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Comet: the Newsletter of the Norman Nicholson Society

price £1.50

The Scandinavian Link— an interesting correspondence

27 years ago a Swedish teacher of English, Mr. Göran Strandell, approached Norman Nicholson by letter to ask if he could meet him in Millom during the summer vacation in order to discuss Nicholson's religious dramas. Two of the letters which Mr. Strandell sent to Nicholson at that time can be read in the John Rylands Library as they form part of the Norman Nicholson Archive. Mr. Strandell remarked in the second of these letters: *Your links with the*

Scandinavian countries Closing" and particularly are perhaps not only your description of the historically based as you indicate with your family name Cornthwaite but the environment in which you live and have drawn impulses for your writing also resembles our countryside, I think. Perhaps this type of landscape generously lends itself both to the active life and living and calm meditation thus giving rise to activities which stimulate us in many respects. I am thinking of your interest in birds and flowers shown in "Wednesday Early

Having access to this letter in the archive makes a tremendous impact on the reader as it is clear that not only did Nicholson agree to talk to Mr. Strandell, but that he also offered him generous hospitality—

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CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

In 1993 UNESCO introduced the category "Cultural Landscapes" for their World Heritage Sites and, as is known to many living in Cumbria and beyond, the Lake District National Park is now in the process of putting together an application to be inscribed as a World Heritage Site.

According to a report prepared by Chris Blandford Associates (on-line at http://www.lake-district.gov.uk/index/looking_after/projects/whs.html) "The Lake District landscape reveals an exceptional testimony to the continuous history of interaction between man and nature over 14,000 years." The Study Day on Norman Nicholson's poetry and prose, organized by the University of Lancaster's Centre for North-West Regional Studies in conjunction with the NN Society, emphasized, among other themes, how prescient Nicholson had been in his vision of a Greater Lakeland and in his inclusion

of human activities, both agricultural and industrial, in his understanding of what a living, organically evolving landscape, actually is.

The concept of a cultural landscape, protected by law and supported by positive political action, such as favourable taxation for those who use the landscape in a culturally sensitive manner, has long been promoted in Norway, perhaps partially as a result of the eco-philosophical writings of Arne Næss. An essay by Per Ole Andersen-Ranberg of the Norwegian Farmers' Union (on-line at www.olavsrosa.no/en/redaksjonelt.aspx?id=146722) emphasizes many points with which a Cumbrian farmer would agree, in particular: "A journey through the Norwegian cultural landscape is a journey through a man-made landscape, created by farmers. It is through clearing the forest and cultivating the land that the landscape that we see today has come about." Andersen-

Ranberg not only emphasizes the historical aspects of such a landscape, its climate and topography, but also its continuous evolution.

In this edition of "Comet" there are detailed synopses of the papers presented at the Study Day at Crooklands on June 13th, and also a continuation of the Norwegian theme in the first of a series of articles which will look at Nicholson's fascination with his Nordic heritage.

Other highlights include the results of the Schools' Poetry Competition, an appreciation of "Black Combe White" by Dr. David Cooper, and a response to "Windscale" by David Boyd. You will also find initial plans for 2008. In March we will mark the society's 2nd birthday: please help us to make next year as successful as this one. Ideas for future events are warmly welcomed.

AF

A Cultural Landscape

Since olden times the main source of livelihood in Norway has been the cultivation of the soil. Small individual holdings are typical for Norwegian agriculture. Over 9/10 of the existing farms consists of less than 25 acres of arable land and only 37 in the whole country have more than 250 acres. Many farms have however in addition to their arable land also natural and artificial meadows as well as mountain pastures, and a great many of the farmers own forests. In the coastal districts farming is also frequently combined with fishing and in the interior with lumbering, fur production and handicraft.

Practically speaking all Norwegian farmers own their farms. They work them well and the yields they obtain per acreage unit are among the highest in the world. Their methods have kept abreast with the times, rationalization and mechanization being the watchwords at present. Fertilizers are widely used and the soil is being worked to the limit.

Excerpted from Norway in a Nutshell
by Eivind Erichsen;
John Grieg's Boktrykkeri,
Bergen (undated— mid to late 1950s— a relatively short time before Nicholson's first trip to Norway.)

Nicholson and Norway (part 1) by Antoinette Fawcett

In an autobiographical fragment which Nicholson composed after his wife Yvonne's death, he moves from reflecting on the hills which "remind us of where we come from" and remain the "basic stuff of our world" in spite of the actions of humans in shaping the landscape to their needs, to describing his teenage stay in a sanatorium in the New Forest, the return to Millom and finally his "marriage to a wife who drove a car", enormously extending the range of what he could know of the world by personal experience. But like the Orkney writer George Mackay Brown who rarely travelled away from the Orkney Islands— and when presented with the opportunity to extend the range of his knowledge chose to go to Ireland, arguably a landscape and a history with similarities to his own, Nicholson too "always seemed to be exploring my own patch of South Cumberland. Wester Ross, Sutherland, Shetland, Norway — all these told me more about my own home, showed me more mountain flowers, more sea-birds and, above all, told me more about the Viking ancestry of the Nicholsons and Cornthwaites that I sprang from (NCN4/1/4/4).

In the previous issue of *Comet*, in a letter sent to Nicholson's cousin Doreen Cornthwaite, we saw how Nicholson used the Travelling Scholar-

ship awarded to him in 1973 to visit Norway in the summer of 1974. But this was not Nicholson's first trip there, nor was it his last. He and Yvonne travelled to Norway three times in total: by ship and coastal steamer in 1965 (The Coastal Tour), by ship and car in 1974, and by aeroplane, trains and coaches in 1978. Given that Nicholson made no obvious attempt to travel to any other foreign country— in spite of invitations to visit the US and Russia, and in spite of being able to read Italian (see the evidence presented in Stella Halkyard's article in *Comet II. 2*), — it is clear that the Norse heritage which Nicholson refers to time and again as being an essential part of his own and Cumbrian nature, must have been the draw.

