands Library, carefully unpacking the contents of the case, checking the condition of each item, and placing them into sturdy, “archive-friendly” boxes in the vaults of the Library’s strong room. At the end of the task I breathe out slowly and as the tension flows out of my body my head fills with golden recollections of the events of a remarkable day spent with Doreen Cornthwaite, Norman Nicholson’s cousin. I recall the pleasure of our exploration of her collection of Nicholsoniana and how we packed it up carefully in readiness for its journey south to the Rylands to join what has become the largest collection of Nicholson-related primary source material in the world.

This exceptional set of papers, so generously deposited, contains a range of materials including a wonderful sequence of files which tell the history of Nicholson’s career through newspaper cuttings (some of which are likely to be unique) in addition to a vast stack of letters from Nicholson to his “charming cousin” Doreen, spanning the 1970s and 1980s. They shimmer with jewelled detail of every aspect of Nicholson’s life. Read as whole they show Nicholson engaging with his friends, family and his community in Millom and beyond; they speak eloquently of the literary projects he is involved in and provide accounts of the emergence of some of his best

loved works; they offer clues about his practice as a writer; and (perhaps most touchingly) they place us in the privileged position of encountering the personality of the poet through triumphs, disappointments, grief, contentment, friendship, curiosity, hope, love and affection. Saved for the North West Region and the Nation, this previously “untouched” collection is currently being catalogued to ensure it can reach as wide an audience of readers and visitors as possible. Items from the Collection will feature in a display in the Rylands during December but for those already tantalized beyond endurance a few edited highlights are included here for your delectation.

1974 was a noteworthy year in Nicholson history. In January a telephone was installed at 14, St George’s Terrace for the first time and Nicholson was busy at work on his celebrated autobiography, *Wednesday Early Closing*. He reported that “64,000 words are now on paper, out of a required total of about 80,000, though I’ll probably write more like 90,000 and then

cut back”. The thing of most significance for him at the time however, was the fact that he’d reached the age of sixty. He records that he felt “quite ancient for a few hours, but I’m really full of thanks and amazement that I should ever have reached that age at all”. True pathos seeps through these words as we witness the influence of his boyhood battle with tuberculosis casting its pale shadow into later life. Further on in the year we find Nicholson regaling Doreen with tales of experiences with the media as he is the subject of a programme on Radio Carlisle and the South Bank Show on Television. He recalls how the vicar of St George’s Church in Millom accommodatingly “shortened his service on Sunday morning so that the congregation could get home in time to hear the reading”. We are also treated to an inspirational glimpse of Nicholson’s robust, northern humour. Subjected to the indignities of a barium enema he describes his experience as “weird... rather like giving birth to a baby on the Big Dipper at Blackpool”.

1974 was also the year which also brought a new typewriter into St George’s Terrace.

The illegibility of Nicholson’s handwriting is legendary. In a copy letter to John Betjeman from 1977 in his personal papers Nicholson was to recall how “years ago in the days of my first negotiations with Fabers, Eliot said that it would be a happy day for him when my friends joined together to subscribe for a typewriter for me”. So the upgrading of the technology in 1974, recorded in his letter to Doreen, was surely an occasion for celebration by all those friends, [\[cont. next page\]](#)



Mary Griffiths
Gabriele 25, 2007
Pen, ink, wash

“My Charming Cousin” - continued

family, and publishers in regular written contact with him. Some commentators however, including Yvonne Nicholson, have cast aspersions on Nicholson's prowess as a typist as well as castigating the infamous handwriting. At last we have some evidence which might account for Nicholson's tendencies to eccentricity in typing. The new machine was a Gabriele which was acquired at a “knockdown” price of £50 because it was a “cancelled export order”.

In his letter to Doreen, Nicholson cheerfully explains how it came with “full instructions in German, Italian, Spanish and Swedish, of which luckily, I can read the Italian. But it has a foreign keyboard, which is taking some getting used to. For one thing, there is no exclamation mark, and, for an apostrophe I have to use the French acute... I've got a marvellous selection of foreign consonants”!

