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Comet

Comet: the Magazine of the Norman Nicholson Society

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Nothing to Celebrate… except the evidence that Nicholson's reputation is on the upturn

We've had quite a few commemorative events in the Norman Nicholson Society over the past few years: the centenary of Nicholson's birth in 2014; our own tenth anniversary in 2016; 30 years since Nicholson's death in 2017; and a focus on various other occasions of note (the publication of Nicholson's second collection of poetry—*Rock Face*—celebrated in the previous issue of *Comet*, for example). It is also wonderful to see that, entirely independently of the Society, the Maryporters and The Castle Hill Settlement in Maryport have created a festival celebrating the 59th anniversary of 'When Percy met Norman', to be held at the end of September this year (details on our back page). We have, moreover, had successes with grant applications—to support the composition of Harry Whalley's 'Seven Rocks' (Britten-Pears Foundation, 2014) and to help us fund a feasibility study into our plans for Norman's house (Heritage Lottery Fund). And we're hoping for further success too (see Charlie's Project 14 report on page 24). Please do cross your fingers for a successful outcome for this bid.

So have we reached a point in the history of the Society when there is nothing in particular to celebrate? I don't think so. We don't need special occasions as an excuse to celebrate Nicholson's writings and his place in English literary history—we celebrate his work all the time, through our events and our work in various media. More particularly, the richness of this issue of *Comet* should amply demonstrate that there is plenty happening with regard to Nicholson-related events, and that not all of these have been initiated by the Society. The most encouraging of these, I believe, is the fact that Geography students from the University of Nottingham have visited Millom two years in a row to deepen their understanding of the intersection between literature, the economy and social and political geography. Sue Dawson has written a report on their field trips, included in this issue. Additionally, as Glenn Lang points out in his short article, over the years quite a few members of the Society have given public talks about Nicholson in various locations, including this year in Carlisle, at Tullie House (Alan Beattie), in Dalton-in-Furness (Antoinette Fawcett), and in Millom itself (Charlie Lambert). Even the fact that quite a few members of the Norman Nicholson Society will be featured in an anthology of Cumbrian poetry to be published this October raises the profile of the Society and makes it clear that we don't only appreciate Nicholson's work—we write our own. In this issue, the second part of a three-part article by Brian Mitchell includes a number of examples of his own writing, like Nicholson's influenced by locality, nature and a post-industrial landscape, and there is also a wonderfully evocative poem by Martyn Halsall which is probably unique in responding to the events of an AGM day! There are so many other things to enjoy in this issue of *Comet*, and perhaps most of all you will relish the fact that you—the members of this Society—are helping to maintain and renew Nicholson's reputation. *AF*

A Place for You—'Peggy's Song' by Pippa Mayfield

The Phoenix Singers gave the first performance of 'A Place for You' at the Hospice at Home *Light Up A Life* event in December 2017, a performance which, like the song itself, was dedicated to Peggy Troll, a founder member of the choir. Although it's known affectionately as 'Peggy's song', the chorus was born over 30 years ago, long before Peggy and I met. I was living with a Spanish family, the warmth of whose faith had drawn me in, and the chorus originally used the same Bible verse, but in Spanish.

By the summer of 2017, I had decided to revisit this song for our usual involvement at the Light *Up A Life* event and I started working on English words and adding verses to it. The song was nearing completion when we heard quite how poorly Peggy was and I went to see her. I told her about the Bible passages on which it was based and I fully intended to ask Peggy to endorse a top copy before photocopying it for the choir. One of the last things I said to Peggy was that I would play her the whole song when it was ready. However, as the dedication of the song now reads, Peggy 'went to find her place' only a few days afterwards, so she didn't hear it, but had certainly approved it in principle.

Peggy sang the middle line in our three-part choir and although most of the song is in two parts, I wrote a three-part ending, with a brief moment where the middle line shines out above everyone else. That is most definitely for Peggy and she would have smiled broadly singing it, whilst being perfectly content to come to rest at the end on the all-important middle note of the harmony.

Pippa Mayfield
March 2018

A place for you

Pippa Mayfield

(for Peggy Troll, a much missed founder member of Phoenix Singers, who heard about the song on 20 September 2017, a few days before she went to find her place)

♩= 96

Soprano

2nds/Altos

Piano

mp

S.

Do not be troub-led or up - set. You be - lieve in God, be-lieve in me.

2/A

mp

Do not be troub-led or up - set. You be - lieve in God, be-lieve in me.

(RH quaver movement above the choir parts, particularly when there's a long note in the choir or left hand)

Pippa directs the Phoenix Singers and is a freelance editor of textbooks for learners of English as a Foreign Language. Pippa has sent a pdf copy of 'A Place for You' to the editor of Comet. She has generously said that anyone is free to use the song in any way at all, although she warns that the piano line isn't written in full. If you are interested in the full song, do feel free to contact Antoinette Fawcett at the email address given on the back page of Comet and the pdf can be sent on to you.

AGM Event 14th April 2018—Report by Antoinette Fawcett

Society Chair Charlie Lambert Opening the AGM
Photo by Brian Whalley

Our AGM day was held in mid-April, in glorious sunshine, and included an update on Project 14 (see also the report by Charlie Lambert on page 24 of this issue). Full AGM reports and the minutes of the AGM have already been sent to members by email. Copies can also be obtained by post, if requested, from the Membership Secretary (i.e. Antoinette Fawcett). This brief report will, therefore, focus on the events that surrounded the actual AGM.

We were treated to two marvellous talks, by Marshall Mossop and Charlie Lambert. Marshall's lecture focused on the history of cricket and the cricket club in Millom, and turned up some interesting facts about Nicholson's own family, particularly his Uncle Jack, who was a well-known sportsman and local cricketer. This is the same Uncle Jack (never personally known by our Norman) who was later killed in the Hodbarrow Mine 'with half a ton of haematite spilled on his back'. We also heard that for a relatively short spell Norman himself had been Secretary of Millom Cricket Club, around 1938/39. After his talk Marshall led us round the Cricket Field boundaries where we discovered even more about the importance of the Cricket Field to Norman. The fact that the field backed onto Holborn Hill Primary School, which Norman attended, and where the fine sportsman and notable singer Herbert Thomas was the headmaster, meant that Norman was often out on the cricket field as a boy, practising Thomas' favourite sport with the other pupils. Norman wasn't particularly gifted, but he did love the game!

The delicious lunch was provided by Caroline Knowles from the Lighthouse Centre, Haverigg, and cakes and refreshments were donated by Sue and John Troll. Charlie Lambert's talk (see pp. 4-9) was wonderfully lively and amusing, and gave us new insights into Norman's writing. I personally found it very funny to think that Millom Cricket Club could add Norman's name to their Honours Board, as Charlie suggested, based on the fact that Norman's discovery of truly contemporary poetry was made on the Cricket Field where he read the poetry of TS Eliot for the first time.

Our AGM days are far from tedious: the AGM itself enables us to present and discuss the important work of the Society and to make plans for the future, while the surrounding talks, guided walks and delicious food should provide even more people with the temptation to attend. See you next year? *AF*

Marshall Mossop—photo by Brian Whalley

On the Cricket Field—photo by Brian Whalley

'Nostalgia is the besetting sin of many who write about cricket'

Cricket, more than any other sport, is a sport which inspires poetry. But what sort of poetry? And where does Norman Nicholson sit within the tradition of English cricket poetry?

Here's a very different writer's take on the Englishness of cricket:

I remember in September
When the final stumps were drawn
And the shout of crowds now silent
And the boys to tea had gone….

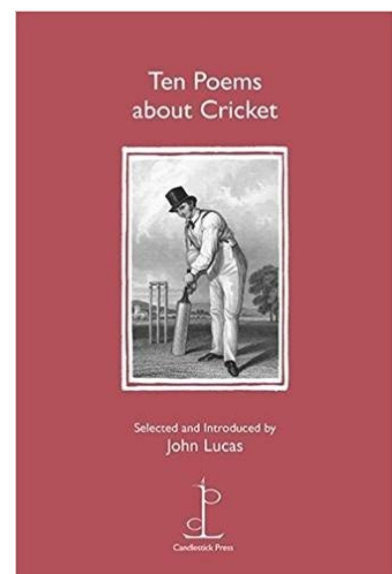
Those lines form the start of a song called 'The Captains and the Kings,' from Brendan Behan's play *The Hostage* (1958)[1]. Of all unlikely people to invoke the archetypal image of fondly-remembered days watching cricket, Brendan Behan - Irish republican activist, would-be bomber of Liverpool docks, guest of His Majesty in Strangeways prison - is perhaps at the head of the queue. The song is, of course, a spoof. It is what Behan sees as a silly little ditty of wistful empire, given to the character in the play who represents the played-out British way of life in a Dublin boarding house. It's Behan's view of a typically English view of cricket: cricket, the sport which represents so much that so many think is typical of England: summer afternoons, fair play, languid youths in white flannel trousers, the tea interval.

Better known than Brendan Behan's unexpected diversion into the ways of English middle-class public school sport is this one:

There's a breathless hush in the Close to-night --
Ten to make and the match to win --
A bumping pitch and a blinding light,
An hour to play and the last man in.
And it's not for the sake of a ribboned coat,
Or the selfish hope of a season's fame,
But his Captain's hand on his shoulder smote --
'Play up! play up! and play the game!'

This is a well-known poem, or at least the first few lines are well-known, by Sir Henry Newbolt, titled 'Vitai Lampada' ('They Pass On The Torch of Life'). It continues for two more stanzas. In contrast to Behan, it's no mickey-take; this is Victorian schooling at its finest, developing the idea of it being on the playing fields of Eton where the Battle of Waterloo was won.

It was written in 1897 when Newbolt was 35, inspired by memories of his time at public school, Clifton College in Bristol. This poem has done more than any to create the image of cricket as a sport which exemplifies the right way of doing things and therefore a suitable code for the living of life. It was popular at the time, and had another burst of popularity at the start of the First World War. It is of course an idealised version of the sport, along with the idealised way of life it represents, but it is far from alone because, as the title of this article states, 'nostalgia is the besetting sin of many who write about cricket'.



