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and more!

## NORMAN AS A LETTER-WRITER— MORE FROM SWEDEN

Readers will remember the articles published in *Comet*, November 2007, in which Nicholson's deep affinity with his Nordic heritage was explored in some depth. In particular, the correspondence which Nicholson had with the Swedish teacher Göran Strandell showed Nicholson's affability and his willingness to meet with and talk to Scandinavian admirers of his work.

Letters from Nicholson to Strandell have been rediscovered in which Nicholson speaks about his dramas, which "now seem a long way away from me - - THE OLD MAN was written 35 years ago!" (the letter is dated 28 June 80). Nicholson also stresses that he has "long given up any ideas of progressing as a dramatist. But I think my short experiment with the stage did me a lot of good as a poet, while the ideas presented, in particular in THE OLD MAN and in PROPHECY, have become some of the dominant themes of my later verse." Nicholson also, as noted in the long and warm answer which Strandell gave to Nicholson's letter, reported in the November 2007 article, speaks of his Scandinavian links, both with regard to *Prophecy to the Wind* and to his middle name: Cornthwaite.

Most human and touching is the picture we get of Nicholson's easy and natural way of dealing with the request of Mr. Strandell to meet him in order to talk about the dramas. Nicholson suggests itineraries, warns against heavy tourist traffic in the Lakes, offers accommodation, and makes jokes about the cost of living. Both letters, 28th June 1980 and 21st July 1980, are full of corrections and the idiosyncratic typing which Norman's correspondents so enjoyed.

Are there perhaps more as yet undiscovered letters from Nicholson lurking in attics or in boxes tucked under bedsteads? It would not be at all surprising if that were so!  
AF

## NORMAN NICHOLSON SOCIETY AGM APRIL 2008

by Peggy Troll

We held our second AGM on Friday, April 11th in the Pensioners' Hall at 7.30p.m. The tragic death of our Chairperson, Rosemary McFie, was remembered with sadness by the members who recalled her energy and enthusiasm in leading the activities of the Society - she is greatly missed.

The 'business' part of the evening got quickly under way. Peggy Troll, acting Chair, gave a summary of the year's events: the 'walk and talk' led by Professor Brian Whalley of Belfast University, in May 2007; a *Nicholson Study Day* with the Centre for North West Regional Studies, Lancaster University; a *Nicholson exhibition* for National Heritage Weekend; and the *Nicholson Day* in October, with two eminent poets, David Scott and

Matt Simpson, and the prizewinners of the *Millom Schools' Poetry Competition*; a visit to the *Nicholson Archive at the John Rylands Library* in Manchester; lastly, a birthday celebration in January when members were able to see and hear Norman Nicholson in the films 'Look, Stranger' and the 'South Bank Show'. Officers were then elected: David Cooper as Chair, Margaret Forsman, Secretary, Wendy Bracegirdle, Treasurer, with committee members Neil Curry, Antoinette Fawcett, Glenn Lang, Angela Petersen, Mandy Penellum and Peggy Troll.

Why do we assume that AGMs are just dull 'business' occasions, to be avoided at all costs? This one wasn't! The second part was a lively, entertaining talk by Dr. David Cross on the letters from the artist Percy

Kelly to Norman Nicholson, the subject of his recently published book, *Cumbrian Brothers*. Dr. Cross regretted that very little of the Nicholson side of the correspondence had been found. He brought several examples of the artist's work and an envelope, showing how Percy Kelly decorated his letters (and envelopes) with beautiful miniature illustrations, often in watercolour. There was an opportunity for questions, after which David Cooper thanked Dr. Cross for a talk which gave new insights into the lives of both Kelly and Nicholson.

This AGM marked the end of the 2nd year of existence of the society and the start of the 3rd year. Long may the NN Society flourish!

## As Thursday

Millom Heritage Open Day , Saturday 10th September 2005

By Wendy Cook

*The title comes from the Millom Heritage leaflet which listed all the events for Thursday and for events on following days simply "As Thursday". To complicate matters the booklet was printed in a rather idiosyncratic order which left Thursday tricky to find. It seemed to be Millom all over!*

**Back in 2005 Wendy and husband Mike visited Millom on one of the Heritage Open Days, peeked inside Norman Nicholson's house, took a guided tour round town and saw the brand new Nicholson window in the church.**

A steep, narrow stair from the back of the health-food shop whose owner gives permission to proceed with a nod of the head. Photos show leftovers of the 1960s: brown and orange wallpaper, shiny brown furniture, a thin-topped drop-leaf table. Shelves hide behind floor-to-ceiling orange curtains, a coat rack drenched in coats and caps towers over a spindle-backed rocker. A modest life.

Drifting round St George's Church Hall, held in a 1950s time warp. Folk dot the place like fungus spores, waiting for "The Walk". "Are you here for The Walk?" We are. And we gaze at more photos: women inspecting white stockings (Elbeo), knights on a tomb (Huddlestons). Millom years ago, not so very different from Millom now.

The guide arrives and we're off. We see the school Norman didn't go to - too rough, his Mum said, too many catapults, too much spitting. Boys pulling little girls' knickers down! Down long streets of terraced houses we trot after our guide. He's used to covering ground, was once the town bobby.