The stories compressed into the layers of the rich stratigraphy of this collection are myriad, and potentially endless, to anyone who

has an interest in the life and work of Norman Nicholson. You are exhorted to come and see for yourselves. As one who has had the great privilege of reading a large quantity of Nicholson's letters, the most striking quality of those he wrote to cousin is that they are saturated with affection and display the poet's deep capacity for friendship. I leave you with two short examples:

It was a great disappointment not to see you last Friday. All the way up, driving through darkening fog, I had consoled myself with the thought that I'd be able to show off my charming cousin... (1974)

I thought you might use a little note to welcome you on your return to England. There is nothing in the least importance to say, so, if you still have unpacking and the like to deal with, just put this letter aside until you are at leisure... (1984)

*Stella Halkyard
Modern Literary Archivist
John Rylands Library
March 2007*

Nicholson, Wordsworth and the Lake District David Cooper's talk at the AGM

The second AGM of the Society, held on March 30th, was well attended. After the year's events had been summarised and amendments to the Constitution ratified, David Cooper gave a most interesting and informative talk. His subject, 'Nicholson, Wordsworth and the Lake District' posed the 'problem of precedent' and the dual challenge to Nicholson of Wordsworth, 'this great big Old Man on (his) back' who had 'documented every rock, stone and tree', and of the Wordsworthian view of the Lake District.

Nicholson acknowledges Wordsworth to be 'one of the supreme poets in the English language' - he needed to draw upon him, then move beyond him. In doing so, Cooper maintains, Nicholson 'oscillates between reverence and subversion', a view he bases first on Nicholson's private notebook, analysing its many references to Wordsworth to illustrate this ambivalence, then on two key poems, 'To the River Duddon' and 'On the Dismantling of Millom Ironworks'.

Nicholson also challenges the Wordsworthian 'wheel and central hub' model of the Lake District: to ignore the coastal and industrial sites, he argues, is to dismiss elements which are as much a product of 'the rock, the shape of the land and its history' as 'Derwentwater, Blea Tarn and the Wasdale Scree'.

David said that while we may criticise Nicholson's failure to break completely away from Wordsworth, we should also celebrate his willingness to wrestle with these issues: the tension inherent in the 'problem of precedent' ensures that Nicholson's poems of place will endure.

Peggy Troll

An Extract from William Cowper's *The Task: Book Three—The Garden*

Well—one at least is safe. One shelter'd hare
Has never heard the sanguinary yell
Of cruel man, exulting in her woes.

Innocent partner of my peaceful home,
Whom ten long years' experience of my care
Has made at last familiar; she has lost
Much of her vigilant instinctive dread,
Not needful here, beneath a roof like mine.
Yes—thou mayest eat thy bread, and lick the hand

That feeds thee; thou mayest frolic on the floor
At evening, and at night retire secure

To thy straw couch, and slumber unalarm'd;
For I have gain'd thy confidence, have pledged All that is human in me to protect
Thine unsuspecting gratitude and love.

If I survive thee, I will dig thy grave;
And, when I place thee in it, sighing say,
“I knew at least one hare that had a friend.”

William Cowper 1785

Closure

no Mossbay
rails
rolling after
today
- they're tek'n family
apart -
die
was cast years back
too short a time
a rail
the lines like veins
run deep
at seven fifty five
twenty fifth of August
the last bloom
enters
- blood of the track -
pressured, forced
to make its last
reluctant show
to breathe its last
relenting breath
an I
a me
as the we
disbands
and creeping
from the gate
a workforce
is extruded
one
last
time

Phil Houghton
25th August 2006

Bloom – raw steel, ready
for processing / rolling

Nicholson's Influence on a Contemporary Cumbrian Poet and Writer

Editor's note: I was lucky enough to hear Phil Houghton read the poem "Closure" at the Words by the Water Festival in March this year and was intrigued by his introduction to the poem in which he made a link between his work and that of Norman Nicholson. Phil Houghton has been writing poetry for just over eight years, but more regularly since moving to Cumbria seven years ago to live near the Ullswater Fells. His work draws much of its influence from the Cumbrian landscape, its natural and industrial history. Phil is a member of the Cumbrian Poets group in Keswick, under the tutelary spirit of Chris Pilling, prize-winning poet and translator. In 2005 Phil received mentoring from the poet Marita Over, after being selected by competition for this privilege. He gave his first public reading in Wordsworth House, Cockermouth on the eve of the 235th anniversary of Wordsworth's birthday – on the 7th April 2005. Phil's work has already been published in several places, including Christmas—New Writing from Cumbria, 2005 and on the Flora of the Fells 2006 project website. He reads his poetry regularly at several Cumbrian venues and stresses the importance to him of regular

critique and support from fellow poets at the Cumbria Writers' workshops.