Nicholson's last published collection of poems, *Sea to the West*, contains four pieces which relate to his first-hand knowledge of Norway (*Fjord, Glacier, Midsummer Fires on the Sognefjord and Cornthwaite*), but he had announced his interest in this part of his heritage very early on in his writing life in a number of different ways. In the 1944 collection *Five Rivers* the poem "For the Grieg Centenary" is full of a hard and sharp imagery that links sound, dialect, weather, landscape, flora and fauna together and deliberately evokes the Cumbrian connection to Norway. The most evocative lines speak of "the Norsemen" who "foraged down the dales / Crossing the sea with the

THE MAST-BEATER BLOWS, THE BOW CHISELS THE SMOOTH SEA INTO SPRAY-STORMS:

IMAGE REMOVED FOR REASONS OF COPYRIGHT

SIMILAR IMAGES OF THE BOAT IN WHICH NORMAN AND YVONNE SAILED CAN BE FOUND HERE:

[http://bergen-sporveis-historie.origo.no/-/image/
show/2304139_bds-ts-leda?ref=checkpoint](http://bergen-sporveis-historie.origo.no/-/image/show/2304139_bds-ts-leda?ref=checkpoint)

M/S Leda

The boat in which Yvonne and Norman Nicholson sailed to Norway, August 1965

Nicholson and Norway (continued)

migrant redwing, / Thieving heifer and yow and teg, / Leaving their names scotched on the flanks of the hills, / Leaving also the crackling northern tongues, / The dialect crisp with the click of the wind / In the thorns of a wintry dyke, / So that Solveig sings / In the words which bind the homes of Cumberland."

Nicholson knew, of course, that many of the topographical words which describe the Cumbrian landscape are derived from Old Norse and linked to modern Norwegian ("fjell", "tjern", "tveit" and "bekk" to name but a few). He understood, long before visiting the land in reality, that we share a similar landscape and weather conditions, and that the birds which live in Norway in the summer migrate south to us in the winter, just as the Vikings did a thousand years ago.

Two at least of the unusual words which Nicholson chooses in describing the actions of the Norsemen in the Grieg poem are probably of Norse origin: "teg" (or "tegg"), defined by the Chambers dictionary as "a sheep in its second year" and "scotched", by which Nicholson means "gashed", or "scored", and which is related to the word "score" which derives from the Old Norse "skor, skora". As Nicholson realized, many English "sk"-starting words come from our Scandinavian ancestors, including "sky" and "skirt", two of our most

commonly-used nouns.

The same interest in the Nordic culture is announced in a wide variety of Nicholson's other writings, in the drama, for instance, where *Prophesy to the Wind*, although set in a dystopic future after a nuclear disaster, actually has the surviving Cumbrian people reverting back to their Nordic heritage, living in the manner and with the language and names they once used. And in the autobiographical *Wednesday Early Closing* Nicholson emphasizes both his Irish ancestry and his Cumbrian-Nordic roots, drawing attention to the Norse origins of his mother's maiden name ("Cornthwaite") and to the fact that her family came from "Osmotherly, near Ulverston, in a part of North Lancashire much colonised by the Vikings". So that in using "scotched" to describe how the Cumbrian landscape came to have Nordic place-names attached to it, Nicholson is possibly emphasizing both the violence of the sword-blade and the strength of the axe-blade which claimed the land in two different senses (by conquest and by clearance). The Vikings literally and metaphorically carved out the shape of the language, customs, culture and farming practices which the Cumbrians inherited.

continues on p. 8

THE WILD WILLOW-SHAKER WHIRLS HARD AND COLD, SAVAGING THE BREAST OF MY SAILING SWAN

(Egil's Saga trans. H. Pálson & P. Edwards)

IMAGE REMOVED FOR REASONS OF COPYRIGHT

SIMILAR IMAGES OF THE BOAT IN WHICH NORMAN AND YVONNE SAILED CAN BE FOUND HERE:

http://hurtigrutene.stormposten.no/?page_id=409

<http://www.hurtigrutemuseet.no/historien/skip-i-hurtigrutens-tjeneste/ms-nordnorge-iii/>

The ship must have been Nordnorge III...

M/S Nordnorge—in which Yvonne and Norman sailed on their Norwegian Coastal Tour, August 1965. The ship had made its maiden voyage on June 11th 1964.

Good, Wild and Sacred

The thought that wild might also be sacred returned to the Occident only with the Romantic Movement. This reappreciation of nature projects a rather vague sense of the sacred, however. It is only from very old, place-centred cultures that we hear of sacred groves, sacred land, in a context of genuine belief and practice...

... the back-packer pilgrims step-by-step, breath by breath walk up a trail, carrying all on the back is so ancient a set of gestures as to trigger perennial images and a profound sense of body-mind joy. Not just backpackers, of course. The same happens to all those who sail in the ocean, kayak rivers, tend a garden, even sit on a meditative cushion. The point is to make contact with the wild world, wild self. Sacred refers to that which helps to take us out of our little selves into the larger self of the whole universe.