Halfway down the street, one of the identical houses is a jeweller's shop. To us this is odd. The policeman doesn't share our surprise. Up we all go onto the slag bank - a moon-like expanse of barren, white gravel. Few places in Britain can be so inimical to plant life. Years after the iron-works were bulldozed, the slag still stares raw at the sky. This is the edge of the Duddon estuary and the tide is out. Dark swishes of water braid flat sands. At the bottom of the slag bank, salt marsh is threaded with deep cuttings made, filled and abandoned by the tide. All Lakeland stands at the head of the estuary, flat as a paper cut-out. The policeman, from memory, quotes Wordsworth, "Now expand, Majestic Duddon, over smooth flat sands, Gliding in silence with unfettered sweep," and Nicholson, ". . . but you and I, Duddon, know better."

Between rosehips and blackberries we squeeze back into the town. Somewhere a band is playing, teas are on offer at the Methodist church, sensible folk are doing their Saturday shop and stepping off their own pavements out of the way of "The Walk" with amused looks on their faces

A little lad and his mum walking near us live in Millom castle and have been on TV this week. "I don't quite like being famous. My cousin Harriet, who's third cornet in the band now, teased me loads. . . The antenna on the Outside Broadcast van extends like a light sabre. . . I was scared at first of the telly men coming but it was good in the end."

How we find the Duddon Pilot for lunch I'm not sure. Indentures from the mine and correspondence from the ironworks line the walls. Not squirreled away in a museum. Just part - a proud part - of life.

Behind the pub, a twelve foot high lump of black iron perches against the sky. They couldn't shift it when they dropped the four furnaces. It remained. Their efforts to blast it apart failed. Bigger it - they said - leave it there. Now they've put a plaque up, new it is, last Thursday. Suddenly it has become a monument.

Up at the church are newly-launched booklets for the Nicholson memorial window. There is a slightly manic, carnival air inside the church: a lady from the committee is keen to explain what

continues on page 10

**A letter from Islay by Mavis Gulliver**

June 24th 2008

Dear Editor,

We have long been admirers of Norman Nicholson's work and my husband and I have visited Millom twice.

We've been in his room and to the museum and have explored many of the places mentioned in his poems, including following the Duddon.

On our last visit, in September 2007 we found out about the Society, and promptly joined.

Our location means that it's unlikely that we will be able to attend events. Although, if we are ever on the mainland at the appropriate time, we will certainly join you.

Also, on our last visit, I sat in the cemetery and wrote the following poem. I wonder if you feel it suitable for inclusion in one of the forthcoming issues of *Comet*?

Yours sincerely,

Mavis Gulliver

ALL YOUR WORDS

*'Let my eyes at the last be blinded  
Not by the dark  
But by the dazzle.'*

Norman Nicholson 1914-1987

Today  
there is no dazzle.  
Black Combe's curves  
lie hidden under cloud;  
but in the west  
a streaked sky gives a glimpse  
of powder blue.  
On the skyline  
a windfarm's windmills turn  
and all your words turn over  
in my mind,  
words that make me feel  
I know this town, this place  
where all your roots ran deep  
into the soil,  
and deeper yet  
into the very rock  
of Cumberland.

Mavis Gulliver

*Clouded Hills*

*Though you can't see them,  
You know they are there.*

[...]

**The text of this poem has been redacted for copyright reasons**

*NN Collected Poems (page 329)*

This is the poem in which Nicholson is at his most Zen-like. The imagery is simple and appropriate, the magical exactness of "Herdwick fleece", "damped-down fire", "white meringue" and, especially, "grey rain-break", almost unobtrusive in their particularity. Here is Nicholson writing like a Chinese artist, brushing in the grey, white and black of the words with an apparent ease based, as Chinese brush-paintings were, on long meditation and much experience. The sounds of the poem add to this lightness of touch, free airy rhythms and light stresses for mild emphasis, as if the clouds depicted in the poem touch earth and mountain here, and here, and here. The rhyme-sounds too use almost the full gamut of rhyming techniques available to the English poet (see Peter Dale's *An Introduction to Rhyme*, London: Agenda: 1998, for an idea of what is possible when one moves away from the notion that only full rhyme is rhyme): I particularly like the intertwining alliterative, assonantal and consonantal effects of the second stanza and the wit of "pikes... **Spiking** up to an unseen sky". Most of all I like the openness of the poem's message. The poem could simply be a description of the clouded hills of Cumbria, or something much deeper and more mystical, an affirmation of faith not tied to the particulars of Christianity, a mystical awareness of something other, accessible to all and familiar as clouds on hills, hiding what we nevertheless know is really there. This is probably *my* favourite NN poem.

AF

*PS And the title, of course, refers to Blake's: 'And did the Countenance Divine Shine forth upon our clouded hills?'*

## ‘Places on the Margin’?

In his 2000 pamphlet on Norman Nicholson’s life and work (Carlisle: Northern Lights), Neil Curry put forward the case for a critical engagement with the topographical prose books as well as the poetry. I, for one, think that this is a persuasive argument since there is what the theorists would call a complex ‘intratextuality’ between the prose and verse writings: a reading of the prose books can illuminate Nicholson’s work as a poet of place; and his practice as a landscape poet clearly underpins his prose documentation of ‘Greater Lakeland’.