A seismic shift somewhere in the bedrock of Cumbria drew my chosen centre of Lakeland out from Keswick towards the industry of a Greater Lakeland which hinged the fells on iron to the edge of the sea. The stability of thirty thousand feet of solid Cumberland carried the shock waves of this change of perspective right from their epicentre: one Norman Nicholson of Millom.

I had formed my view of the Lakes from childhood visits to Keswick, the picturesque hiding the wad and sweat of its own mining days behind the happy crowds of holiday makers, but it was on becoming a resident of Cumbria and reading Nicholson's Greater Lakeland, that the true character of this area was opened up to me. Having found my own poetry to be heavily influenced by the landscape and its natural history, expanded

reading of Nicholson's prose, and later his poetry, led me to consider the subjects raised by Nicholson in *Greater Lakeland* in much greater depth than previously.

Driving to work late one August day in 2006, I heard BBC Radio Cumbria's live broadcast of the last rail being made at the Mossbay plant in West Cumbria and I was moved to write the poem *Closure* to mark this event. It was later that I realized that, whilst this is not Norman's poem, it was certainly an event which he would have noted had he still been with us.

Greater Lakeland starts with Norman claiming Millom as the centre of his Greater Lakeland and this he does in the shadow of Millom's iron-works closure. Thirty-eight years on Mossbay changed forever, whilst the fells looked on with a steady permanence.

PMH — Cumbria

6th May 2007

Nicholson Festival Schools' Poetry Competition

Due to a lack of funding the committee have had to curtail some of the plans for a mini-festival in October to celebrate Nicholson's life and work during the 20th anniversary of his death. Nevertheless we are determined to go ahead and hold a Festival Day on October

20th as promised.

A major aspect of this day will be the Award Ceremony for winners of the first Norman Nicholson Festival Schools' Poetry Competition, this year to be aimed exclusively at Millom and District Schools. There

will be three age-groups in the competition: 7-11, 11-14 and 14-18; and great prizes will be awarded, including a valuable bonus prize of a Masterclass with Neil Curry for all winners and runners-up in the 11-18 category. [story continues on p.7]

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Touring exhibition of the writing and photos produced by Millom writers and artists for the Norman Nicholson Project

Several Cumbrian libraries and other venues have agreed to host the exhibition of work influenced by Nicholson's themes. There will also be an installation version of the exhibition touring the North West throughout 2007 and bringing word about Millom and Norman Nicholson to a wider audience.

Heritage Weekend — Millom

6th—9th September 2007

Several events are planned and will be advertised in the local press and via English Heritage. The NN Society will have an exhibition about Norman Nicholson in St. George's Church.

If any members have memorabilia relating to Nicholson's life and work and would be willing to lend these to the society, please contact Peggy Troll: 18, Lowther Road, Millom LA18 4LN

Schools' Poetry Competition (continued)

All schools entering the competition will receive the gift of Norman Nicholson's *Selected Poems* as a memento, and as further encouragement to read and be inspired by Nicholson's work. We hope that the award ceremony will be a memorable and meaningful event for the children, families and teachers involved, and hope too that we will be able to continue with and expand on this competition in future years.

We are placing such a strong emphasis on children's writing because we want it to be apparent that the society wishes not only to be a focus for research and literary criticism but also to promote creative responses to Nicholson's work. Moreover, we want local children to be aware of Nicholson's life and work and to feel proud of

Norman Nicholson Festival Day: October 20th, 2007—Guide Hall, Millom

- Matt Simpson, poet, writer and critic
- David Scott, poet
- Schools' Poetry Competition Winners and presentation
- Poetry Masterclass with Neil Curry for winners of the 14–18 category in the Poetry Competition

(This will happen at a date mutually convenient to the school and the poet)

Please do support us and come to this event. We have worked hard to make it happen. Bring a friend! Or several...

Dec. 8th 2007 (to be confirmed):

Members' trip to the Norman Nicholson Archive at the John Rylands Library, Manchester

Further information will follow.

the fact that such an internationally reputed writer lived in Millom all his life.

The Norman Nicholson Society also wishes to play a role in developing and promoting a love for local places and people, in the tradition of Norman Nicholson, helping people to realize that the local and particular is a vital part of the universal.

We are fortunate in having received generous donations from members and a particularly substantial grant from the local publishing company CGP, all of which have made it possible to go ahead with the competition. Further donations to help make future events successful and memorable are encouraged. Please contact our membership secretary, Wendy Bracegirdle, if you would like to make such a donation.