Gary Snyder

Excerpted from: The Trumpeter, Vol. 3, no. 2, Spring 1986. Online at: <http://trumpeter.athabascau.ca/index.php/trumpet/article/view/558/930>

SYNOPSSES OF THE PAPERS PRESENTED AT THE NORMAN NICHOLSON STUDY DAY 13TH June 2007

Starting Rather Late: Norman Nicholson and his Lakeland Predecessors – Grevel Lindop

As a Lancastrian writer on the edge of the Lake District, Norman Nicholson was acutely aware of his closeness to the territory of several great predecessors, notably Wordsworth but also Ruskin, Coleridge, Gray and others. He developed a range of strategies for dealing with this inspiring but also potentially intimidating heritage.

These ranged from arguing with his predecessors, to chronicling their doings in prose and reworking their themes and titles in his own poems. He was able to draw on the industrial heritage of Millom and on his position near the geographical margins of Cumbria, to create a body of work which takes an ironic view of Romanticism, but also extends and refreshes Romantic insights by bringing them into the industrial and scientific territories of the twentieth century.

The result is work which is rooted in both the landscape and the Romantic tradition, but has its own distinctive flavour and concerns.

'Mountains and Morals' – was Norman Nicholson a conservationist? – Ian Brodie

Norman Nicholson had a passion for wildlife and landscapes especially of his native heath, subjects which often informed his poetry and topographical writings. Despite these interests he lived in an industrial landscape and gave paramount recognition to the social needs of people. He had also strong views on nuclear issues. The paper discusses these topics before asking how important were these interests for Nicholson and what, if any, was his contribution to the

conservation of Cumbrian landscapes and wildlife?

Landscapes in a Claude Glass: Norman Nicholson and Lake District Tourism - Ian Whyte

Norman Nicholson is much better known for his poetry than for his prose but his achievement in this genre is nevertheless considerable. In particular in his book *The Lakers* (1955) he looked at how changing landscape aesthetics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries influenced the development of Lake District tourism. He examines in detail the Picturesque view of landscape in the late eighteenth century and how picturesque landscapes were 'consumed' by visitors with the aid of a Claude Glass and a William Gilpin guidebook. He appreciated, however, that there were other views of the Lake District landscape at this time, including that of more scientific visitors, who saw Cumbria as a place full of scientific curiosities; waterspouts, bog bursts and floating islands. Wordsworth's conversion from a picturesque to a romantic view of nature heralded a new phase of landscape perception which was codified in the various editions of his Guide to the Lakes.

Norman Nicholson, as geographical a poet as Wordsworth, has refined our view of the human and physical landscapes of the Lake District through his prose as well as his poetry.

Norman Nicholson & the Cumberland Coast - Neil Curry

Norman Nicholson's topographical books concentrate on what we recognise as being The Lake District, whereas this rarely features in his poems. From the outset it was not the typical tourist areas but the industrial coast which interested him as a poet and there are poems about such unpicturesque places as Askam, Whitehaven

and Eskmeals. Considering the fashion for what came to be known as 'Pylon Poetry' in the 1930's, and the influence of Eliot and Auden, this is not surprising.

Millom, as a theme, was something of a godsend, but it took the publication of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* in 1959 to show him that he had until then omitted to mention the people of Millom and members of his own family.

The closing of the Millom Ironworks can be seen as giving his later poems a sense of finality and of narrative direction.

Thinking Global, Acting Local: Norman Nicholson's engagement with the literary and artistic networks within and beyond the North West region of England - Stella Halkyard

Norman Nicholson was a defiantly self-defined provincial. The weft of his own history, heritage and identity was seamlessly woven into the warp of the community he was born into and the landscape it inhabited. In his work he drew upon the images, references and subject matter of the region to which he belonged and in his critical writings he often adopted a regionalist stance. However, his rootedness in a particular community, and its North Western industrial setting, should not seduce commentators into overlooking the fact that Nicholson was a writer of considerable virtuosity, engaged in an ambitious artistic project within the arena of a national modern poetics. Using the notion of the Imagined Community, this paper will provide an account of how he made a home within the Republic of Literature, Letters and Art and explore his interactions in the literary and artistic circles of his day. It will also describe some of the

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literary friendships and associations he cultivated which nourished his work.

The Lake District, just a piece of rock – Denys Vaughan

John Ruskin said many people look, some see, and a few understand. Norman Nicholson not only saw; his insight was clear, and expressed also in plain language. He called the Lake District a *Piece of Rock*, and, like everywhere on the Earth's crust, it is indeed at bottom, just a piece of rock.

Nicholson strips away all we call culture, mountains of guide books, acres of paintings and prints, changing needs and fashions during 10,000 years of people trying to make a living and others trying to stop them. Nicholson's rock is more than what collectors once gathered for their display cabinets. Identification is important, but rocks are part of a system, not just part of Nature's grinding machine.

We must know already:- The variety of the landscape, the texture of the fells and the form of the buildings and even the colour of a town street are all to be accounted to the rock. It is the rock which makes the land and the land has made the people. Have we considered processes, and purposes adequately? To look at scenery without trying to understand the rock is like listening to poetry in an unknown language, you hear the beauty but you miss the meaning. You don't have to be learned to understand the rock, Nicholson offers readily accessible ideas in both prose and poetry.

Remove the film of life between rock and air, the temporary veneers we call culture or what passes at a time for civilisation, and his basics remain:- In the bare unpopulated parts of the earth's surface you can see our physical environment reduced to

its simplest terms; rock, water and air. This is our dependency on natural landscape. There is little natural landscape left in the Lake District; perhaps in the highest hills, the rugged west coast and the lonely miles of salt marsh we can still find some uncultured or semi-natural landscape.