That said, I have always found it difficult to identify the correct generic label for the series of prose books on what Nicholson describes as the ‘Lake System’. What is more, the fact that the publications are not conventional guide books also raises questions regarding Nicholson’s anticipated readership. For whom was he writing? Are the books aimed at native dwellers; socio-spatial ‘insiders’ for whom this landscape provides the environment of the everyday? Or are they targeted at visitors and holiday-makers; ‘outsiders’ whose interest in region remains necessarily detached and distant?

Such questions kept on entering my mind as I read Neil Curry’s entertaining new book, *The Cumberland Coast* (Carlisle: Bookcase, 2007). How does one define this text? Is it a travelogue? Is it a work of local history? Is it a memoir? Ultimately, the label ‘topographical prose book’ seems insufficient when discussing the way in which Curry moves seamlessly between interests, approaches and modes of description. In its generic hybridity, then, *The Cumberland Coast* is placed in a long tradition of what the Raven, a character in Nicholson’s verse play *The Old Man of the Mountains*, calls this ‘north west corner of a north west island’. It is a tradition which includes such texts as Thomas Gray’s *Journal* of 1769, Wordsworth’s *Guide to the Lakes* and, of course, Nicholson’s own prose writings on place.

As the title suggests, Curry’s book draws our attention to what the spatial theorist, Rob Shields, would describe as ‘places on the margin’. More specifically, Curry reminds the reader that Cumbria is a coastal county: in his own words, it ‘means’ Millom, Whitehaven and Workington, as well as ‘Wordsworth and daffodils [...] the Old Man of Coniston, Windermere and Helvellyn [...] the gift shops in Ambleside, mint cake in Kendal and gingerbread in Grasmere’. In attempting to reconfigure the popular conception of the region, Curry restricts himself to the coastline of the old county of Cumberland. In his Preface, however, Curry argues that this decision was predicated upon a ‘practical’ rationalism rather than a ‘nostalgic’ longing for the traditional county boundaries:

But it was no kind of nostalgia which led me to keep the old county name in the title of this book. I was simply being practical. The Cumberland coast used to stretch from the Solway Firth to the Duddon Estuary and it remains an entity in itself. There is a *Cumbria Coastal Path* which follows that route, and then goes as far as Silverdale, but the towns it passes through after Millom – Ulverston, Cartmel, Arnside – are not the same. They do not feel the same. The people are not the same. They may be Cumbrians, but they’re not, and never were, part of Cumberland.

So, Curry takes the reader on a littoral journey, moving southwards from the ‘restless’ estuarial space of the Solway to the slagbanks and sparrows of Millom, passing through many ‘marginalised’ – to apply Shields’s term – places and landscapes in-between.

*The Cumberland Coast* is characterised by the way in which Curry weaves his eclectic interests to develop a rich and complex sense of place. The following list, chosen randomly from the Contents page, details Curry’s subjects in the third of his ten chapters:

Charles Dickens visits Cumberland. Allonby. The Ship Inn. Capt. Joseph Huddart. Salt. Crosscanonby. Maryport. The Roman Fort. Humphrey Senhouse. The port. Coal mines. Sunday Schools. Shipbuilding. Industrial decline. Nether Hall. Regeneration. The Roman Museum. Maritime Museum. The Aquarium. Colin Telfer.

Curry brings together these seemingly disparate subjects to offer a complex and interconnected portrait of place; he articulates a sense of a multi-layered landscape as he moves through time as well as across space.

The dominant feature of *The Cumberland Coast*, however, is the presentation of people. In writing the book, Curry clearly followed a Coleridgean, rather than a Wordsworthian, model in that he actually

## A Review of Neil Curry's *The Cumberland Coast* by David Cooper

engaged with the people inhabiting those places he visited. More than in Nicholson's prose books, then, Curry uses a series of character portraits, or pen-pictures, to show how this is a populated landscape: from the haaf netters of the Solway channel right down to Glynn Griffith, the infectiously dedicated owner of the RAF Museum at Millom. Curry ends his brief Preface to the book by thanking the people he met during his coastal journey: it seems only right that they receive this acknowledgment as it is the inhabitants of Cumberland's coastal communities – from the shrimp-pickers at Silloth to Richard Woodall of Waberthwaite sausage fame – who provide the spine to this book.

For all of this, I don't think that *The Cumberland Coast* is without its problems or weaknesses. I expect, for example, that I am not the only reader who has vehemently disagreed with Curry's disparaging thoughts as he wanders around the streets and squares of Workington. Similarly, some of the derisory comments about the museums he visits *en route* seem to be deliberately provocative. But these are relatively minor criticisms, though, and, for the most part, Curry's tone is playful and his tongue never seems to be too far away from his cheek.

A more significant problem, however, is the lack of maps. One of the great delights of reading this kind of writing is the interplay between textual and cartographical representations of place; a rich relationship is almost invariably set up as the reader moves, perhaps unconsciously, between words, maps and his or her own imaginings of landscape and environment. A series of maps would have been helpful in locating the reader (both natives and visitors alike) and would have complemented the frequently evocative nature of Curry's prose.