That comment was made by John Lucas, poet, publisher and academic, Professor Emeritus of Literature at Loughborough and Nottingham Trent Universities, and editor of the slim volume, Ten *Poems about Cricket*[2]. By very happy chance I met John Lucas early in 2018, at the first Matt Simpson memorial lecture at Liverpool Hope University. Matt Simpson, who passed away in 2009, was a poet from Liverpool, a friend of Norman Nicholson,

by Charlie Lambert

and one of the prime movers in setting up the Norman Nicholson Society, and it was interesting to note at that event that the idea of having a memorial lecture for Matt was inspired by Matt's own staging of a series of memorial lectures for Norman, in Liverpool, in the years following Norman's death in 1987.

The ten poems collected by John Lucas are a lovely variety, some predictable, others certainly not. Having grown up listening to the cricket commentators on BBC radio, and later working as a sports commentator myself, I was delighted to find that opening the batting in John's volume is a poem by the legendary cricket commentator John Arlott. To most people, Arlott is far better known as a commentator. His was THE voice of cricket in the 1950s and 1960s, not so much for what he said, although his observations were always perceptive, but for his characteristic Hampshire tones.

The sample of Arlott's poetry which figures in the anthology is a poem in praise of the well-known England batsman Jack Hobbs on his 70th birthday in 1950. It begins:

There falls across the one December day
The light remembered from those suns of June
That you reflected in the summer play
Of perfect strokes across the afternoon.

And continues in similar style, a lovely tribute to a great sportsman but framed in that nostalgic surround which John Lucas describes in his introduction as typical of many cricket poems, a 'mistily fixed pastoral'. John writes, 'it is easy to see how cricket, in England at least, can be regarded as an essential expression of 'Englishness', rooted, unchanging, a land of squires and contented peasantry, of Gentlemen and Players, village cricket…'

But, at number nine in the anthology, we find the perfect antidote to all this rose-tinted long-distance spectating – 'Old Man at a Cricket Match', by Norman Nicholson, a poem which is so far from nostalgia that it might be using a different dictionary entirely, a poem which in three short stanzas says more about the reality of cricket than we find in a score of gilded reminiscences, and also says much about the sort of life that Norman finds reflected in his version of the game.

'Old Man at a Cricket Match' begins with the somewhat puzzling statement

It's mending worse, he said
Bending west his head

At my talk at the AGM in April I was able to play an audio clip of Nicholson discussing that statement[3]. For Norman, cricket presents the opportunity to encounter individuals, people with their own take on life and the game. This old man doesn't make complete sense when it says 'it's mending worse,' but Nicholson understands what he means, and so do we. The weather's taking a turn for the worse – there's *a skitter of rain on the scorer's shed* – but that's actually a good thing because the team is in trouble and the best outcome could be that the match is rained off, and therefore the team avoids defeat.

This is all a very long way from playing up and playing the game, and perfect strokes across the afternoon. This is in fact the reality of cricket that many of us will recognise. The team is not carrying all before it like Jack Hobbs; it is seven down for 45 – in other words, the batsmen are doing pretty badly. Catching the ball is like receiving *stings from a hive* and again, anyone who has caught – or more often in my case, dropped - a cricket ball travelling at speed will recognise that. It isn't a day to be fondly remembered in future years, it's a day when *it's bad to be alive*. It's a very human, long-suffering take on a different version of the game played in the close at Clifton College.

'Nostalgia is the besetting sin of many who write about cricket' (continued)

right to this golden glow of nostalgia with which many writers imbue it. Cricket overspilled the sports pages and dominated the front pages when it emerged that the Australian team in South Africa had knowingly cheated by rubbing the ball with sandpaper to give their bowlers a better chance of deceiving the South African batsmen. There was outrage across the western world but the response that drew my attention was from Michael Atherton, former Lancashire and England captain and now an award-winning writer with The Times: Atherton thought the condemnation of the Australian players was over the top and wrote:

> *Cricket can be beautiful and ugly, crooked and straight, grasping and generous, spiteful and good-humoured, sporting and unsporting. Often it can be all those things at once.*[4]

Atherton went on to quote John Arlott, pointing out that Arlott's love of the sport did not blind him to its faults. *Cricket, like the novel*, Atherton quoted Arlott as writing, *is great when it shows the salty quality of human nature*. And this is cricket as observed by Norman Nicholson.

Let's step back from the writing for a moment, and consider the role of the very place where we met for our AGM, Millom Cricket Club, in Nicholson's life. It was as much a part of his upbringing as the chapel, the church or the library. In a separate talk at our AGM, Marshall Mossop provided a lot of fascinating detail about the club and its successful era in the 1920s when Norman was a boy.

As he reached early adulthood Norman would still gravitate to the cricket ground to see what was going on, or to use it as a base for reading and contemplation. The archive supplied by Radio Cumbria provides evidence that it was here, on this very spot, that Norman's path towards poetry was first ordained, through a recording from 1971, in which he relates how his discovery of TS Eliot and 'The Wasteland' took place while reading library books at the cricket field. Later in that same recording, Norman claims that it was not only his own poetry career whose seeds were sown here, but that of Ted Hughes. He justifies this by saying that his friend Ted, aka John, Fisher, who was with him that day, was the first to recognise the talent of the young Hughes when teaching at Mexborough. Ted, like Norman, had his eyes opened by 'The Wasteland' that day at the cricket field.

The language of cricket sidles almost unobtrusively into Nicholson's writing, even when he isn't writing about cricket. In *Provincial Pleasures*, he describes the depth of February snow at Old Trafford as being *wicket-high*, and overgrown meadows next to the cricket field as *wicket-deep in grass, buttercup, and dog-daisy*[5]*.* In *The Lakers*, when discussing the early visitors to the Lake District, he writes that *the connoisseurs of the Picturesque played tip and run with their senses*[6]*,* tip and run being a simple form of cricket played without the need for a full team. In the same book he describes the garden of Wordsworth's childhood home in Cockermouth as being *about twice the length of a cricket pitch*[7] and there's an assumption that the reader will be sufficiently well-versed in the sport to understand the references.

For Nicholson, the cricket field is a way into his own locality, a setting where anyone and everyone comes and goes in a way that doesn't apply to the ironworks or the mines, which are very much closed communities. The cricket field is a place to observe and record the delightful ordinariness of the town's inhabitants, except of course that with Nicholson there is no such thing as ordinary; instead, everyone has their own *individuality*, the more eccentric the better.

His description of the annual grudge match between Odborough and Oatrigg, in the June chapter of *Provincial Pleasures*, is an absorbing account of the match, but totally different from the sort of report John Arlott might have penned. My own career as a reporter of sport ended with 10 years spent lecturing university students on the do's and don'ts of sports reporting. I would ram home the essentials: tell us the result, tell us the scores, tell us who scored most runs and who took most wickets, and what the result means for the winners and the losers – or, more often than not

by Charlie Lambert

in cricket, the consequences of a draw. Nicholson has an eye for a different detail:

> *Here along the hedge, under a large overhang of elder and willow, are the old men's seats and the tin shed where the tackle is stored and where once the horse was stabled that pulled the roller. The fourth side of the ground opens onto the meadows. This is where the strangers sit, because it is the prettiest side, and they do not know that they will get an ache in the back and a draught in the neck. Here, now, the elder is offering its soup-plates of bloom and the wild rose is twining about the corrugated iron pushed in to block the gaps where the cows break through.* [8]

Gaps in the corrugated iron where the cows push through? You could never write that if your only experience of cricket is at Lord's, the Oval or Old Trafford. It's lovely stuff, told not with the earnestness of the sports reporter but with the puckish humour of the writer of colour pieces; or the diarist, the writer with the inside understanding but the outsider's eye, a writer to whom what matters is not so much what is done, but the way it is done – or not done. Thus, Nicholson appreciates the efforts of the less talented as much as the side's stars:

> *the men who always chuck the ball to the wrong end when there is a chance of a run-out; who are attacked by little dogs in the out-field; who throw away their batting gloves in the middle of their innings and are cracked on the bare thumb the next ball.*[9]

This is real reporting about real people and rings much more true that any breathless hush in the close tonight.

I admit to being surprised, though, at discovering a strange error in Norman's cricket reportage. All of a sudden, well into the ups and downs of the Odborough v Oatrigg derby match, he records the latest score in the *Australian* style, not English. In England and most other cricketing nations, you always give the batting side's total first, then the number of wickets they've lost. Thus, England scored 213 for 3 against India, that's 213 runs with three batsmen out. In Australia, they do it the other way round: 3 for 213, that's three men out and 213 runs made so far. So in *Provincial Pleasures*, having told us that Oatrigg made 142 all out, Norman inexplicably writes that Odborough are soon one for five. To the reader, this would normally mean Odborough, or Millom as it really is, have made just one run and five of their batsmen are out. Then, it becomes two for seven, and three for nine. At this point Odborough are heading for probably the worst score ever recorded in organised cricket, only one wicket left to fall and only three runs on the scoreboard. Relief then, five paragraphs later, when Norman reverts to the *conventional* style: suddenly Odborough are now 60 for 5 and normal service is resumed. A strange sequence of off-key writing by Norman.[10]

It's probably in his poetry where we are most familiar with Norman's affinity with cricket, first articulated in the poem 'Millom Cricket Field,' from the 1948 collection *Rock Face*. For a moment in this poem, you think Norman is going down the dreaded route of nostalgia with an opening evocation of a summer's day – but very quickly he adds his own imprint,

and memories swarm as a halo of midges

Yes! That is Norman Nicholson, glorying not in the perfection of the scene but in exactly the opposite, its imperfection, and one that we all immediately, ruefully, recognise.