Nicholson believes the universe works to a pattern and purpose, which goes beyond physics and chemistry and we should look for purpose in the way the universe works. Does he convince us that the universe, the rocks and ourselves are the work of a divine creator? Part of the sheer enjoyment of being among mountains comes from our sometimes feeling swept up into the plan, where every end is a new beginning and every death is a new birth.

Rocks are not as unchanging as they appear. In summer the sun bakes the rock, and in winter the frost cracks it ... every hour of every day the becks and rivers and waterfalls are at work on the surface, scrubbing and scouring and grinding it down. We all understand weathering, as it slowly demolishes our houses, but are we aware of the vast quantities of loose stuff in the landscape, where it has come from, where it is going to and how it gets there, and then what? NN tells us:- The entire mountain dome of Cumberland and Westmorland is gradually being worn flat as a pancake. We are reminded that during 500 million years many pancakes have been made of the Lakeland dome and for example we get a brief introductory tour of his nearest valley, Dunnerdale, along with the estuary, marshes, sea-shore and mountains which make up Nicholson's Lakeland. His understanding is not a mere re-gurgitation of book-learning, but based on experience, learned through the soles of his

boots; close observation, reflection and result.

Processes of weathering away and carrying away mountain-tops down to the sea make a central theme. The journey of a fragment of Coniston Old Man to Duddon Marsh may have taken 500 million years but it is already part of a new process. Endless wearing down, re-forming then being raised again is for Nicholson an expression of purpose which reflects the birth, life, death and resurrection of people.

It is impossible to explore his Seven Rocks in half an hour, but Mountain Limestone is essential and St Bees Sandstone is the most readily accessible of his deepest thoughts about rocks, process, purpose and motivation.

The Poetics of Provincialism: Nicholson and Millom David Cooper

Throughout the 1950s, Norman Nicholson demonstrated a sustained interest in defining both provincial experience and provincial literature. This paper examines Nicholson's theoretical engagement with these ideas and suggests the ways in which an understanding of the provincial informs his poetic representation of Millom.

In his *Dictionary* of 1755, Dr Johnson famously defines the 'provincial' as that which is 'rude' and 'unpolished'. The first part of the paper traces this pejorative understanding of the term, as reinforced by such canonical writers as Matthew Arnold and Ezra Pound. I then argue that Nicholson, through a series of critical texts published in the 1950s, attempts to construct an alternative model of what may be called positive provincialism. Focusing on the articles, 'On Being a Provincial' and (continues on page 10)

The First Norman Nicholson Schools' Poetry Competition

WINNERS AND HIGHLY COMMENDED

<p><i>World War I</i></p> <p><i>Where I am</i></p> <p><i>World war one</i></p> <p><i>Tanks are coming</i></p> <p><i>Ranks are running</i></p> <p><i>Bombs are dropping</i></p> <p><i>Lives are stopping</i></p> <p><i>Explosions are exploding</i></p> <p><i>Erosions are eroding</i></p> <p><i>Fear is crowding me</i></p> <p><i>Death is shrouding me</i></p> <p><i>Machineguns are firing me</i></p> <p><i>My boss is hiring me</i></p> <p><i>Smoke is rising</i></p> <p><i>Soldiers are sighing</i></p> <p><i>The captain is dying</i></p> <p><i>Privates are crying</i></p> <p><i>Planes are crashing</i></p> <p><i>Tanks are smashing</i></p> <p><i>Where I am</i></p> <p><i>World war one</i></p> <p><i>Jed Miller</i></p> <p>1st prize St. James Primary</p>	<p>Where I am...</p> <p>Listen</p> <p>Can you hear the rippling water flowing over the bumpy rocks, it sounds like a waterfall never ending - the crispy crackling seaweed on the rocks sinking into the soft sand.</p> <p>Look</p> <p>can you see the black headed common gull on the shore front, looking for its dinner?</p> <p>Can you see</p> <p>the waves on the damp sand by the running river and the cool breeze blowing the soft sand into the ridges?</p> <p>Look at the never ending river can you see the sparkles touch</p> <p>the damp sand</p> <p>feel</p> <p>smooth shells</p> <p>Can you touch the seaweed on the slippery rocks?</p> <p>Smell the strong salty sea with cool breeze running</p> <p>While leaving memories of where we've been before and where we are now.</p> <p><i>Claudia Bradley</i></p> <p>1st prize</p> <p>Haverigg Primary School</p>	<p>What if I listen, What if I learn</p> <p>What if I listen, what if I learn, What if I cry, what if I gurn, What if I love, what if I hate, What if I'm true, what if I trate, What if I dance, what if I play, What if I steal, what if I pay, What if I talk, what if I shout, What if I trust, what if I doubt, What if I listen, what if I learn, What if I wait until it's my turn?</p> <p><i>Emilie Slater</i> (age 11) 1st Prize (11—14 category)</p> <p>Where I am...</p> <p>Gazing at the view like you're on top of Scafell, Observing the swooping seagulls dive like an F430, Smelling the rich pine combine with fresh air, Grasping the pine tree which is as spiky as a hedgehog rolled in a ball, Listening to the birds cheep softly like they are singing in a Christmas choir, Feeling the soft breeze like a velvet bed sheet blowing about gently</p> <p>I am</p> <p>Still gazing at this wonderful world</p> <p>As it circles me</p> <p>Once more.</p> <p><i>Mitchell Townson</i></p> <p>3rd prize</p> <p>Haverigg Primary School</p>
<p>I am in Haverigg</p> <p><i>I am in Haverigg, listening to the birds telling Each other secrets...</i></p> <p><i>I can hear the quiet whisper of the wind rustling in the trees.</i></p> <p><i>I can smell the freshly cut grass and, when I touch it, it feels like a warm rug.</i></p> <p><i>David William Jackson</i></p> <p>2nd prize</p> <p>Haverigg Primary School</p>		