At the end of *The Cumberland Coast*, Curry indicates that Norman Nicholson, in his own prose books, concentrates primarily on 'the traditional areas, what one might call the Tourist Areas of the lake [sic] District he wrote about so tellingly'. I am not sure that I entirely agree with this statement in that there is a sense in which Nicholson uses his prose books to challenge the dominant model of the Wordsworthian Lake District and to offer an alternative understanding of the region as either 'Greater Lakeland' or the 'Lake System'. Whereas Curry suggests, then, that his book offers a portrait of an industrial coastline which Nicholson only fleetingly documents, I would argue that *The Cumberland Coast*, in fact, emerges out of the Nicholsonian tradition of presenting 'marginalised' places: 'marginalised' in the sense that these locations sit outside, both physically and imaginatively, the image of Cumbria which becomes conflated with that of the Lake District within the national consciousness.

Over forty members of the Society were fortunate enough to hear Neil Curry read from, and talk about, *The Cumberland Coast*, at a special event at the Beacon, Whitehaven, on Thursday, 19 June 2008.

Since its inauguration in 2006, the Society has organised a series of events in Millom. It has also worked in partnerships to organise one-day mini-conferences at Crooklands, near Milnthorpe, and in Lancaster; and it has organised a trip to the Norman Nicholson Archive at the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester. The event at Whitehaven, then, formed part of the Society's ongoing programme to organise gatherings outside of Millom, as well as in Nicholson's home town.

As the mid-point on Neil's coastal journey, Whitehaven seemed to be the logical location to hold the talk. The use of the recently-redeveloped Beacon also allowed members of the audience to take a look at the exhibition, *Ferrous Horizon, Jewelled Sky*. Taking inspiration from the work of Nicholson, *Ferrous Horizon, Jewelled Sky* was the culmination of a twelve-month project involving Copeland Borough Council, English Heritage and Millom residents. A series of photographs and pieces of creative writing were produced by local people – including Society members – working with professional photographer, Rob Fraser, and writer/editor of *Comet*, Antoinette Fawcett. The exhibition was on display in the Beacon's Harbour Gallery.

The committee of the Society was delighted to see so many members make the trip to Whitehaven. More than this, the evening event was also open to the public and it was wonderful to see some non-members being introduced to Neil's book and, more generally, the work of the Society. A big thank you to all who attended!

*David Cooper*

See also David's plea for suggestions for events and venues on the back page.

## Schools Writing Competition 2008

For the second year the Society has run a writing competition for the Millom Federation of Schools during the summer term. To celebrate the return to print of Nicholson's autobiography of his childhood in Millom "Wednesday Early Closing", the theme for the 2008 competition was "Memories". To date we are pleased to say we have over 50 entries, many beautifully presented. Judging will take place in September and the panel will be Peggy Troll, Phil Houghton and Julia Dixon. Presentations will take place at the October Festival.

We are grateful to the staff of local schools who have done so much to encourage pupils to take an interest in Nicholson's works and to look around at the environment that inspired him. Members will remember the video of poems created last year by Black Combe School and the Poetry Trail devised by Haverigg School. This year Haverigg staff have produced a pictorial CD of Nicholson locations around Millom. Pupils from St. James' School visited the attic room in the Terrace and listened to Nicholson reading his own poems through the courtesy of Millom Oral History Society and their archive of tape recordings.

We are deeply appreciative of the contribution made by Antoinette Fawcett to this event. Despite her considerable workload, Antoinette has again produced superb teaching materials for each of the three age groups and provided inspiration for both teachers and pupils.

*Margaret Forsman July 2008*

### WEDNESDAY EARLY CLOSING: An extract

*The following extract from Nicholson's autobiography, Wednesday Early Closing, are provided for critical reasons, so that members of the Society who do not have access to the text are able to respond to aspects of the text, just as the schoolchildren have done. In this short extract Nicholson describes his father's daily routine and the reason for the title of the book:*

My father's daily routine was as methodical as the lay-out of his shop. He used to keep open from eight-fifteen to seven o'clock in his early days, and from nine to five-thirty after 1945. And the shop really was open during those hours: no closing for lunch, except, again, in later years. When he came into the house at meal-times, he would switch on a little battery-worked bell, which rang when the door opened, and when the bell rang, he would drop his knife and fork and go immediately to the shop. Often, he had taken only a couple of mouthfuls when the bell rang, and by the time he had served his customer, the meal was cold. During the Christmas shopping week, it was almost impossible to eat at all.

The blessed respite from all this came on Sundays and Wednesday Early Closing. Sunday, of course, was everybody's day off, but Wednesday afternoon was the tradesman's own privilege. I learned, as a very young child, to look forward to the peace which came over the house on Wednesday afternoon. To other boys, holiday time meant bustle and stir, the shops lit up and the streets crowded; to me they meant quietness. Even today, when I visit a town for the first time, I prefer to go on an Early Closing Day. I enjoy seeing the shops empty, the shop doors shut, the streets un-crowded. In later years, when I was lying ill in the bedroom two storeys above the shop, I would often start up with a little thrill of pleasure when I heard the yale lock click into place at twelve-thirty on Wednesday. "Early Closing", I would say to myself, and lie back on the pillow, determined to enjoy it.