The final stanza of this poem has always puzzled me:

Among the champion, legendary men
I see my childhood roll like a cricket-ball.
To watch that boy
Is now my joy –
That he could watch me not was ***his*** *joy then.*

'Nostalgia is the besetting sin of many who write about cricket' (continued)

I find this is somewhat cumbersome and not at all clear, and my interpretation is that Nicholson, aware of his own shortcomings as a cricketer, thinks it is just as well that the small boys of today couldn't witness his own feeble efforts at playing the game back in the 1920s.[11]

I've mentioned 'Old Man at a Cricket Match.' There is also 'The New Cemetery' where the scene is described from the cricket field on a Saturday afternoon

....soon after the umpires
Laid the bails to the stumps and the match

Had begun.

and he remembers the retired horses being put out to grass, glorying in their freedom, and expresses the hope that

...when, one end-of-season day, they lead me
Up through the churchyard gate

To that same
Now consecrated green – unblinkered and at last delivered
Of a life-time's

Load of parcels – let me fling
My hooves at the boundary wall and bang them down again,
Making the thumped mud ring. [12]

Norman uses the familiar framing of cricket to communicate his philosophy of giving life everything – *giving it Wigan*[13], in a different sporting context - until the very end.

In the poem 'How's That?, published in the year of Norman's death, 1987, the poet uses the cricketer's plea to the umpire to remind us of the near misses we all experience in life until, eventually and inevitably, we see the dreaded finger sending us back to the pavilion:

How's that?
Asks the doctor –
Four score years and ten,
With a gurgle in the bronchials, a growling in the breath,
Appealing for a re-play, life over once again...
Out,
Says Death.[14]

A very personal framing of that 'last-wicket stand'; as we know, Nicholson had been dealing with a gurgle in the bronchials and a growling in the breath since his late teens when TB took hold – took hold, in fact, while at a cricket match. The family were on holiday in Scarborough and went to watch Yorkshire.

> *The weather was drugged and heavy, pressing like a hot saucepan-lid, as my father and I sat, unmoving, throughout the long afternoon. Then, at close of play, when everybody stood up to leave, I staggered as if I were drunk. For a moment, the field swam round me, and, as if a turban were pushed down over my eyes, first the sky and then the field turned black.* [15]

This was a key moment in Norman's life and we know what the consequences were, which I'm not going to dwell on here. But it shows how significant cricket was in his life. For one reason or another.

As Marshall pointed out in both his talk and his informative walking tour of the boundary, Millom cricket field was very much part of Norman's environment: so close to home, on his way to school and other parts of the town. He used it as a place to call in and have a rest, to chat with friends, to

by Charlie Lambert

meet strangers, to catch up with his reading, to watch what was going on. It's interesting that nowhere does Norman write about the building where we held our AGM and which he must have seen nearly every day – the pavilion. I have found no reference to it, nor the honours boards, nor the dressing rooms, nor the bar. His version of cricket has none of the clubbyness which we often associate with the sport and of course feeds into the theme of nostalgia, the old club tie etc.

Norman's cricket is viewed not through the prism of Empire, of Clifton College, of playing up and playing the game; it's seen as a natural, routine part of the way of life of this town in Cumbria. Like the fells, the ironworks, the jammy cranes on the Duddon estuary, like the railway tracks, it is an essential and natural part of his experience, and a vital tool in his opening of our eyes to the wonderful glory of the human individual.

Nicholson does not write about cricket in the way others write about cricket, and this is part of the ongoing joy of reading him.

Just so long as he remembers to give us the score English-style, not Australian.

Charlie Lambert
April 2018

The photo above is by Charlie Lambert.

NOTES

1. 1 first encountered *The Hostage* when cast in a role in the play in a production at the University of Bristol in 1970. The producer was a medical student called Malcolm Donaldson who went on to marry another of our Bristol contemporaries, Julia Shields. Julia later found global fame as the creator of the Gruffalo series of children's books. The music for that production was composed by Malcolm's flatmate Colin Sell, who went on to star as the pianist on Humphrey Lyttleton's long-running radio show 'I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue'.
2. Candlestick Press (2016)
3. The audio came from a substantial treasure trove of recordings of Nicholson which the Society has been able to acquire from BBC Radio Cumbria, thanks to a very welcome contact from the radio station's retired senior producer Nigel Holmes.
4. The Times, March 27th 2018
5. *Provincial Pleasures* p. 117
6. *The Lakers* p. 154
7. *The Lakers* p. 160
8. *Provincial Pleasures* p. 117
9. *Provincial Pleasures* p. 126
10. *Provincial Pleasures* p. 127
11. This prompted an interesting discussion at the AGM, including the alternative interpretation that Nicholson is looking back at himself and seeing the child grown into the man.
12. *Collected Poems* p. 376
13. 'At the Music Festival' in Collected Poems p 367
14. *Collected Poems* p. 236
15. *Wednesday Early Closing* p. 174

MCC

A Poem by Martyn Halsall with photos by Phil Houghton and Brian Whalley

Effectively Nicholson's garden, the known world
taught in the school beyond the cricket field boundary,
lived through swiped sixes, skirl of evening swallows.

That story of young Norman, and his cousin Albert
pinching a lift on the horse-drawn heavy roller
till scattered by a shout, like a shot at rooks.

Outfield a sponge just one week to the new season;
prayers below steeple for a drying wind
as sea to the west threatens in-swinging showers.

That story of the longest six in history,
a cloud shot landing on a moving coke train,
ball 'still in play', till Barrow, miles away.

Memories of great games re-lived over by over;
how couple of thousand would toss change in the bucket
each time the pro knocked fifty, took five wickets.

That story from the photocopied cutting,
first game in the *Ulverston Mirror and Furness Reflector*
from 1870; Millom all out for ten.

That same set of initials, MCC,
as posh beggars in London; same applause
from iron workers' palms as kid-gloved bankers.

That story of a book read on the boundary,
borrowed crisp from the library, Eliot's *Wasteland*
firing a young cricket fan to write some poetry.

Martyn Halsall April 2018

Martyn Halsall is a poet, journalist and member of the Norman Nicholson Society. His new pamphlet, *Borrowed Ground*, is published by Cylch Cerrig Press. It will be reviewed in the next issue of *Comet*. Meanwhile, why not buy the book? It is only £5.00. If you write to me via my email address (see back page), I can put you in touch with Martyn. Martyn's previous book, *Sanctuary*, is still available on the Amazon website.

Photo (left; Millom Cricket Field Benches) by Brian Whalley; photos above by Phil Houghton.

Rocks and Landscapes in the West (part 1) by Brian Whalley

I have talked previously about 'geology' and Norman Nicholson. In this article I want to elaborate on the geological basis for viewing Nicholson, if not as a scientist, then at least one whose observations were of a scientific manner. I start with an introduction to the geology, as seen on the ground by travelling to Millom, and then look historically from the time a few people started to think 'geologically' about Cumbria and the Lake District. To avoid too much complication I have provided notes at the end where you will also find a brief list of references.

If you turn off the M6 at J36 and drive west along the A590 and then the A5092-595, up, down and around, you skirt the High Furness fells, cross the inlets and estuaries of the Lyth/Kent, Crake/Leven/Rusland and Duddon/Lickle rivers to glimpse the spire of St George's Millom and the Irish Sea. On the way you traverse several rock types that can be see in road cuttings[1] or sediments[2] in the valleys. Building materials also change according to the predominant rock type. Although the main road route by-passes most towns and villages nowadays you know that the vernacular buildings reflect the main rocks available. Limestone at Grange, Ulverston and Dalton but dark slates at Newby Bridge. Bricks, probably from kilns at Askam or Heversham or possibly Barrow, in locations with industrial development housing (such as much of Millom). As we shall see, not all houses are brick in Millom, as Nicholson describes in 'Millom Old Quarry' (CP 181). Door and window frames and lintels are from 'exotic' sandstone or limestone on banks, official buildings such as libraries, and whole buildings in the case of churches. Paley and Austin's Church of St George is (1874-7) of a red, 'Permo-Triassic', sandstone (with a slate roof) although there is no sandstone quarry nearby. At Furness Abbey, the 12th century Cistercian Abbey founded by Stephen (later King) is of red St Bees sandstone but here it was quarried within sight of the abbey ruins. Local quarries also supplied the imposing Barrow Town Hall (1887), not to mention the apartments of the Devonshire Buildings. These 'Permo-Triassic' sandstones are sometimes called 'New Red' sandstones to distinguish them from the 'Old Red' sandstones. The nearest 'ORS' out-crops to Cumbria are in Berwickshire, Anglesey and the Welsh Marches.

The coastal bays have sands and muds brought down from the fells by rivers that cut through marshy lowland pasture. At Walney and much of the coast north of Hodbarrow you look along the Irish Sea from cliffs of till[3] (aka 'boulder clay) with shingle beaches and ridges and sand dunes. Although we see Millom with a vernacular architecture of brick and undressed local stone, garden walls frequently have rounded cobbles in them and a look around Kirksanton is interesting too. So geology is part of the landscapes of south Cumbria and is appreciated as such in some of Nicholson's poems. This important aspect of Nicholson's writings as a whole are at the core of Ian Brodie's *Norman Nicholson's Nature* (2015).

Our east-west traverse takes you across geology dating from the day before yesterday to some 350 million years ago. The geology and its geomorphological scenery can account for much of the human occupation in Furness and the western Cumbrian strip. From post-glacial tree felling and the erection of stone circles to copper mining and coppicing for charcoal and bloomeries, early coal extraction to iron mining and the development of ironworks—and their demolition—there is a history of human settlement in this area. We shall return to this later. This summary of geological deposits is a lot to take in but you can get a good appreciation by reading Norman Nicholson in *Portrait of the Lakes* and perhaps the most detailed description is in *Cumberland and Westmorland*. *Norman Nicholson's Lakeland, a prose anthology*, provides basic information with selected Nicholson vignettes of geology and its relationship to the land, topography and its history. Although there are brief résumés of the basic stratigraphic column no popular works on 'The Lakes' have geological maps, to show what rocks are below you at any location. A useful book is Alan Smith's *Lakeland Rocks*, a well-illustrated guide but with his caution, ‘In geological terms the

Rocks and Landscapes in the West (part 1)

Lake District is a rather complicated place. The sort of place where to begin to recognize rock types and to begin geology, you would probably say "I wouldn't start from here".' On the opposite page Smith places a photograph of Jonathan Otley, 'Father of Lakeland geology', who did start geology from his back door.