<p>Where I am</p> <p>I am in a classroom. I can hear a bird chirping. A bird chirping reminds me of the colour Orange. Where I am.</p> <p>I am in a house, I can hear the kettle boiling. A kettle boiling reminds me of the colour Purple. Where I am.</p> <p>I am in a swimming pool. I can hear a person screaming. People screaming remind me of the colour Red. Where I am.</p> <p>I am in a hospital. I can hear a baby crying. Babies crying remind me of the colour Blue. Where I am.</p> <p><i>Ross Bickerdike</i></p>	<p>Where I am</p> <p>The boats sailing on the smooth quiet sea. The green muddy grass squelching. Wet damp clouds rough and fierce. The tall sharp mountain tops - big.</p> <p><i>Megan MacDonald (age 7)</i></p>	<p>What if I listen, What if I learn</p> <p>Sitting in a classroom, I can hear the teacher but I'm not listening. More important things are going on. Outside it's raining, But that doesn't stop anything.</p> <p>I look out the window, My head against the glass. It's cold but I don't care. The things I can see and what I can hear, Is just amazing.</p> <p>I see.... Clouds in the sky, All different shapes, Cars and motorbikes Whizzing down the road.</p> <p>I hear.... The rain beating the ground, Like a big drum, The birds in the sky, Chanting and squawking to each other.</p> <p>I taste, I smell... Wafting through the open window, The mix of cake and chlorine From the swimming pool and Fec. The sweet taste of frozen lemonade, Melting on my tongue.</p> <p><i>Ellen Watson</i> 1st prize Millom School</p>
<p>The Hill</p> <p>The hill's arms enclose a garden. Here one sits, Along the water, Where the weeds grow, Like vines, amongst the wall. This is where I sit, Just sitting, sitting, sitting, Watching, watching, watching, Waiting, waiting, waiting, For IT to strike.</p> <p><i>Jodie Floyd</i> 3rd prize St. James' Primary School</p>	<p>The Laughing Children</p> <p>The laughing children were really screaming And the teachers were really laughing The food was flying across the room Hitting several people on its way. The smell of chips wasn't that strong The gravy was sticky and thin. And that was my dinner over. The bell rang. The smell of thick Sloppy gravy stayed up my nose The taste of hard and chewy chips Stayed in my mouth And the sight of the awful teachers Stayed in my mind All day long.</p> <p><i>Bethany McCloy</i> 2nd prize Millom School</p>	<p>Judges' Comments</p> <p>We were immensely impressed by the high quality of the entries and could see how much the pupils had enjoyed this project. We were so impressed that we decided to give out some extra prizes, including a Special Commendation to the pupils of Black Combe School who made a wonderful video of their poems. We also increased the prizes in the 7 - 11 category to allow for joint 1st, 2nd and 3rd prizes, and awarded a joint 1st prize in the 11-14 age-group to allow Emilie Slater to be "promoted" into the next category for her well-handled poem. We hope to print more of the winners and highly commended entries in the next <i>Comet</i>, including Matthew Crowther's lively description of a cricket match (3rd prize: 11-14).</p>

**CERTIFICATE
OF ARCTIC
CIRCLE**

*I, Njord,
God of all the Seas,
hereby give witness that

Mr. Norman Nicholson
the 30th day of August
1965
On board the ship
M/S
NORDNORGE
Of Ofotens Steamship
Company,
crossed the Arctic Circle*

*May good luck and
happiness follow him
on this voyage and for
ever.*

The Coastal Tour (Nicholson and Norway—continued)

So perhaps it should come as no surprise to the reader to discover that on the rare occasions when Nicholson chose to travel abroad, he only visited Norway. In fact, it could be argued that he was not travelling abroad at all, in the sense of travelling to discover a new and different culture – what he was doing was not broadening the mind, but deepening it, coming to a better understanding of his own locality by going to a place of origin and seeing for himself what the relationship was.

The first trip was made in August 1965 and was taken in the summer holiday just after Yvonne took early retirement from her teaching job at Millom School (information from Peggy Troll). Previous to this major trip, holidays with Yvonne had been taken in Scotland – the most recent in 1961 (according to evidence from the photo albums in the John Rylands Archive). The title page of the Norway 1965 and 1974 album is carefully and proudly lettered:

1965 COASTAL TOUR.

Throughout the album there are notes on the subject of each photo, some of which are quite extensive. Based on the knowledge that Norman Nicholson's adult handwriting was notoriously difficult to read, and having made a comparison between his and Yvonne's script, we can be fairly sure that Yvonne was the author of the album and picture her diligently and meticulously putting it together after their return from this adventure. This, after all, was Nicholson's first trip abroad.

They set sail from the North Tyne Docks on the ship the "Leda" (an appropriately poetic name), a classic passenger boat built in 1952, complete with funnels and lifeboats and lying much lower in the water than today's lumbering giants.

The record of this first trip to Norway, as presented in the album (NCN16/114/1) shows an experience which must have been full of amazement and wonder for the Nicholsons, but which at the same time is now a relatively common retirement trip for today's older generation. And because they were not travelling on their own steam, but on a pre-determined tour, the places which they visited may seem fairly predictable to us. But the choice of scenes which they photographed tells us something about their joint interests – or at the least tells us that Yvonne was an excel-

lent support to Nicholson in making a record of those things which might at some point prove to be fruitful in terms of his writing. (I say "they photographed", although my guess is that Yvonne was the main photographer, as she had kept a clear record of her climbing and walking holidays in Scotland before her marriage to Nicholson, and as Norman, on occasion, appears in the photos of this trip). We would expect Nicholson to be attracted to more than the standard picturesque tourist views, and, indeed, there are photos of cranes on the quayside at Newcastle, for example, and boat machinery on the Nord Norge, the combined passenger boat, post-boat and workhorse coaster on which the Nicholsons made their coastal tour. The Hurtigruten, or Express Boat, trip can still be taken, but the conditions now are more comfortable than those which the Nicholsons would have experienced. In no way was their trip a luxury cruise.