**The image of the front cover of Wednesday Early Closing has been redacted, for copyright reasons.**

**The front cover portrays Black Combe from Millom in 1920, by the artist Juliet Renny.**

**The actual cover can easily be viewed on sites such as Amazon or Google images.**

*Wednesday Early Closing, pp. 157–158*

### St Francis and St Bernard

Close to the independent republic of Uzupis  
 where the young trade hubcaps for hashish,  
 splash paint on statues, scratch themselves and bleed  
     poems,  
 a knight of Jerusalem, with a broken arm,  
 still casts his level gaze across the nave.  
 In hard times, prayers struck these hard walls like woodpeckers.

We tried to look our best here, concentrating,  
 keeping silent until released by benediction.  
 Then the doors slammed shut for fifty years  
 and we worked here, repairing machinery,  
 piled sacks of flour round the high altar,  
 when too drunk or tired to make our way home, slept in  
     the organ loft.

That's history for you, battered, uncomplaining, empty,  
 a shape, a space, silence recalling music –  
 and, like a child entering a grown-up room,  
 I am caught and silenced on the threshold,  
 even bruised  
 as by a blow once suffered in a dream.

**Hugh Thomson**

*Hugh Thomson's poem is reprinted here with kind permission from Michael Baron and "Slate". It was first published in Hugh's Slate pamphlet Rough Music. Copies of the pamphlet can be bought directly from the author (e-mail: [lomurrah@gxn.co.uk](mailto:lomurrah@gxn.co.uk)) or from The Senhouse Museum, Maryport ([romans@senhousemuseum.co.uk](mailto:romans@senhousemuseum.co.uk)) or from Neo's Bookshop, Cockermouth ([debbie@neo-bookshop.co.uk](mailto:debbie@neo-bookshop.co.uk)).*

*Members who attended the joint Senhouse Poets / Norman Nicholson Society Event at Isel Church on the 19th July will recognize this poem, set in Vilnius, Lithuania.*

*The Senhouse Poets are based at the Roman Museum in Maryport and were initially formed as a writing group tutored by the Cumbrian writer and poet, Angela Locke. The NN Society is hoping to hold some future events in common with the Senhouse Poets, an exciting new collaboration for both groups, and a result of the Society's interest in contemporary Cumbrian writing.*

### NICHOLSON FOUND by Phil Houghton

Locality, identity and "local distinctiveness" resound in the opening pages of *England in Particular* by Sue Clifford and Angela King of *Common Ground*, published by Hodder & Stoughton, noted as "A Celebration of the commonplace, the local, the vernacular and the distinctive". This book, in itself, has a real distinctiveness, capturing a sense of place and of places, at every turn of its pages. It is no surprise, therefore, to encounter Norman Nicholson in the folds of its captured landscapes and amongst the layering of humankind, set between the hedged edges of its encyclopaedic field patterns.

Within the descriptions of landscape features, games, names, local traditions, wildlife and too much more to describe here, there is a wealth of locality and Nicholson is drawn upon for three references, in support of entries in the book's A to Z layout. The entry for "Becks" quotes from Nicholson's poem *Beck (Sea to the West, Faber & Faber, 1981)* from the line "Motionless to the eye", down to, and including "In the blink of a lifetime."

Echoes of Nicholson describing the gurning encountered at Egremont, are to be found in the entry for "Crab Fair", included as an extract from Nicholson's *Cumberland & Westmorland*, Robert Hale, 1949.

"Hound Trailing" sees us on the trail of Nicholson again, where the definition for this entry in the book gains significant support from the inclusion of Nicholson's description of the sport, taken from his prose writings in *Cumberland & Westmorland*. Here, in the chosen quotation, we see a real layering of Nicholson's concept of a *Greater Lakeland* and its industry, through his listing of those who attend the trails - "...bookie, miner, shipyard- and steel-worker and clerk mix with farmer, farm-labourer and squire" - *Cumberland & Westmorland*, Robert Hale, 1949.

We remain on Nicholson's trail, where the poet's writings and references to his work become the aniseed drag, to be followed into the craggy crevices of library shelves, across the fell-side curves of back copy magazines, a scree of paper clippings from the local press and lately from within solid collections of place and of people, as laid down here by *Common Ground* - track down *England in Particular* and wherever else you can, Nicholson in particular.

**Philip Houghton August 2008**

***Poetry In Cumbria: Norman Nicholson and Beyond***  
**A Day of Readings and Discussion at the University of Cumbria**  
**by Dr Penny Bradshaw**

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May Literature and Creative Writing staff from the Faculty of Arts at the University of Cumbria hosted a day of poetry readings and discussions reflecting on the ongoing influence of Norman Nicholson on contemporary Cumbrian poetry. The day was held in the Alexandra Gallery at our Lancaster campus and was organised to tie in with a Faculty art exhibition, “*Outside the Glass*”: *Perspectives on Norman Nicholson*, which featured work inspired by Nicholson’s life and writings by a range of contemporary artists.