In *The Lakers* Nicholson refers (p 160) to Jonathan Otley, 'swill-maker and watch-repairer, born in 1766 near Loughrigg Tarn, whose studies led Professor Sedgwick to the Lake rocks'. In fact Otley produced one of the first geological maps (Figure 1) and shows the three basic divisions of rocks of Cumberland and Westmorland. Otley himself[4] said,

> When this essay was first published, in 1820, the structure of the mountainous district of Cumberland, Westmorland, and Lancashire, was but little understood; scientific travellers had contented themselves with procuring specimens of the different rocks, without taking time to become acquainted with their relative position. Since that time, the subject has received more attention from persons conversant with geological inquiries; especially from the distinguished Professor Sedgwick, who in 1824 and following years, subjected this district to his untiring examination. In his address to the Geological Society, Feb. 18th, 1831, the Rev. Professor deigned to compliment the author, as being the first to point out that 'the greater part of the central region of the Lake Mountains is occupied by three distinct groups of stratified rock of a slaty texture.'

Not only did Otley identify the three main rock types he also recognised the significance of the thin limestone deposit separating the 'Greenstones' from the 'Greywackes'. You can observe it too; off the A593 there are several lime kilns on the 'Coniston Limestone'. It is observation that plays a great part in geological mapping and placing rocks in context. This is what Otley was able to do for Sedgwick, as hinted in the above extract. Otley taught Adam Sedgwick about geology, mapping and what was needed to interpret the rocks and showed him how to map geology. This aspect of 'thinking geologically' is important, it is placing observations in context rather than collecting fossils and specimens.

Figure 1. Jonathan Otley's division of the Lakeland rocks. From Alan Smith, Lakeland Rocks, 2010

The three-fold division of Lakeland rocks, as seen in Fig. 1, is the basis for the subsequent mapping. The mention of Sedgwick in Otley's guidebook (above) is deferential but this is because of his social status. Brenda Maddox's recent *Reading the Rocks*, discusses Sedgwick's work and the subsequent controversy[5] with Roderick Murchison. She does not mention Otley, although discusses William ('Strata') Smith and his geological map and the role of Adam Sedgwick (from Dent) in the establishment of English geological thinking. Geological maps show more than location, the outcrop of the limestone

by Brian Whalley

for instance, but also the three dimensional shape of the rock masses below ground. This is important in the context of mining, whether for coal or metal ores.

A recent book chapter by Andrew Gibson, 'At the Dying Atlantic's Edge: Norman Nicholson and the Cumbrian Coast',[6] refers hardly at all to the geology, although it states: ‘Even a poem like “Skiddaw Slate” turns out to be about, not Skiddaw, a northern peak, but Black Combe, a south-western one, because Black Combe is composed of the slate in question.’ (Gibson p. 80). This is almost dismissive, implying that the Skiddaw Slate is important in the topography of the Lake District but is irrelevant in south Cumbria. Of course, Nicholson knew his geology, not only with respect to the 'Seven Rocks' but because geology *is* important in his local view - temporal as well as spatial. Black Combe is an important reminder of geology overlooking the Irish Sea coast from Barrow and Millom to Ravenglass.

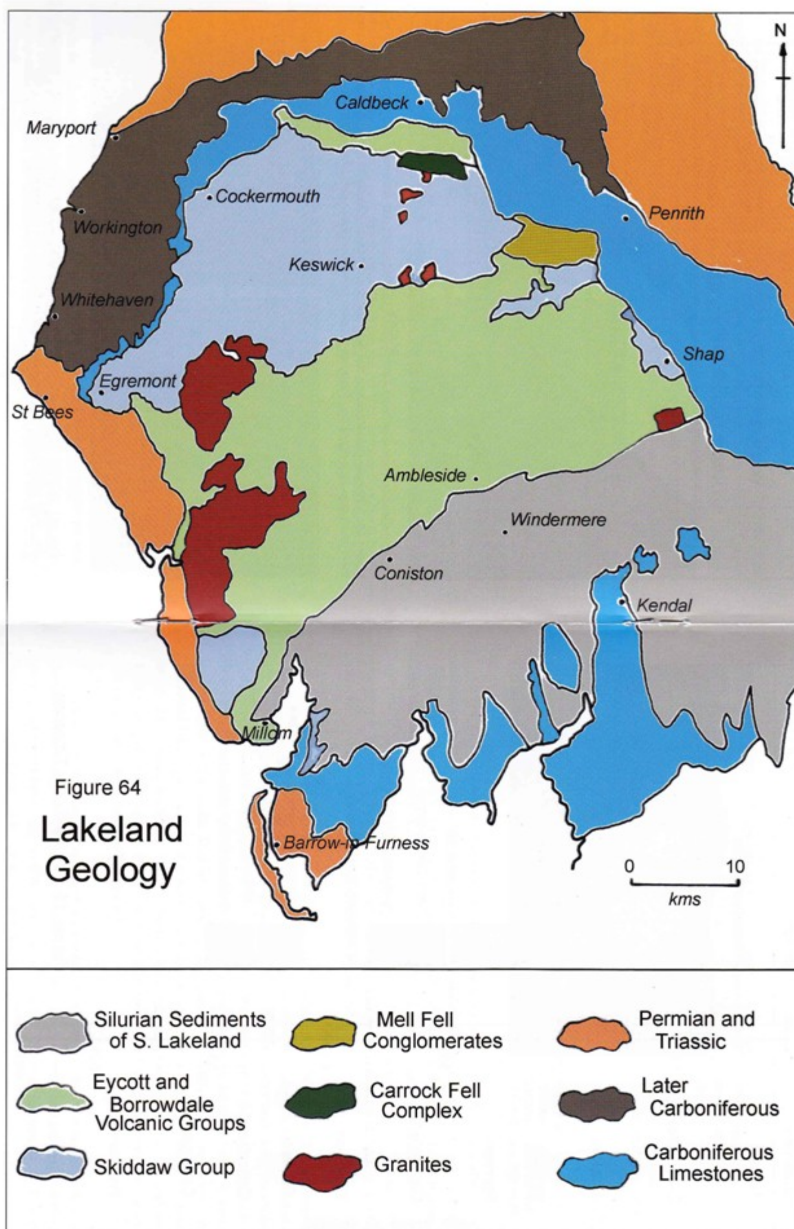


Figure 2. Basic geological map of Cumbria and surrounding areas. From Alan Smith, Lakeland Rocks, 2010.

In Figure 2 we have a simplified map of Lakeland geology. The comparison with Otley's map (Figure 1) shows how well he did! Otley's 'Clayslates' are what we now call the 'Skiddaw Group' (and formerly, as with Nicholson, 'Skiddaw Slate'). What was missing in Otley’s map was the 'blob' north west of Millom. This of course is Black Combe, an inlier[7] of the Skiddaw Group. It is the rock of this group that gives the rounded hills with few of the crags that are a significant part of the scenery in Otley's 'Greenstones'. The Skiddaw slate does not generally provide good building materials and the sandstone and limestone quarries were too far from the rapidly industrialising village of Holborn Hill. But clay and brick is as much part of the geology of the area as geomorphological landscape. Rocks are the footing and backdrop for many aspects of Nicholson's writings.

In the next part we'll explore some more of the geology and rocks of south and west Cumbria, investigate the ages of rocks and visit a few locations linked with Norman Nicholson and geology.

Brian Whalley
January 2018

See overleaf for notes and bibliography

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Notes

(CP) refers to the page number in Nicholson's *Collected Poems*.

1. We call these 'outcrops', where rocks 'crop out' at the surface, whether natural or man made such as the various cuttings on the A590.
2. By 'sediments' we can mean, as here, sands and muds of the Duddon estuary or shingle at Silecroft Shore. These are 'unconsolidated' or unlithified, i.e. not made into rocks. The 'Clay slates' or Skiddaw Group were originally sediments before being lithified by pressure burial and heat.
3. Till, sometimes called 'glacial till', is another sediment. It may be that the origin of a material is not necessarily 'glacial' so there is a professional trend to call it a 'diamict' or 'diamicton' as a term without an implied origin, meaning 'mixed through'. Such deposits may contain boulders and clay, or they might not! If the rock is lithified it is called a diamictite (or perhaps tillite). At this stage you might be sympathising with Wordsworth: 'He, who with pocket-hammer smites the edge/Of luckless rock or prominent stone, disguised/In weather-stains or crusted o'er by Nature/With her first growths – detached by the stroke/A chip or splinter – to resolve his doubt;/And, with that ready answer satisfied,/The substance classes by some barbarous name,/And hurries on ...' (*The Excursion*, 1814).
4. From Otley, *The Geology of the Lake District*, ed. John Challinor (1948). See also Otley 1843.
5. This controversy is fundamental to our present geological maps and chronological terminology and I shall refer to this, all being well, in part 2.
6. Gibson has a curious view of the Atlantic as being the Irish Sea. His sub-title is an inverted line from Nicholson's 'Whitehaven' (CP 18): 'At the Atlantic's dying edge/The harbour now prepares for siege. This refers to John Paul Jones' (The Yankee-Scot) invasion of Whitehaven. Nicholson's reference to the 'Atlantic' seems fine poetically but rather stretching the sea for Gibson's view of Millom.
7. You might think this was an 'outlier' but scientists are particular. If it is an inlier, the older rock protrudes from surrounding younger rock. It is an outlier if younger rocks are completely surrounded by older. The Northern mass of Skiddaw and Blencathra is itself an inlier. There are two small inliers near Bampton and Ullswater, both abutting the limestones of the eastern margin. As Black Combe is an inlier, it tells us (i.e. we can interpret) that the younger rocks, which have overlain the Skiddaw Group rocks in this case, have been removed by erosion. We'll have a look at the age of the rocks in the next part.

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Exploring the Literary and Economic Geography of Millom through Norman Nicholson's Writings: A Report by Sue Dawson

In March this year the Norman Nicholson Society hosted two visits for first-year Geography students from the University of Nottingham. The Society also hosted similar visits last year so we were delighted to welcome this year's batch of students. The focus for the visits was to study the changing economic geography of Millom by combining literary and economic geography. The visits reflected on how the changing economy interconnects with the geology of the West Coast of Cumbria and how this is expressed in Millom's landscape and townscape.