The first glimpses of Norway are of mountains and water – a cloudy-bright sky – and the Leda docked at Bergen where the Nicholsons stayed at the Orion Hotel close to the quayside and the medieval Hanseatic warehouses. Although Bergen is now being promoted as a World Heritage City, in large measure because of this Hanseatic connection, a guidebook to Bergen almost contemporary with the Nicholsons' visit underplays the architectural interest of the town, saying that there is "nothing particularly outstanding about the houses themselves" and not even giving the famous Bryggen warehouses a mention (Bergen in a Nutshell; John Griegs Forlag). But the Nicholsons *did* notice the warehouses and have pasted in a large colour postcard of them (at this point, it is clear that they do not yet use colour film themselves).

After a short time in Bergen, probably only one night, the coastal tour begins. There are photos or postcards of lighthouses, churches, including some with bold modern architectural features, fishing boats, new bridges, teenagers lolling about on a quayside with their bicycles with the comment "The teenagers turn up for the daily event", "Lapps in traditional costume", glaciers, and several sunsets, narrow fjord scenes and so on. But apart



Norwegian Travel
Brochure (late 1950s ?)

The Coastal Tour (continued)

from the human interest of knowing that Yvonne and Nicholson stood at the North Cape and dutifully photographed the sign pointing North (captioned "On the top"), and the fabulously colourful, stylized certificates which they received, depicting a map of the north which clearly shows Britain as well as Scandinavia, the most interesting aspects of the record of this tour are, for me at least, the somewhat longer captions relating to geology.

On page 24 of the album, next to a small colour picture most probably cut out of a tourist brochure, there is the comment: "Torghatten Island with Hestmannen's arrow-hole (geological fault eroded by frost and sea 80-115 ft high 175 ft long + 40-80 ft wide)".

And on page 25, almost at the end of the tour, as the boat is returning to Bergen, there is a comment on the Hornelen Rocks under a black and white photograph showing a jagged rocky landscape: "2,900 ft sheer from sea level. The deep gash is gradually widening. We were told that the ships may not sound their sirens in case the vibration causes the rock mass to slip." Apart from the comment on the teenagers (Yvonne's teacherly eye?) and a wry remark on sunbathers near the Russian border, these are the most informative captions in the record of the trip. I feel that given Nicholson's abiding interest in the way that rock "makes the land" and the land makes the people, we can see here a part of what fascinated him about this country. AF

The Scandinavian Link (continued from front page)

"a kind offer of accommodation"—tactfully refused by Mr. Strandell who intended to travel to England with his wife and daughter, and clearly did not wish to impose himself on the writer.

But the correspondence also vibrates with mystery. Did Mr. Strandell carry out his plans and actually meet Nicholson? Did this link between Cumbria and Scandinavia ever bear fruit? The Archive as it stands gives us no answer. What it does give are Mr. Strandell's preliminary thoughts on the significance and impact of Nicholson's theatrical works.

Nicholson's dramas are undervalued compared to his poetry and topographical writings, and yet in their time they were well-respected and well-performed, having the support of such theatre directors as Dr. E. Martin Browne, well-known for his direction of T.S. Eliot's dramatic works and for his revival of the medieval York cycle. Indeed, it is apparent from Mr. Strandell's letters that it was on Martin Browne's recommendation that he first became acquainted with Nicholson's oeuvre. It is immensely interesting that Nicholson's dramas, rooted as

they are in the Cumbrian landscape, should have appealed so strongly to a Swedish reader—so much so that Mr. Strandell wished to carry out postgraduate studies on these texts.

The past may be a different country, but people living in this present state can at times cross a seemingly impassable border with the help of a native guide. Göran Strandell still lives in Sweden and has recently written to the editor of *Comet* to confirm that he did indeed meet Norman Nicholson in the summer of 1980 at 14, St. George's Terrace: *he was very amiable and kind (invited me to my first glass of whiskey) - I was perhaps too nervous.*

This correspondence from the 1980s, which could have been read as merely formal and incidental, has been made warmly personal by the generous response of Mr. Strandell to my enquiries. We know now that Nicholson wrote to his Swedish correspondent on several occasions — the last letter being dated 30th August 1986, nine months before his death on the 30th May 1987. In this letter Nicholson talks of his feelings about the loss of his wife, Yvonne, and about the year 1984: *that of*

Dragon

Like a bird in
the sky
Gliding down in
the valley
Diving through the mist
Smashing walls with its tail
Breathing fire.

Ryan Duffy (age 11)

my 70th birthday which gave the kind of celebration which Yvonne would have enjoyed so much. I can imagine, too, the pleasure which Nicholson would have taken in knowing that his work was liked and respected by someone from Scandinavia — a foreign region made native first by his historical sensitivity and responsive imagination, and then by the visits he made to Norway.

The postcards Mr. Strandell has sent me of his part of Sweden show a rocky sea-strand, skerries, hills in the distance, rowing boats and sailing boats, wild flowers and wild birds, and the setting sun to the west making a glittering golden path on the sea-waters...