The Tame Hare

*She came to him in dreams — her ears
Diddering like antennae, and her eyes
Wide as dark flowers where the dew
Holds and dissolves a purple board of
shadow.*

[...]

*Oh, but never dared he touch —
Her fur was still electric to the fingers.*

[...]

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

Norman Nicholson, *Collected Poems*, p. 140

The poem was also collected in Seamus Heaney's and Ted Hughes's anthology *The Rattle Bag* and mentioned in Blake Morrison's review of that book: <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/seamus-heaney-ted-hughes-beyond-the-pleasure-principle-2/>.



1502
Albrecht Dürer "A Young Hare"

COWPER'S TAME HARE by David Scott

One of the underlying motifs that ran through Nicholson's adult life was the life and work of William Cowper (1731- 1804). Though separated by the 19th century, both men were poets who had a love of nature, both cast a whimsical eye on the absurdities of life, both were religious believers, and both knew the highs and lows of fragile mental and physical constitutions. In Nicholson's introduction to 'A Choice of Cowper's Verse' (Faber, 1975), he concludes like this, "In Cowper's letters, we see his imagination and humour playing like firelight over everyday affairs (the escapes of a tame hare, the warping of a table leg, the ordering of a hat, an unexplained knock on the door) till they form a personal landscape which is neither insignificant or dull... Cowper says things as they are, but in the sad, yellow brightness of a sun that was always on the point of setting." Nicholson wrote a biography of Cowper in 1951, which was published by John Lehmann.

That passing reference to "the escape of a tame hare" refers to the hare that lived with Cowper and Mrs Unwin in Olney. It was a domestic hare called Old Tiny (no doubt because it was quite large). When Old Tiny died, Cowper wrote an elegy for the hare called 'On a Hare'. Cowper describes its indoor nature:

Here lies, whom hound did ne'er pursue,
Nor swifter greyhound follow
Whose foot ne'er tainted morning dew
Nor ear heard huntsman's halloo.

Old Tiny was fed on wheaten bread, milk, oats and straw, thistles, lettuces, and "with sand to scour his maw". At the age of 8 years 5 months Old Tiny died and was buried underneath a walnut tree. Cowper found the hare a solace in his more melancholic periods, "for he would oft beguile / My heart of thoughts that made it ache / And force me to a smile."

Nicholson's poem 'The Tame Hare' (published first in *Rock Face*, Faber, 1948) takes up the theme from Cowper's poem of the comfort that this pet hare could bring, and sets that in the context of Cowper's passion for the quiet and hidden beauties of the countryside, which were Nicholson's passions as well.

The Tame Hare

She came to him in dreams – her ears
Diddering like antennae...
...Yet of all the beasts blazoned in gilt and blood
In the black-bound missal of his mind,
Pentecostal dove and Paschal lamb,
Eagle, lion, serpent, she alone
Lived also in the noon of ducks and sparrows;
And the cleft-mouth kiss that plugged the night with fever
Was sweetened by a lunch of docks and lettuce.

The 'she' of the opening line is Old Tiny, the hare, and indeed the word Tiny doubles as an adjective in line 6: "The world opened / Tiny and bright as a celandine after rain." Nicholson's signature on this poem of the hare lies in his choice of language. I had to look up "diddering", incredulous that it was a real word, but there it is in the OED "diddering: same as to dither, meaning to tremble, quake, shake, shiver" and it is also a Westmorland dialect word, as in "I quite doddered for fear." (1821).

As the poem progresses we see how the hare colours the nightmare world that Cowper experienced in his dreams. The second section of Nicholson's poem gathers religious and heraldic images together. The terror of the accusing texts of the Bible come from the time when Cowper's neighbour and minister, John Newton, was preaching in the Parish Church. The serpent of Genesis, the shields and breastplates, and the lion and eagle, all have apocalyptic significance. The nights of terror, though, are tempered by the noon of ducks and sparrows. "Plugged" is another Nicholson word. I can hear him saying it. The hare-lip and "cleft-mouth" of Old Tiny, was plugged or filled with the plant 'fever', but 'fever' is used as a metaphor again for the distinction between the terrors of the night (Cowper's years of madness), and the days of sweetness and respite of his later years which were mirrored in Old Tiny's sweet "lunch of docks and lettuce."

This is a complex poem, which needs quite a lot of background information to help it resonate, and work, but once the homework is done, it seems one of the profoundest of Nicholson's early poems. In it we can see the way Nicholson's mind worked on the construction of poems, and some of the deepest influences that stayed with him throughout his writing life.

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