Studying Nicholson's poetry was an important aspect of the day, but there were also opportunities for the students to listen to the memories of local residents and to gain local historical and geographical knowledge as they made a walking tour of Millom. The field trip included site visits to the former Hodbarrow mine and Millom Ironworks where the students were able to learn more about the growth and decline of an industrial town. There was also the opportunity to visit Nicholson's former home in St George's Terrace and to hear his distinctive voice as the students listened to a recording of Nicholson reading some of his poetry.

The afternoon sessions involved working in small groups to read through a selection of Nicholson's poems to help the students develop a better understanding of poetry of place and the impact of the changing economy on Millom's townscape. The groups were supported by committee members who were able to answer the students' questions as they worked their way through the poems. A question and answer session followed the reading groups during which the students were able to discuss their thoughts about the day and to gain more insight into Nicholson's writing.

The feedback from the students' visits was overwhelmingly positive. When asked if they would pick this day again they all said they would: they enjoyed visiting Nicholson's house and loved his poetry. They also commented on how much of a highlight it was to do the activity of working through Nicholson's poems. Their lecturer Kieran added: '*Such a fantastic experience—smiles all round!'*

The students were based in the Millom Discovery Centre this year and they found it '*an amazing building*' which they would like to spend more time exploring if they were to visit Millom again. This also houses the NN room which is a valuable learning resource for the students to take advantage of while they are in Millom.

As a society we would definitely like to host another field trip of this kind. We consider that our members are able to offer a range of expertise and local knowledge which can provide study groups with worthwhile learning experiences linked to NN and the local landscape. The positive comments from the visiting students are reassuring. It is clear that we deliver relevant and appropriate experiences through our specialized knowledge and our enthusiasm for learning even more about Nicholson and his work. I would like to thank Antoinette Fawcett, Glenn Lang, Brian Charnley and Dot Richardson for supporting activities with the university students on both days and for helping to make the visits such a success.

A final comment from Geography lecturer Kieran who accompanied the second group this year: '*The general feedback was that it (i.e. the Millom visit) was the highlight of their field trip. It was such a wonderful day and I really hope that we run this trip again!'*

Sue Dawson, Schools & Community Liaison Officer

The ALS AGM Weekend—A Brief Report by Antoinette Fawcett

Clockwise, from centre-top: an amusing typo (Alliance of Literate Societies); Claire Harman; Antoinette Fawcett armed with plenty of *Comets*; Norman Nicholson in Good Literary Company; Antoinette again; Molly Rosenberg.

The Norman Nicholson Society was represented by Glenn Lang and myself, for the third time, at the Alliance of Literary Societies AGM Weekend. This year's event took place in Birmingham, over a hot May weekend, in the air-conditioned coolness of a Chinese-themed Ibis Hotel Conference Room, slap in the middle of Birmingham's China Town. There is an extremely good report on the weekend on the ALS website (https://allianceofliterarysocieties.wordpress.com/2018-birmingham/), so it seems unnecessary to do anything more than point out a few highlights: superb catering, excellent talks and presentations, including a witty and impassioned introduction by the ALS Chair and author Claire Harman, a well-researched report on *Literature Today,* presented by the new Director of the Royal Society of Literature, Molly Rosenberg, and no less than *five* presentations on four Midlands authors: Jerome K. Jerome (*Three Men in a Boat*), Frances Brett Young, A.E. Housman and J.R.R Tolkien.

Glenn Lang (NN Society Secretary) and I found the talks on all these authors inspiring, and particularly admired Maria Artamonova's ability, at the end of a very intensive day, to hold the audience enthralled by her account of Tolkien's childhood and teenage years in Birmingham. It was wonderful to meet members from other literary societies and to hear how they promote their authors' works. We had the opportunity—again—to report on the NN Society's progress with Project 14, and to be assured of the support of the ALS in our quest to create a vibrant centre in Millom which will be an a worthy memorial to Nicholson's name.

The AGM day started with a chance to present our authors informally to other member societies and ended with an excellent dinner and a moving address by Will Adams, son of the ALS founders. Several societies then read from their authors' works. I read Nicholson's 'Epithalamium for a Niece' and tied it in to the Royal Wedding, happening that very day. The feminist note of the poem was much appreciated, and Nicholson's words were given a rousing cheer! Next year's ALS weekend will celebrate George Eliot and will take place on the 17th-19th May in Nuneaton. *AF*

On Keeping Company with Mrs Woolf by Neil Curry (2018) Shoestring Press—Review by Ian Davidson

Neil Curry's new book of poems, *On Keeping Company with Mrs Woolf,* takes the form of a dialogue between him and Virginia Woolf. It is, as he says, about time he fell in love with another man's wife. The interface between the novelist and the poet provides interesting opportunities to explore not only the artistic souls of the participants, but also to reflect on the hows and whys of composition. What inspires the writer? Why do some rare spirits—and both of these are rare—develop an idea, explore a thought, analyse a situation in such a way as to expose not only its essence, but also the peculiar insights of two expert wordsmiths?

Neil's poems are a refreshing reminder of what poetry used to be like before it became the domain of the neo-incomprehensibles. In direct, conversational language, lightly organised in a rough scheme of pentameters and alexandrines, he conveys a true sense how the two writers might converse over a gap of a century. Although the poems end with Virginia Woolf's death in the Spring of 1941, the earlier poems imagine her in her youth in the halcyon days of the British Empire, before the Great War. Imagined dialogues take place in Virginia's early years, the time of *To the Lighthouse* , and then to Bloomsbury days in the early 1900s. These were the days of 'the buggers', those handsome, influential, rich, clever young men of the Cambridge Apostles, who thought women were superfluous. 'On Lytton Strachey' ends,

> He proposed to me once, and I accepted,
> But we slept on it, (no, no, not together)
> Thought better of it; stayed good friends.

And so to the days of equanimity with Leonard Woolf, unconnected, unmoneyed, Jewish – altogether unsuitable in the eyes of the Garsington set, yet oddly suited to the gangling, uncertain Virginia Stephen who scarcely trusted her own talents.

The poems are marvellously allusive; to follow their erudite wandering is an education in itself as Neil Curry imagines with a poet's insight the workings of his correspondent's mind.

> Wouldn't you rather learn what's going on inside her head,
> Than what she's got in her handbag?

Always the quotidian is contrasted with the timeless, the speculations of the curious observer on what might lie beneath the surface of ordinary living:

> Sometimes, it seems to me, I live my life
> Like a child at the circus.

Or worrying about language, its slippery, fluid nature and its importance as a mediator not only between our worlds and other people's, but as an interpreter/definer of what we think and feel.

> There's no telling
> Where they've been
> In God's house
>
> The Playhouse
> The whore house
> And now in your house
>
> And no way of knowing
> Whose mouth
> They've been in

Words, words, words – as Hamlet said. Here they're best read aloud as part of the dialogue they form – sometimes Virginia, sometimes Neil. It's easy to see how he fell in love with her. The poems are best read aloud, as dialogues, which in fact they are, then there emerges the full flavour of the changing rhythms, the dramatic pauses, the reflections, the reminiscences that give life to the whole sequence. It seems then, not a collection of poems but an account of a relationship, and record of a conversation between interested parties somehow separated by the best part of a century, but nevertheless managing to communicate in a satisfying way.

Ian Davidson July 2018

Norman Nicholson, Poetry and Me (Part 2)

I have always been fascinated by flora and fauna, but I spent much of the two decades up to 2004 devoting what spare time I could make to the study of insects in my local area. Wildflowers were an early interest and, of course, since many insects have host preferences for ovipositing to provide their larval pabulum, it has been essential to be fairly knowledgeable about the identification of flora. I have also, outside my role as a Secondary School English teacher, written poems since the early 1980s, many of which have been about local people, places and particularly, flora and fauna. For the first five years post-graduation I couldn't find time to write poetry but during the second five years I wrote regularly and contributed poems to many magazines of variable quality, culminating in a collection published at the end of 1985 entitled *The Nature of Things*. In it there are several poems about flowers - 'Great Bindweed' for example, which was loosely based on the Martian School initiated by Craig Raine's 'A Martian Sends A Postcard Home' - but I wouldn't claim my imagery was as way out as his! I wrote several times about daffodils, those quintessential flowers of Wordsworth's Lake District – four of the poems appearing in the collection, viz. 'Looking At Daffodils', 'The Show Down' 'Sorting Bulbs' and 'Daffodil Bulb' - a pastiche of Ted Hughes' poetry. In later years I wrote 'Daffadowndillies' which was printed in *The Countryman*. A prose poem, 'Hemp Agrimony' was included in the 1985 collection and there are references to flowers throughout: willow-herb, bindweed, ragwort in 'Common', a poem about a Clouded Yellow of the big 1983 invasion; dead and dying dahlias in a vase in 'Keeping Mum'; a late November red rose flowering in the garden in 'Reminder'. Later, I even wrote a poem in the style of a quaint translation of an Anglo-Saxon riddle, 'Grondeswyle' ('Groundswallower'—Groundsel) which won a competition run by an Anglo-Saxon Society! But there were other subjects in the natural world (insects and birds, for example), most inspired by local experiences, people and places. To this extent I am grounded in the same way as Nicholson was. I wouldn't wish to claim any similarities in poetic technique, craft or style. Indeed, the only poet ever mentioned in relation to some of the poems in my early collection, brought to the mind of the editor (of a well-known poetry magazine) when reviewing my collection, was Edward Thomas. Again, I personally wouldn't wish to make any comparison and if any of my writing does suggest Thomas, then it can only have been through being very fond of his work (I have been a member of the Fellowship and the Dymock Poets Society for many years).

Three poems from *The Nature of Things* that have a botanical bent and might appeal to readers of Nicholson's poetry are quoted below, the first of them already mentioned above, and the first two previously published in poetry magazines:

LOOKING AT DAFFODILS

Some come at you, suddenly
as you round a corner -
a shocking fanfare of yellow!