And ever to the true north of the rock

Is polarized the compass of the bone,

Pointing to time beyond the shifty clock,

Pointing to land beyond the homely stone.

(NN: The Land under the Ice).

It seems fitting that Nicholson should find such strong admirers in Scandinavia. AF

Journey

*We finally appeared again
out of the night-fog.
And no-one recognized anyone.
Underway we'd forgotten how:
Nor did anyone demand:
Who are you?*

*From "Through Naked
Language" by Tarjei Vesaas
(trans. from Nynorsk by Roger
Greenwald).*

Papers Presented at the Nicholson Study Day (continued)

'The Provincial Tradition', the paper highlights what Nicholson identifies to be characteristics of quotidian provincial life and what it might mean to articulate that everydayness in the poetic form.

The second half of the paper draws upon these theoretical writings to read a selection of Nicholson's Millom poems. I argue that Nicholson attempts to use both the geography and the inhabitants of his home town to show the universality of provincial experience. I also illustrate how Nicholson's provincial poetic em-

phasizes his own position as a social insider.

The paper ends, however, by raising questions about Nicholson's model of positive provincialism and by identifying the inherent problems of writing from within a small, enclosed community. I argue that Nicholson's Millom poems are almost invariably underpinned by a sense of social dislocation as the poet's articulates, perhaps unconsciously, a series of anxieties regarding his necessarily solitary vocation.

David Cooper

50 years after the Windscale Fire... David Boyd assesses Nicholson's views on the nuclear industry

Just over 50 years ago a near-meltdown and serious fire at the No.1 nuclear reactor pile at what was then Windscale [now rebadged as 'Sellafield'] released considerable quantities of potentially harmful nuclear material into the environment.

Despite living for much of his life almost on the doorstep of exceedingly heavy, dirty and hazardous industry in the form of Millom Ironworks and the associated iron ore mines, where one of his own uncles died as a result of an underground accident, NN seems to have regarded the West Cumbrian nuclear industry with a mixture of bemusement, bewilderment and concern which expressed itself, following this nuclear accident as the clear-loathing which inspired 'Windscale', his very well-known poem about the incident, subsequently much-promulgated by anti-nuclear groups such as CORE [Cumbrians Opposed to a Radioactive Environment] who have published an illustrated poster, their own description of which reads:-

'CORE has combined the work of two well known Cumbrian artists in the form of a poignant colour poster which is now offered for sale. The poster incorporates the reproduction of the oil painting "Towards the Sea, Scafell" by Julian Cooper, member of the famous Heaton Cooper family of painters from Grasmere. Depicting the rugged beauty of the Lakeland fells with the stark threat of Sellafield just discernible in the coastal background, the scene cites the poem "Windscale" by the late Lakeland poet Norman Nicholson of Millom.'

This industry can be a very controversial and emotive presence, evoking strong, often polarized and sometimes ambivalent feelings in all parts of

West Cumbria, the economy of which nowadays depends so very much upon the nuclear industry and all its associated industries and services, now that most of the others have disappeared entirely.

In contrast to the scathing tone of his 'Windscale' poem, NN adopted a more reflective and balanced stance in 'Portrait of the Lakes' [1963; page 176], stating that he was 'not one who thinks that the splitting of the atom is likely to be a boon to mankind' but conceding the manifold training and employment opportunities it brought to West Cumbria along with 'our most impressive industrial architecture since the blast-furnaces' - a rather different image to 'towering toadstools' etc.! NN even went on to declare that the industry 'has given the once-isolated West Cumbrians a sense of being in the front line of the twentieth century' but immediately adds that 'we have already paid for this dubious honour by pouring our milk down the drains....we may pay a higher price in the future.' But, he concludes, 'at present, Sellafield helps to keep more than just the Geiger counters ticking.'

Now the site is largely being 'decommissioned'. No longer do goblets of steam plume skywards from Calder Hall's massive cooling towers and soon these enormous pieces of industrial architecture are likely to be erased completely from the skyline - strong echoes of the closure and dismantling of Millom Ironworks here? Of the two original Windscale reactors, with their towering, rather grotesque and sinister-looking concrete chimneys, only a lone one remains, this being the one which caught fire in 1957, still dangerously radioactive and difficult and expensive to dismantle even today. The much more modern but arguably equally sinister-looking

Thermal Oxide Reprocessing Plant [THORP] chimney has been added to the Sellafield vista, along with the earlier addition of the highly distinctive and now-disused 'golfball' of the plant's Advanced Gas-cooled Reactor [AGR].

When featured on 'The South Bank Show' on his 70th. Birthday in 1984, NN himself read 'Windscale' in his usual, masterfully bardic, way, but I think with a quite apparent strongly critical and indignant feeling, especially when saying the phrase 'sewers flow with *milk*.'

Possibly NN was factually mistaken in his reference to 'meat is carved-up for the fire to eat'. [The thyroids of slaughtered cattle from farms near Sellafield were identified and incinerated because they would have concentrations of radioactive iodine but meat generally wasn't incinerated as far as I know.] But this writer vividly remembers, as a small child at the time, the local milk being poured down the drains, as well as the image immortalized by the photographer Ivor Nicholas: the masterful picture of churns of milk on a lorry at the dairy being poured into the sewers with a big placard on the lorry roof proclaiming how healthy to drink was milk !

The poem itself brims with the most startling and original contrasts and juxtapositions, largely based perhaps upon the violations of 'God's fresh air' brought about by [post-nuclear] Man. Windscale's blunderings with Nature have literally turned Life and Nature upside-down with the totally crazy result that 'dirt is clean', 'poison pastures quick and green' and 'storm sky, bright'. But, to Scafell [God ?] it's all a transitory, though cankerous, itch between the toes.