The theme and title for the poetry day was *Poetry in Cumbria: Norman Nicholson and Beyond* and given the focus on new directions it was appropriate that the day opened with readings from University of Cumbria Creative Writing students, including doctoral student, Martyn Halsall. This was followed by readings from more established Cumbrian poetic voices and during the latter part of the morning session we heard from Annie Clarkson, Geraldine Green, and Mike Smith, whose work collectively began to signal the diversity of contemporary poetic engagements with the region; these poets offered reflections on both the centre and the peripheries of the Cumbrian landscape, and their work involved a range of perspectives and views, taking us from the surreal to the sinister, and ranging between childhood memories to working life in Cumbria. A particular and unexpected highlight of the morning session was an excerpt from a recording of an interview with Norman Nicholson made by Mike Smith in the 1970s; in a day which centred on the idea of poetic influence, it was fascinating to hear Nicholson himself reflecting on his own process of finding a poetic voice.

The afternoon session opened with a reading from Phil Houghton, who talked about Nicholson’s influence in opening his eyes to the wider Cumbria and whose work continues to engage with both natural and industrial Cumbrian landscapes. Dr David Cooper followed with a paper on “The Problem of Precedent’: Norman Nicholson and Modern Cumbrian Poetry” in which he talked about some of the issues faced by post-Romantic Cumbrian poets. Dr Cooper explored Nicholson’s attempts to map his own imaginative and geographical Cumbrian spaces and questioned whether for Nicholson the “anxiety of influence” became a form of “imaginative possibility”.

The final speaker of the day was the widely acclaimed and prize-winning poet, Paul Farley, whose reading included poems engaging with the Lancashire landscapes of his childhood as well as those written while he was poet-in-residence at the Wordsworth Trust between 2000-2002. Professor Farley talked about his own poetic responses to the experience of living and working in Cumbria while poet-in-residence and discussed the complex and sometimes retrospective influence of space and place on his work.

In my introduction to the day I commented on Nicholson’s key place within the continuum of writers and poets for whom the Cumbrian landscape has been a source of inspiration and creative power, and whose interaction with this landscape has shaped their identity as writers and artists. Nicholson’s work proposes new imaginative directions for what Cumbria means to us in creative and cultural terms and the ongoing influence of Nicholson on contemporary creative practitioners was apparent throughout the day, with both the artworks on display and the readings drawing attention to the subtle and often unexpected threads of Nicholsonian influence on contemporary creative engagements with Cumbria.

***Dr Penny Bradshaw***

Course Leader for English, University of Cumbria

July 2008

*Norman Nicholson’s poetry will feature on a contemporary Cumbrian poetry module within our new MA in Literature, Romanticism, and the English Lake District, which will be offered at our Ambleside campus from October 2009. For further information about the MA or application details email Dr Penny Bradshaw at [penelope.bradshaw@cumbria.ac.uk](mailto:penelope.bradshaw@cumbria.ac.uk)*



## THE NN SOCIETY MEETS THE SENHOUSE POETS A SUMMER EVENT AT ISEL CHURCH by Antoinette Fawcett

On Saturday 19th July 2008 an unusual joint event was held by the Norman Nicholson Society and the Senhouse Poets in the beautiful little church of *St. Michael and All the Angels* at Isel Hall. The event was kindly hosted by Miss Mary Burkett O.B.E, former Director of the Abbott Hall and gave members of both groups a chance to meet each other in atmospheric surroundings on a beautifully bright summer's day.



**Isel Church**

Isel Hall is situated on a small hill or rise overlooking a bend of the River Derwent flowing on its journey from Derwentwater to its meeting with the River Cocker at Cockermouth. On such a day one could

imagine the young William Wordsworth exploring upriver, perhaps sporting "like a naked savage" on the river-plain, as he describes his boyhood self in "The Prelude", paddling in pools and mill-races, or composing his thoughts to the "ceaseless music" of its streams, gazing in wonder at the "shadow of those towers / That yet survive", reflected in the "bright blue" waters - quite possibly the Pele Tower and crenellations of Isel Hall itself.

Did Nicholson also visit this lovely place and its church, low and modest, but vibrating with almost a thousand years of human history? One can imagine him savouring the name—not "All Saints" but "All the Angels", as if the consecration of this spot of earth recognized the angelic potential of the whole of creation.

Spirit and nature meet in places like this and all the readings we listened to on that green-gold afternoon felt as if they had been created in the real flush of inspiration. The Senhouse Poets, Hugh Thomson, Ann Ward, Gillian Greggains and Mike Smith, together with Angela Locke, author, poet and creative writing tutor, shared their thoughtful and varied work with us, showing that poetry can be serious, challenging and essential, dealing with themes that really matter.

Neil Curry read some delightful passages from Norman Nicholson's "Provincial Pleasures" as well as excellent examples of his own work and the afternoon was rounded out by a wonderful talk by Miss Mary Burkett in which she reminisced about the work of Helen Sutherland whose patronage of the arts had helped so many people, both in terms of moral support and in real financial terms. Nicholson's poem "Cockley Moor, Dockwray, Penrith" portrays Helen Sutherland's house (and indirectly its owner) and the way in which art, life and spirit flow into and inform each other. The poet briefly sees the "cubist fells" as Sutherland's artists must have seen them, and in a neat closing antithesis places the short but conscious life of man against the aeons-old unconscious existence of the stone:

Inside, a man remembers he must die,  
Outside, a stone forgets that it was born.