Others leap out,
rowdy gangs from hedge bottoms
jostling, silently.
Occasionally, one
forced out into the open
reveals its secret gold.

These we herd like cows
penned in neat garden borders,
their richness there to be milked.

Now, sockets stare at me,
discontented,
eyeless in vases.

by Brian Mitchell

The other two are as much about local people and family as they are the flowers:

PASSING TIME

They gathered daily on the Broomhills once,
Where yellow gorse sparked and blazed up the banks.
Once. Old men chatting about the debris
Of their past, passing their time quietly:
They talked of dreams they had when they were young,
Recalled memories relived in the telling
Then being old, sitting among the still
Attentive harebells, delicate and pale
Under the whispering silver birches.

Once. But now they are gone. Gone, too, the gorse
Ripped by the roots from those old banks. Cattle
Now lie on that spot; around them dried pats
And crippling hoof hollows have pocked the ground.
In Autumn, rain turns sun-baked clay to mud.
Now all the birches have been silenced, felled.
But a pale harebell still raises its head;
In Summer leans, straining in gusts of wind,
To hear the ghostly voices of the dead.

APPLE PIE

Apple-pie. Why does the word inspire
an image of that footpath, the Riddings,
rank with flowers, dappled with sunlight, where
Grandad, old Joe, lugged a wicker basket
that lodged a few bobbing, cooing pigeons
before we set them free on the bare top
of the Broomhills? I have to admit
it all seems a long, long time ago.

As Grandad buckled up the leather strap
of the creaking basket, I would watch
the birds circle over the woods below
then head off for their loft home. I pick
again the flowers of Apple pie, a bunch
for Granny, carry them all the way back,
gripped tight in sweaty palms, those pink spikes
towering above me, made my hands ache.

We call it Rosebay willow-herb, but Gran,
she always had a name for everything.
Others call it Fireweed – Americans
especially – but she, Apple pie.
Confused, I used to think of eating
those pink flowers, so like the Lupins
that flourished in her garden. But why
she called it Apple pie, I didn't know.

(poem continues overleaf)

NN, Poetry and Me (2) by Brian Mitchell (continued)

Great Hairy willow-herb is Codlins-
and-cream, and some grows along the Riddings.
That is Apple pie or Cherry pie, so
similar they are easy to confuse.
Its flowers crushed smell of apples cooking,
or so books claim, but not to me: I say
that when Granny cut a summer's slice
of pink apple pie, *she* saw the Rosebay.

Nicholson, of course, championed the country names of wildflowers – *"You can keep your flowers – Give me weeds!"* In my poems above, the Riddings is a woodside footpath leading from the old Watling Street (now the A5) up to and through the Broomhills and beyond up to what was the Maypole Inn (since the mid-noughties the site of a small housing estate or close). As the name suggests, Riddings is a mediaeval term for soil or overlying earth (the overburden) that early miners had to "get rid of" to reach the coal below. The path used to be the track for a narrow wooden tramway, probably the earliest one locally dating back to around 1740 when Messrs England and Burslem had it installed to transport coal in wagons from their drift mines in Grendon Wood down to the main road. The Broomhills is a higher, hilly area north west of Grendon Wood, south of Black Riddings Wood and adjoining both. The cutting and embankments for the tramway can still be seen at the Broomhills. In my youth the area was covered with Gorse and Broom but in the last four decades a large part has scrubbed over with Brambles and Bracken, despite the grazing horses allowed there in recent years. Some good stands of Broom persist. The earliest shaft of the Maypole Pit was sunk in 1765, very near an area known to this day as "Little Brum" where the first of 8 shafts was sunk around 1800. Today it is a housing estate in a cul-de-sac but 200 years ago it was regarded as a smaller version of noisy, smelly industrial Birmingham with dozens of shafts and their winding gear, numerous smoking brick kilns and everywhere a maze of railway lines and clanking wagons. Former industrial landscapes in this area – brownfield sites that were once deep-pit coal mines, opencast areas, quarries, spoil heaps, mounds, red shale tips and clay pits for bricks (the 'Bricklepits' near the Maypole and Little Brum) – re-colonised with plants and trees and became good wildlife habitats. In the past 2-3 decades, however, most have been lost in the land grab for housing estates or the blight of light industrial 'units' and worse, re-landscaped for the human eye, not the needs of flora and fauna. Readers will appreciate the similarities here with Norman Nicholson's environment.

Brian Mitchell

Part 1 of this article appeared in last summer's Comet (Vol. 12, Issue 1). *Part 3 will follow in a future issue.*

NN on the Internet (and across the pond) by Antoinette Fawcett

It is a while since I shared some of the interesting Norman Nicholson snippets I have found whilst searching the internet, and space in this issue limits me to just *one* new discovery. In the next issue I will give a full update. Meanwhile, here are some links to what is being said about Norman's work by the American writer and independent social media consultant Glynn Young. Glynn, formerly Director of Online Strategy and Communications for the multinational company Monsanto, has written no less than *three* posts that include comments on Nicholson's work, after he read about Norman's poetry in Owen Sheers' *A Poet's Guide to Britain* (2010). Our Society gets a mention too!

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https://www.tweetspeakpoetry.com/2016/12/06/poetic-asides-norman-nicholson-frank-stanford/

The Closing of the Millom Ironworks—50th Anniversary
Report by Antoinette Fawcett

Bill Myers striding to 'the core of clinker, like the stump of a dead volcano' - the remnants of molten iron which dynamite could not budge.

More than 30 people attended our Summer event this year.

Photo by Brian Whalley

Our summer event this year took place in an unexpected venue: the Millom Methodist Church. We had originally, with the help of Sue Troll, booked the Meeting Room in the Millom *Baptist* Church, but unforeseen problems with its kitchen meant that a new venue had to be found. Sue was able, at quite short notice, to arrange for the Society to use the Methodist Church, which turned out to be a very appropriate location for many different reasons, the most striking one being the fact that this Methodist Church has strong links to the Wesleyan Chapel where Norman worshipped as a child, and where, it could be argued, his poetic vocation began. Norman was given the chance to 'chair' a children's concert there, and that gave him the taste for poetry and performance which never deserted him thereafter. The *actual* church of Norman's childhood is right next door to the current Methodist Church, and has been transformed into flats, but the current church is a little gem: friendly and convenient, with all the facilities needed to shape a good event. Our warm thanks go to the Church and to Sue Troll for making the arrangement.

The focus of the day was on the closing of the Millom Ironworks in September 1968, which was preceded by the closing of Hodbarrow Mines in March of the same year. 2018 marks the fiftieth anniversary of both closures, and hence also, effectively, of a number of poems which Nicholson wrote in response to these events.

Our speaker was the local history expert and writer Bill Myers, who shared his detailed knowledge of the Ironworks with us, very nicely illustrated with a wealth of photos from the period. The political background regarding the struggle to preserve the Ironworks, and therefore the jobs of about 550 to 600 men—a very high proportion of those living in Millom at the time—was particularly interesting. Bill had entitled the talk 'A Changed Habitation—50 Years Without Iron' in a clever reference both to the origins of the town of Millom in iron ore mining and iron-making processes and to Nicholson's fourth book of poetry, *A Local Habitation* (1972). After lunch Bill guided the majority of the group on a walk around the site of the former Ironworks, in brilliant sunshine, and with perfect views of the hills of Furness and the fells of Lakeland beyond. Meanwhile, I led a creative writing (and talking) group, focusing on the lines from Nicholson's 'On the Dismantling of Millom Ironworks' in which he bitterly states: 'they shovelled my childhood/On to a rubbish heap…'. The emphasis of the session, however, was on memories, and on change and transformation, rather than on bitterness, and some wonderful experiences were shared.

Cakes and refreshments, provided by Sue and John Troll, were enjoyed during a discussion of the three poems which had brought us there: 'Glen Orchy', 'On the Closing of Millom Ironworks' and 'On the Dismantling of Millom Ironworks'. These still have the power to move, fifty years on. ***AF***

What's Your Word of the Month? by Ann Thomson

If you follow Word of the Month on the Society's website, you may have noticed that there has often been more than a month between new contributions. That's mainly because, so far, they have all been the work of a very few regular contributors. They do an excellent job, and presumably enjoy it, but it would be great if more members could participate.

As the introduction on the website says, WotM aims to highlight words in Norman Nicholson's writings that 'give his language and imagery a special Northern flavour'. Have you come across a local or northern word in Nicholson's works that has piqued your interest? If you have the means to research its background, fine, but if not, don't worry. Equally interesting is your own perspective on the word in its context. Why did Nicholson choose to use that particular word, in just that place? What sounds, rhythms, nuances or connotations might he have wanted to capture? Does the word trigger memories or associations for you personally? I have resources to look into the history and etymology of the word, and can add that kind of information in an editor's afternote.

I look forward to Word of the Month contributions from lots more of you! There are no particular deadlines – send them in whenever you like. Thanks!

Ann Thomson
June 2018

As highlighted on the Society website and in recent e-bulletins, Ann has taken over the editing of Word of the Month. New Word of the Month articles are always introduced on the home page of the website and clicking on the distinctive WotM image will take you immediately to the current article. Previous Words are stored in the WotM Archive, with links on the right-hand side of the WotM page. There are now twenty Words and articles that can be explored!

MEMBER NEWS

Mary Robinson has moved from Cumbria to the Lleyn Peninsula in North Wales. She is a member of both the Norman Nicholson Society and the R S Thomas Society and is interested in exploring possible links between the two poets. A selection of her Alphabet poems is published in the current issue of *Stand* (volume 16:2). Her poem, 'Six Studies of Pillows', based on a Dürer drawing, won the 2017 Second Light Poetry Prize. She will be the guest poetry editor for the November 2018 edition of *Artemis* magazine.