Truly, then, NN sees and evokes 'hell in a grain of sand'.

David Boyd

Black Combe White

*... there, beyond the roof-tops,
Bulging from the flat ledge of the horizon
Like a blister on the white paint of the window-sill,
Black Combe—its unmistakable cleft forehead,
No bigger than a thimble now, outlined in chalk
On the blue distemper of the sky.*

[...]

*And now, from my own doorway, between gable and chimney,
That harsh, scarred brow, entirely stripped of snow,
Impending over yard and attic sky-light,
A dark, parental presence.*

Norman Nicholson

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

David Cooper responds to this poem overleaf and invites members of the Society to respond with further comments.

Please do send responses, in any form, to any of Nicholson's poems, for the Favourite Nicholson Poem column. The Editor will try to use all submissions.

A Child of God

In Nicholson's churchyard where Nicholson lies where light rains down from the sea close by a stone somewhat smaller than the rest, reads

A Child of God
A Boy

A tiny body discovered with history undiscovered A gravestone paid for by subscription six simple words for its inscription

A Child of God
A Boy

Wendy Cook

Editor's note: Wendy Cook is a founding member of the Norman Nicholson Society who wrote this poem after visiting Millom in September 2005 for one of the Heritage Open Days. She had been listening to Neil Curry's talk on Nicholson and afterwards went into the graveyard to locate Nicholson's grave. She writes:

We must see the grave, "Let our eyes at the last be blinded not by the dark but by dazzle."

Shoulder by shoulder, the identical grey gravestones echo the identical grey shoulder-to-shoulder houses of this quiet, comical town.

A cricketer in the field next to the graveyard scores a boundary and we walk past the grave of a baby boy, "A Child of God", a little dead body aged 15-18 months found on the slag bank. An unsolved sadness.

More of Wendy's writings will follow in a future issue of "Comet".

Readers are reminded that creative responses to Nicholson's work and/or themes are always welcome, as well as critical and biographical pieces.

AF

**VISIT TO THE NORMAN NICHOLSON ARCHIVE:
DECEMBER 8TH 2007**

The editor will not be able to attend the visit to the NN Archive at the John Rylands Library. Members are invited to send in their own reports on this forthcoming visit, to be published in the March 2008 issue of *Comet*.

Contact Peggy Troll for full details about the visit and to book a place: 01229 772 603 or peggytroll@clara.co.uk

'A dark, parental presence?': Nicholson and Black Combe

In *Sea to the West*, Nicholson's sequence of Black Combe poems – 'Cloud on Black Combe', 'The Shadow of Black Combe' and 'Clouded Hills' – can be read as the ultimate expression of his lifetime commitment to a particular patch of land. These poems highlight both Nicholson's knowledge of localised weather conditions and his understanding of a spiky topography which remains all too frequently concealed beneath the Cumbrian cloud. What is more, these poems are characterised by Nicholson's intimations of his own mortality as the poet imagines his corporeal self being absorbed into 'the Ordovician catacomb' ('The Shadow of Black Combe') which looks down upon his home town of Millom. This imaginative preoccupation with ideas of landscape, rootedness and impending death is underscored by turning to the 1978 pamphlet, *The Shadow of Black Combe*, in which this short sequence was first published. Brian Wade's front cover photograph offers a barren image of Black Combe as a 'round, / Turfed, cobble-dashed dome' ('The Shadow of Black Combe'); whilst, on the back of the publication, a flat-capped Nicholson is photographed leaning on a tombstone in the churchyard of St George's, Millom. These poems, then, look back to a life spent in the one environment and look forward to an eternity within that same familiar place.

Is it right, though, to suggest that these poems offer an unproblematic articulation of physical and spiritual belongingness? Or is the sequence informed, instead, by a deep-rooted uncertainty and ambivalence? Perhaps the key poem is 'Black Combe White': a text which, for this reader at least, raises significant questions regarding Nicholson's assertion, at the end of *Wednesday Early Closing*, that he remains profoundly grateful for a lifetime spent in his home town. Nicholson's speaker refers to the 'unmistakable cleft forehead' of the titular fell and, later on in the poem, describes the 'known tight streets, / The hunched chapels, the long canals of smoke' of Millom. Yet, alongside this, Black Combe is said to bulge 'from the flat ledge of the horizon / Like a blister on the white paint of a window-sill'; and, in the final section of the poem, the fell is presented as a 'harsh, scarred brow, entirely stripped of snow, / Impending over yard and attic sky-light, / A dark, parental presence'.

What is the reader meant to make of these images? In 'The Shadow of Black Combe', the named landscape offers a reassuringly fixed point: the speaker envisages that it is the site at which his body will return to the earth. In 'Black Combe White', however, the attitude towards the Cumbrian topography remains fundamentally unclear as the speaker oscillates between images of protection and suffocation. What do other readers think? It would be great if members of the Society were to write in to *Comet* with their own readings of 'Black Combe White'. Let the debate begin!

David Cooper
10 November 2007

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

December 8th 2007: Members' Visit to the Norman Nicholson Archive.

Limited numbers (tel. 01229 772 603 for details)

January 12th 2008: Norman Nicholson Birthday Event— Guide Hall, Millom, 11.00 am to 3.30 pm. Showing of South Bank Show and Look Stranger

Please bring poems or passages to read out and food for sharing.

March 2008: Words by the Water— An Exhibition of Art Work curated by the University of Cumbria in response to the work of Norman Nicholson.

Other events: planned events for 2008 include the AGM on April 8th and an event at the Beacon, Whitehaven. Further details and further events listings will follow.



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