The stones of Isel Church and Hall may have forgotten their birth in the landscape too, but although fashions in architecture, art and poetry change, the eternal essence, the spirit remains the same. Wordsworth and Nicholson, Curry and Locke, Miss Burkett, The Senhouse Poets, the lovely ladies who provided tea and snacks and the rapt and listening audience, all in some sense joined with the Angels to whom the church is dedicated.

*Antoinette Fawcett*

## Nicholson on the Worldwide Web by Antoinette Fawcett

From time to time I type the words “Norman Nicholson” into the Google search engine to see if there are any new entries on the poet. The totally democratic and haphazard nature of the worldwide web gives good evidence of continuing interest in Nicholson and his work and reaches a potential worldwide community. Several recent discoveries have struck me both as interesting in their own right and as potential way-guides to future society events.

Some of the most unusual web-page entries on Nicholson’s poetry must be those on the BirdForum website where lovers of wild birds discuss not only birds but poetry. Nicholson has two poems, “Sea to the West” and “The Cock’s Nest”, posted at the start of 2008, on the following page: [www.birdforum.net/showthread.php?t=12805&page=84](http://www.birdforum.net/showthread.php?t=12805&page=84). Interestingly, a suggestion is made for a poetry reading at the Newfield in Seathwaite in Wordsworth’s (and Nicholson’s) favourite valley. That sounds like an excellent suggestion to me!

There is also a very readable article on the bibliophile’s weblog, Vulpes Libris: [www.vulpeslibris.wordpress.com/2008/03/28/norman-nicholson/](http://www.vulpeslibris.wordpress.com/2008/03/28/norman-nicholson/). This gives an overview of Nicholson’s writing career with a strongly personal slant by the writer of the article on Nicholson’s major themes, including the importance of being “provincial”. The responses to this blog are also worth reading.

Society Chairman David Cooper’s article on Wordsworth and Nicholson may be read on the Literature Compass website, but by subscription only. The abstract, however, can be read on the following page: [http://www.blackwell-compass.com/subject/literature/article\\_view?article\\_id=lico\\_articles\\_bpl555](http://www.blackwell-compass.com/subject/literature/article_view?article_id=lico_articles_bpl555). David Boyd, another society member and writer for Comet, has recently had an article published on Big City Lit: [www.bigcitylit.com/bigcitylit.php?inc=spring08/articles/boyd](http://www.bigcitylit.com/bigcitylit.php?inc=spring08/articles/boyd), again, highly readable, and discussing Nicholson’s reputation, influences and social concerns.

Finally, for those of you who have not yet had a chance to view the Poetry Archive’s web-page on Nicholson here is the web-address: <http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=7519>. Not only is there a good introduction to Nicholson’s life and work on this page, you can also listen to Nicholson’s “gravelly voice” reading “Wall”.

All in all, a good crop of literature, giving a picture of a strong virtual presence on the Internet.

AF

## A poem in glass



Part of the NN Memorial Window, Millom Church by Christine Boyce

## AS THURSDAY (continued from page 2)

they’ve got for their money. Les and Enid confess to living in Millom all their lives and not having seen half the places open on this Millom’s first Heritage Open Day. They invite us to tea. It’s that kind of place. Built of aunties. The lecturer presses play and Nicholson - dead - reads the Pot Geranium.

I spoke to him once,” says the vicar, (once!) “he was very shy, would scuttle away.”

“There was no point corresponding with him,” says the speaker (editor of Nicholson’s *Collected Poems*, Neil Curry), “you couldn’t read a word! I got in touch with a lady in Ulverston, she’d been to school with him, had a box of letters. She couldn’t read them. I spent a whole afternoon, the two of us looking at these things, trying to make out the odd word - waste of time!”

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.

Wendy Cook

## Lonely as a . . .

by **Phillp Houghton**

There is a certain familiarity about clouds in Cumbria - not that they are ever *just* clouds, often framing the upper limits of a view or letting those searchlight beams of sunlight pick out a distant crag – they are part of the fabric of the place.

Wordsworth observed in *The Prelude* “Fair seed-time had my soul”, and this establishing of the seed of ideas and germination of thoughts is always in the mind of poets and of those who ask *where does it (the poetry) come from?*

The notion of *composting* is sometimes offered in response - the poet’s means of refining the raw poem to produce the finished article, editing and revisiting his material at intervals.

With Nicholson fabric is a good place to begin. I have observed some apparent composting in one of Nicholson’s poems, ‘Clouded Hills’, which appears in *12 Lakeland Poets*, a collection of holograph poems, published by the Cumbria Poetry Centre, Ambleside in 1975 and which includes an introduction by Nicholson. This is where the fabric comes in - the poem describes the cloud-topped fells and uses the metaphor “a hairy Harris Tweed of mist”. Although not very Cumbrian in its origin, this may be an acceptable image in terms of its frequency as a garment of choice.

It was a while before I spotted a difference here with the metaphor, which appears in the *Sea to the West* version of this same poem, published in 1981. In this later version, Nicholson, either by composting or other means, has changed the description to a “*Herdwick fleece of mist*”. This is the very essence of the fell, the Herdwick - the grey, misty, shape-shifting inhabitants of high ground – surely the embodiment of the fell mists and cloud?