A recent portrait photograph of Mary Robinson

Doreen Cornthwaite has written to the editor with the following sad news: "Canon Richard Bevan passed away on 13th March 2018) aged 95 years. He was such a dear soul and a great admirer of Norman's work. He organised the Memorial Service for Norman at Carlisle Cathedral." Readers may remember that Canon Bevan's letter of condolence to Doreen after Norman's death in 1987 was published in last summer's *Comet*. You can read his obituary online here: https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/11-may/gazette/obituaries/obituary-canon-richard-bevan

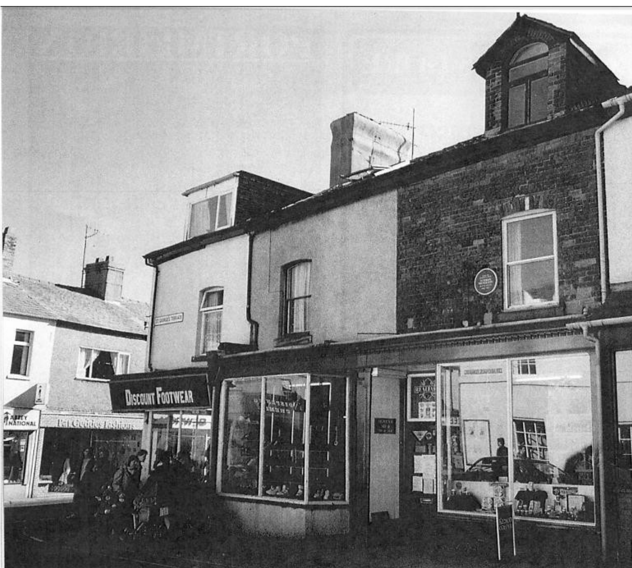
How long did Nicholson live in Millom? by Charlie Lambert

There's always a caveat isn't there? Norman lived in Millom '*virtually* his whole life…'; he lived in the same house 'his whole life *apart from* a spell at a sanatorium…'

It often seems an unfortunate dilution of the full-strength claim that he was as fixed to St George's Terrace as are the fells to the strata of Cumbria.

There is of course no debate about the fact that Norman spent the best part of two years, between 1930 and 1932, at Linford Sanatorium in Hampshire while being treated for tuberculosis. But that doesn't mean that 14 St George's Terrace was not his lifelong home. If we go to hospital, serve in the armed forces, trek across America, or even go to prison, those places do not displace our own home. The location where we are based, where our family and possessions remain, is still our home.

Thus, it is not inaccurate to describe No 14 as Nicholson's 'lifelong home' which is a useful way to make the point about his attachment to Millom while avoiding the usual reservations about time spent at the sanatorium.



I was prompted to consider this when I was gently admonished by my good friend Dr. David Cooper, former chairman of the Society, after I tweeted the news that we had submitted our application to the Heritage Lottery for funds to develop No 14. My tweet described the property as Norman's 'lifelong home'. In re-tweeting it, David described it as Norman's '(almost) lifelong home'.

I don't think the 'almost' is necessary, in this context. And after all, Norman himself wrapped up his autobiographical work *Wednesday Early Closing* with the words 'I thank God for a *lifetime* spent in that same town' (my italics).

Charlie Lambert
June 2018

Member News continued:

Antoinette Fawcett's translation of *Bird Cottage*, Eva Meijer's marvellous novel about the life of the British musician and amateur ornithologist, Len Howard, was published in August by Pushkin Press (£12.99). Len was an unusual woman, who in the second half of her life devoted herself entirely to the study of birds, particularly Great Tits, allowing them to fly in and out of her house as they pleased. Many of them would roost in her bedroom! It is a lyrical novel, which portrays Len as a strong-willed woman whose ideas about the individual intelligence of birds were well before their time. Please do order it from your bookshop or library. It would also make an excellent choice for book groups. And it is important to show support for publishers who specialize in translation. Pushkin Press always produces such beautiful and important translated books. You can order *Bird Cottage* directly from the website: https://www.pushkinpress.com/product/bird-cottage/, from Amazon, or from any good bookseller.

PROJECT 14 Update—Summer 2018—by Charlie Lambert

We are playing the waiting game again! The Society's application to the Heritage Lottery Fund for money to buy and renovate 14 St George's Terrace was submitted on June 5th, 24 hours ahead of the HLFs deadline for summer applications.

This time last year we were waiting anxiously to see if our application for just under £10,000 to fund a feasibility study would be approved. It was, and we were able to bring in top-notch architects and specialists to examine Norman's old home, analyze our plans for its future and give a professional verdict on whether our project is workable. The outcome, as previously reported in Comet, was not just positive but also very complimentary about the case presented by the Society's working group.

FULL STORY: PAGE 9

Thursday, June 7, 2018

www.nwemail.co.uk

80p (64p for subscribers)

£500k grant bid to honour Millom poet

Group hopes to transform former home into attraction

BY REECE HANSON

A GROUP vying to transform a late poets former home have applied for an "essential" grant of £500,000.

The bid to buy and renovate Norman Nicholson's former home, at 14 St George's Terrace, Millom, could be greatly boosted by the grant from the Heritage Lottery fund.

Charlie Lambert, chair of the Norman Nicholson Society, praised the group for their efforts.

FULL STORY - PAGE 8

Mission: From left, poet Phil Houghton with Norman Nicholson Society members Charlie Lambert and Janice Brockbank outside the former home of Norman Nicholson (inset left)

The weeks leading up to the June deadline were extremely busy. The working group met several times to develop and finalize our application. We had meetings with our Lottery support officer, Antonia, in Lancaster and Millom. We had a site meeting with planning officers from Copeland Council. I am hugely grateful to Sue Dawson, Janice Brockbank and Bernard Jackson for the long hours they've put in and their unfailing enthusiasm.

There has inevitably been some tweaking of details, but the proposal we've submitted is very close to the original plan as outlined to members in the past: to buy the house, repair and renovate it, re-open the café (to a design which echoes the heritage of the house), restore the upstairs rooms so visitors can experience what life was like for Norman and his family 'living above the shop', utilize the latest digital technology to provide audio and video presentations, display items of Nicholson memorabilia, build a new extension at the rear to include self-contained accommodation for a writer in residence or general visitors, and ensure that there is full access for wheelchair users.

The project has been costed at £646,000 which includes an allowance for VAT, inflation and contingency. The HLF will not provide all of that, so our application is for £549,000, the maximum allowed under their formula. This would leave us, the Society, to find around £97,000 ourselves, which looks a terrifying sum! It becomes a bit more manageable when we factor in the time that our own people will commit as volunteers to the project. Again, working to the HLF formula, the hours and expertise which members of the working group will commit are valued at £61,000. This reduces the amount of hard cash to be raised to around £36,000, and I am confident that we can achieve that, both through funding agencies and our own fund-raising efforts. Members are already coming up with ideas for fund-raising stunts and schemes, and I think we will have a lot of fun.

So now we wait for the HLF to give us a decision which will not come until the second half of September. If we get the green light, we will receive a percentage of the total funding to enter the HLF's 'development stage,' when the HLF will work closely with us to fine-tune the project. If they are satisfied, we will then receive the rest of the money to enter the 'delivery stage' and really set to work.

Charlie Lambert, June 2018

Talking about Norman by Glenn Lang

As mentioned at the Society's 2018 AGM, talks about aspects of Norman Nicholson's life and work have been given to a wide variety of audiences in Cumbria and the rest of the UK by past and present committee members and by many other members of the Society over the years since the Society was founded, including Alan Beattie, David Cooper, Neil Curry, Ian Davidson, Chris Donaldson, Antoinette Fawcett, Phil Houghton, Irvine Hunt, Kathleen Jones, Grevel Lindop, Brian Whalley, and myself.

One notable example this Spring was the annual Phillipson Lecture to the Dalton Local History Society, given this year by Antoinette. Despite Les Crossley, the Chair of the DLHS, having sadly passed away only a few days beforehand, Antoinette's lecture was well attended and greatly appreciated. Using material gleaned during her 2016 academic fellowship at the John Rylands Library, Antoinette showed how Norman was not just a regional writer but also a widely read and well-regarded poet across Europe and the world after the Second World War, particularly in Italy and Scandinavia. Norman's work was translated into a number of languages and Antoinette examined some of the difficulties translators had encountered, particularly with words such as 'ash' (the tree, but interpreted as 'cinders') and the word-choices they had made.

Another talk worth mentioning was the one our Chair, Charlie Lambert, delivered at Millom Library on 27th July, entitled ***Why is a sports reporter from Liverpool nuts about Nicholson?*** 21 people attended, many more than were expected. Those of us who missed Charlie's talk look forward to hearing more about it very soon. Charlie will also be talking about Nicholson at the *Moving Mountains* project which will take place in Millom in the autumn/early winter and many of our members and committee members will also be involved in the *When Percy met Norman Festival* in Maryport at the end of September (see the events list at the back of this issue).

We are always looking for speakers for Society events and other societies on any aspect of Norman Nicholson's life and work. If you are able and willing to offer such a talk, please let us know. We would also welcome help and input from our members for any of our events and study days. ***GL***

NAME THAT POEM!

Society member John Gilder has compiled a short quiz on Norman Nicholson's poems, with the prize for the winning entry being a year's FREE youth membership of the NN Society (winning entrant from existing adult membership to donate to a junior of his/her choice). GOOD LUCK!

The following quotations are taken from a wide range of Norman's poetry. What is the title of the poem?

1. *A Jordan valley without the Jordan, neither sea nor land.*
2. *Stone axes, chipped from the crag-face, ripped the hide off the fells.*
3. *...and the boats, fratching on their leashes like dogs that sniff a stranger.*
4. *But once in spring and once again in autumn, here's where the sea begins.*
5. *After rain water lobelia drips like a tap on the tarn's tight surface tension*
6. *November sunlight floats and falls like soapsuds on the castle walls.*
7. *Dawn hatches out a spawn of glitter*.
8. *No dog would sniff within a hundred yards of their wing-menaced ground.*
9. *The landscape of sound grows slowly dimmer.*
10. *I feel the air move on my face like spiders .*

Entries can be sent to Antoinette Fawcett, by post or email (details on the back page). The first ***three*** fully correct entries received will be awarded the prize, as detailed above. If no entries are completely correct, then one prize will be awarded to the member who has sent us the greatest number of correct answers. Thanks so much to John for this brilliant idea and for setting the quiz!

'Canon'—An Intriguing Poem by Antoinette Fawcett

Bowston Weir, Burneside, Cumbria
© Copyright Mick Garratt

I thought I would share with our readers some thoughts that have recently gone through my mind with regard to the little poem 'Canon', first published in the weekly magazine *Time and Tide* in 1949 (Vol. 30, p. 794), and later appearing in *The Pot Geranium* in 1954 (p. 27; p. 198 *Collected Poems*). It is a short poem and is easily overlooked, because, in spite of its plainness of language, it is difficult to work out what is going on. It is written in rhyming couplets, but the use of enjambement (run-on lines), somewhat broken syntax, and the playful use of sound, make it hard for the reader to fully grasp the meaning of the words or the poem's intention. In fact, in a modest way, it is almost experimental and, with its cross-rhythms and melodic qualities, perhaps even a little Sitwell-esque.

The clue to the poem for me lies in its title and sub-title: 'Canon. *Beside the paper-mill at Burneside, Westmorland'*. A canon, as readers will know, is a contrapuntal musical technique, of which the round is the most commonly known sung form. One voice leads and other voices enter in exact imitation of the first voice, but at different points. That is a simple canon. But it's clear from the poem that although there is plenty of repetition (imitation) of elements of the first stanza within the following four stanzas, there is also variation: 'I only spoke to see…'/'I only looked to hear…' / 'I listened just to tell…'. If this is a canon in the musical sense, then one can imagine it as a so-called 'free canon', where the voices come in at regular intervals (at the start of each stanza), but the 'quality' of the notes (the words) changes. In the poem speaking is transformed into looking, looking into listening, listening into telling, for example; and whilst the colour 'yellow' remains constant it morphs its way through 'yellow rag' and 'yellow ragtail' into 'yellow ragwort'. Rags, scraps and weeds, which together compose both experience and meaning.

The sub-title of the poem gives the location: *Beside the paper-mill at Burneside, Westmorland*. That mill still exists and is the head office and manufacturing site of James Cropper PLC—an innovative and creative paper-making company, with a history dating back to 1845, and a site history going back even further. At this point, I can only speculate as to why Norman Nicholson, who could not drive and was not yet married to Yvonne, who would later take him all over Greater Lakeland in their car, had gone to this paper-mill near Kendal. However, I suspect that there were two good reasons which might have brought him there. In 1949, the same year that 'Canon' was published in *Time and Tide,* the first edition of Nicholson's great topographical book *Cumberland and Westmorland* was also published. Clearly Norman travelled a great deal throughout Greater Lakeland to collect material for his book, as much of what he writes there is based on his own experience. The second reason may possibly have been his admiration for the Westmorland poet Margaret Cropper, a member of the paper-making Cropper family. There is an interesting passage in *Cumberland and Westmorland*, in fact, which relates almost exactly to the freely flowing words of 'Canon' and helps to cast some light on it. Nicholson in the passage preceding this quotation is talking about wagtails, and the places where he has seen them:

> To people used only to the pied wagtail the first glimpse of a grey wagtail, with its yellow belly and markings, is always a surprise. […] My happiest memory of this bird is of a pair I saw at Burneside on the Kent. The river makes an S-curve among the meadows and boulders and carves deeply into the slope below the Vicarage garden. The flow is not very great, as part of the water has been

> tapped off a little bit higher up. Among the roots of the trees are claytonia and moschatel. The cows come down to the water from the children's playing field. Beyond, low hills border the valley towards Staveley. Then suddenly there is the paper-mill, a large barren-looking building, mostly of slate, with a row of pink rhododendrons beside the rubbish-heaps. The water which has been drawn off is now returned to the Kent, vomiting from pipes, and goes rocking through the village, black as Spanish water. And here the grey wagtails were—skittering from stone to stone in the river, rocking above the grey water, bright as whin flowers in a slate quarry. (pp. 86-7)

I suspect that Norman was actually *staying* at the Vicarage when he had this happy experience.

To return to 'Canon'. There are several intriguing elements, in addition to its formal aspects, that tie the poem into this musical technique. The imagery of the poem is simple—'tree', 'flood', 'weir', 'song', 'rag', 'ragtail', 'ragwort', 'beech' and 'beck'—but it is the tree, not the river, that the speaker came to see 'in flood'; the weir, not the bird, that he looks at to hear it 'in song'; and the 'yellow rag' and 'yellow ragtail' that he listens to, rather than looks at, so that he can 'tell' them that he 'only came for speech of beech and beck'. The overall impression that builds up is a complex one, in which the senses are intermingled, and the speaker/listener is immersed in nature. The layerings and overlappings of sound and image are especially strong in the centre of the poem:

> I listened just to tell the yel-
> low rag—I listened just to tell
>
> The yellow ragtail how to show
> And teach the yellow ragwort how
>
> I only came for speech of beech
> And beck...

The aural effect is particularly attractive here and to my way of thinking imitates the sounds of the river, with its bubbling 'l's', its stoppings and startings, its rushings against stones and pebbles (the words 'speech' and 'beech' interrupt with a kind of splash all the liquid sounds of 'yellow').

But if we can hear the river in this 'Canon', where is the paper-mill, except in the prosaic sub-title? My feeling is that the whole poem intermingles elements of the paper-making process with the environment the mill is set in, and with the purpose of paper (from the poet's perspective). Paper was once made of 'rag' and was by Nicholson's time made of wood-pulp ('tree'). So that to see the 'tree in flood' is not only to see the tree within the flood of the weir and the river, but also to see it (in the imagination) flowing into another form, transformed into the paper it will become, on which the poet's 'speech' will be printed. And the 'speech' of the poet includes the 'song of the weir' and puts into human words the speaking of tree and river.

One remaining question is: what exactly is the 'yellow ragtail'? The speaker is listening—to everything in the surrounding environment—and he listens to 'tell/The yellow ragtail how to show...I only came for speech of beech and beck...'. At first I thought that Nicholson was talking about a 'yellow **w**agtail' here (and the extract from *Cumberland and Westmorland* supports that idea, although Nicholson is describing grey wagtails in that passage). I now suspect that he is playfully mingling bird and hazel catkin together—in a continuous round of transformation. The hazel catkin in northern English dialect is known as a 'rag', 'raggle', or 'hazel-rag' (see J. Wright's 1898 *English Dialect Dictionary*, vol. 5), or more commonly as a 'lamb's tail'. I don't know if Norman visited Burneside in spring, but my guess is that he did, and that in a kind of synaesthetic ecstasy, responding to river, bird, tree, flower, and industrial landscape, and perhaps a shadowy lady (his 'happiest memory'), he composed this unusual little carolling canon. ***AF***

FORTHCOMING EVENTS, REMINDERS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

15th September 2018: **Creative Writing workshop with Kathleen Jones at Cockley Moor**. Places are limited on this workshop. Contact me to book a place if you haven't done so already.

28th—29th September 2018: 'When Percy Met Norman' - A two-day festival at the Settlement, Castle Hill, Maryport, Cumbria CA15 6BQ. This festival celebrates artist Percy Kelly and poet Norman Nicholson meeting at the Maryport Settlement 59 years ago. There is a rich programme of events and exhibitions, most of which are free. The programme includes contributions from Society members Kathleen Jones, Charlie Lambert, Alan Beattie, Brian Charnley and Antoinette Fawcett. More details can be found here: https://www.castlehilltrust.org.uk/events.

20th October 2018— Our Autumn Event is themed around the friendship between Norman Nicholson and the artist and sculptor **Josefina de Vasconcellos**. Josefina was an extremely well-known and gifted sculptor whose last work, *Escape to the Light*, is placed near the beach at Haverigg. Josefina was also instrumental in founding the **Harriet Trust**, which worked with deprived and disabled children, giving them a holiday in a beached trawler on the Duddon Estuary. The day will feature a talk given by the sculptor Shawn Williamson, who was Josefina's pupil, and a further talk by Chris Powell, who was the warden of the Harriet boat, and worked closely with Josefina and the children. We also expect to visit *Escape to the Light*, Josefina's last sculpture, which is sited by the beach at Haverigg. More details and a booking form will follow.

Annual Christmas Lunch: Saturday, 8th December, 12.30 for 1.00 pm at the Netherwood Hotel, Grange-over-Sands. Further details will follow in our e-bulletins. Meanwhile, save this date! **NOTE**: If you do not have an email address you can put your name on the pre-booking list now, by contacting Antoinette Fawcett at the address or phone number below.

Acknowledgements: Some of the photographs in this issue of *Comet* were taken from the 'Geograph' website which 'aims to collect geographically representative photographs and information for every square kilometre of Great Britain and Ireland' (https://www.geograph.org.uk/). The images on the website are licensed for re-use under the Creative Commons Licence. The photos used in this issue are on pages 18 and 19 (**Wild daffodils, Beckmickle Ing** cc-by-sa/2.0 - © Karl and Ali; **Harebell at Latterbarrow** cc-by-sa/2.0 - © Gary Rogers ; and **Rosebay willowherb at Black Andrew Wood** cc-by-sa/2.0 - © Walter Baxter); and on page 26 where the photo of **Bowston Weir, Burneside** is by © Mick Garratt (cc-by-sa/2.0). It is a great project and a wonderful resource, as you can see. The photos on page 16 were taken by Glenn Lang or by members of the ALS. All other photos are acknowledged *in situ*.

Digitization of *Comet*: as authorized by this year's AGM, back copies of *Comet* will be digitized and made fully searchable in a project based at Lancaster University next academic year. This concerns issues from 2006 up to and including 2015. Full details of the project will appear in the next issue of *Comet*. If you have any worries or concerns about this, please do contact me for further explanation.

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Please note: membership enquiries and enquiries regarding receiving *Comet*, or about receiving or buying past issues, can now also be addressed to Antoinette Fawcett (as the current Membership Secretary).

Grateful thanks to all contributors without whose efforts there would be no newsletter. We are always searching for new articles and new contributors: essays, poems and creative writing, reviews, letters, memories—all are welcome!