At the risk of embarking on an exploration of rootedness, there is a subtle sense of place here, which is introduced by this apparent self-editing and development of ideas. Other changes include “*held-back fire*”, which becomes “*damped-down fire*” and “*Under a meringue of white cumulus*”, which in the later version is given as “*Under a white meringue of cumulus*”. The question arises as to whether the changes occurred over time, between the two versions, or possibly in response to and in anticipation of publication in *Sea to the West*, something it would be difficult to establish without Nicholson’s own comment.

One thing is certain, regardless of which version you prefer, and that is, the undisputable fact that clouds are often hefted to the fells, just like the Herdwick – coming down to the valleys in season and withdrawing to the tops for prolonged periods.

And what of the Harris Tweed? Dismissed to Nicholson’s wardrobe for days when the cloud was hefted on Black Combe? – days when the winds ‘Tease and fidget at wool-end and wisp’, and clouds, like sheep, are ‘worried away’ (from ‘Cloud on Black Combe’). Things aren’t that straight forward in this case, as Nicholson presents us with an earlier Harris Tweed metaphor in his prose writing, which predates both versions of the poem ‘Clouded Hills’.

In *Greater Lakeland* (1969) Chapter Three: ‘The Lakes: The Western Dales’ we discover Nicholson’s exploration of the variance in the surface of the landscape, described in part as “One side of a valley will be as hairy as Harris Tweed...”

*Note for interest: in Cumberland & Westmorland (1949) Nicholson introduces the concept that the geologists were among the first people to look at the Lake District objectively – of John Otley of Keswick, he notes that “He (Otley) did not look at the landscape with a vision already fuzzy with adjectives” – this line is interestingly echoed in Nicholson’s own later poetry and prose (with regard to the Greater Lakeland quote, above, uncannily so).*

**Phil Houghton** – Cumbria, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2008

## Poets, Artists and Angels

“Poets, Artists and Angels” is a current project in Millom studying local stained glass windows. A group including several members of the Nicholson society have been visiting local churches, learning about stained glass artists and improving their photography skills. The project will result in a Church Trail leaflet detailing the stained glass windows in churches from Waberthwaite down to Millom and out to Thwaites and in the production of postcards and booklets telling the histories of the windows.

The Nicholson Window in St. George’s church is a very important element in this project and on Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> July project members were delighted to hear the window’s creator Christine Boyce talk in person about the window. It was a great privilege to hear her explain her approach to the commission and the process by which she built up stunning creation. Christine carries her expert knowledge lightly and modestly and her audience will remember her commitment to be faithful to the poet.

This excellent study day also gave project members the further bonus of a presentation by Christine on the history of Stained Glass and the unique opportunity to hear expert stained glass historian Bill Waters explain the significance of St. George’s Late Victorian windows in the church itself.

*Margaret Forsman*

PRINCIPLE FIRST: That the Poetic Genius is the true Man, and that the body or outward form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius. Likewise that the forms of all things are derived from their Genius, which by the Ancients was call’d an Angel & Spirit & Demon.

William Blake 1788

## FORTHCOMING EVENTS

**September 11th–14th – Heritage Open Days. Exhibition and reading at Nicholson House, 14, St. George’s Terrace.** Plus events, talks, exhibitions and attractions in Millom, Haverigg, Kirksanton, The Green, Whicham, Whitbeck, Bootle, Thwaites, Corney and Waberthwaite.

Highlights include a series of talks including 'The Closing of Millom Ironworks'; 'The History of Bootle Workhouse'; 'Growing up in 1930's Thwaites'; and 'A Short History of Walking the Fells'.

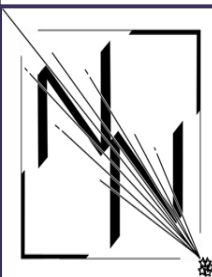
Other highlights include the 'Poets, Artists & Angels' stained glass windows project; a traditional country dance evening; a Victorian toys session; a Victorian picnic and dozens of other events and attractions offering something for everyone, all for free!

**October 18th – Millom: Autumn Festival— including the results of the 2008 Norman Nicholson Writing Competition for Schools. Theme: Wednesday Early Closing. Venue: To be announced. Times: 10.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m.**

**January 10th 2009 – NN Birthday Party: 1–4 pm Pensioners’ Hall, Millom.**

If you have any ideas for possible future events or readings, then please do not hesitate to contact the current Chair of the Society, David Cooper, on [d.cooper1@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:d.cooper1@lancaster.ac.uk).

Over the coming months and years, the Society hopes to host events at a wide range of places both within and beyond the county of Cumbria. If you have any suggestions with regards to possible venues, then, again, please get in touch. We welcome your suggestions as we would like the Society to be as participatory as possible.



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Grateful thanks to all contributors without whose work there would be no newsletter. Also to Göran Strandell and Brian Holt whose efforts to find correspondence have added to the known letters from Nicholson, and to Hugh Thomson and Michael Baron for permission to reprint “St. Francis and St. Bernard”.

Next issue: theme—Wednesday Early Closing; March 2009 issue: theme— NN and the Visual Arts. Other articles outside these themes will still be accepted.