

*Comet: the Magazine of the Norman Nicholson Society***Songs, Stones, Memories and Mysteries**

More to say, more to sing, and more to tell—if there is a theme running through this issue of *Comet*, it is that there are so many different ways of relating to Norman Nicholson's life and work. Some of the key articles in this issue focus on song and singing, but there are also mysteries to explore, memories to enjoy, some geology to understand, and plenty of social and personal history to help us place Nicholson and his work in a wider context.

Ann Thomson's moving piece on Nicholson's 'Songs of the Island' (1942) shows how even these early poems continue to be relevant not only to established fans but to a new generation of readers (and speakers). She points out that in these poems there is a foreshadowing of Nicholson's later engagement with 'deep time, the identification of bone with rock, and the idea that the geology of Cumbria and the character of people rooted there are mutually formative'.

The song-thread winds its way through a number of other articles in this issue, including "'Fossils" - A Song Setting' and "At the Musical Festival (Again)", and even makes a brief appearance in **John T. Andrews' 'Memories of Millom'**, while the geological strata of limestone and sops, veins and bodies of hematite feature in **Brian Whalley's 'Iron in the Soul of Millom'**. The Society's live events have cautiously reappeared this year, and our **Geoweek 2022** event, led by Brian, was the first one. It showed that Nicholson's work is highly relevant to the earth sciences.

Sue Dawson's report on last year's **Virtual Visit to Millom**, arranged for students on the University of Cumbria's MA course in Literature, Romanticism and the English Lake District, also features the iron in Millom's soul, while her photo of a rusty drain cover in a 'Cumberland street' demonstrates that even the humblest elements reveal the town's character. This is completely in keeping with Nicholson's own vision.

Serious questions about the nature of nature—or of natural beauty—are addressed by **Laura Day** in her report on an online symposium held in December 2021, while memories and mysteries are explored by **Jean Crosbie, John T. Andrews** and **myself**.

We know by now that Nicholson's writings have huge environmental and ecological relevance, but it is also important to remember the aesthetic impact of his work and its historical and social *breadth*. That may seem a large claim to those who think that Nicholson's work is limited because of its prime focus on Millom and Greater Lakeland, but as

he himself said, this does not seem a paradox to 'one / Who held quarry and query, turf and town, / In the small lock of a recording brain'. This issue of *Comet* should give a wider sense of his range.

- **'UNDER WESTWARD SKIES': A Personal Response to Nicholson's 'Songs of the Island'**
by **Ann Thomson**
- **Nicholson-related MA Successes**
- **'Fossils' - A Song Setting**
- **Norman and I**
by **Jean Crosbie**
- **Memories of Millom**
by **John T. Andrews**
- **University of Cumbria Virtual Visit, March 2021**
by **Sue Dawson**
- **Rocks to the West Part 8: Iron in the Soul of Millom**
by **Brian Whalley**
- **GeoWeek 2022 – A Report**
by **Antoinette Fawcett**
- **At the Musical Festival (Again)**
by **Antoinette Fawcett**
- **'M' - A Double Mystery**
by **Antoinette Fawcett**
- **Miscellaneous**
- **A Birthday Candle for Norman**
by **Charlie Lambert**
- **'What is Natural Beauty' Symposium—A Report**
by **Laura Day**

and more...

‘UNDER WESTWARD SKIES’

A personal response to Norman Nicholson’s ‘Songs of the Island’

As the Nicholson Birthday Zoom on 8 January reminded us, Norman’s poems can speak compellingly to our personal experiences and concerns. One participant, for example, found in ‘Do You Remember Adlestrop?’ poignant echoes of an ageing parent’s dementia. For me meanwhile, December had brought the anniversary of my husband Alan’s death and called to mind Norman Nicholson’s contribution to his funeral service. I had wanted to include a poem, and in discussion with my son and daughter suggested Nicholson’s ‘Songs of the Island II’ (*Collected Poems* p. 34) as a possibility. Both, as they read it, began reminiscing about family walking holidays in Scotland and the Lake District:

Still we climb, higher we climb
Through the bracken in the dark combe,
Through the bilberries and the wild thyme[.] (Stanza 1)

Nicholson’s lines brought back memories of plodding through mist and rain, sometimes ‘[a]bove the clouds’ (stanza 2) before being granted, if we were lucky, a glimpse of the sea. Perhaps, ‘staring far’ (stanza 5), we might make out a Hebridean island or, closer to home, the Isle of Man. We had found our funeral poem. My teenage grandson read it beautifully at the service as my daughter projected a slideshow selected from Alan’s photographs of mountain landscapes. Word and image together encapsulated something important to Alan from early youth – a lifetime’s treasury of memories that lingered when much else was lost to him, physically and mentally.

‘Songs of the Island II’ is from Nicholson’s 1944 collection *Five Rivers*. I had come upon it serendipitously while browsing through the *Collected Poems*. Like my children I was hooked in by topographical familiarity and remembered experience – but there was something more. Having grown up beside the Solway Firth, feeling perennially drawn to the west coast, and exhilarated by mountain walks that afford a sea view, I relish the opening line of stanza 4: ‘There, westward, there, stretches the sea’. The ‘boundary’ formed by ‘sand and shingle and broken shells’ (stanza 3), is tidal and therefore unstable, while another boundary, that between sea and sky, resists definition: ‘Cloud-like the water beneath a watery sky’ (stanza 4). As ever, Nicholson’s imagery is grounded in acute observation of material phenomena; but that blurring of the horizon between the earthbound and the infinite is something he infuses with spiritual significance, as again in the much later ‘Sea to the West’ (from his eponymous 1981 collection) where the western horizon is pictured in a blazing sunset:

When the sea’s to the west
The evenings are one dazzle -
You can find no sign of water.
Sun upflows the horizon[.] (*CP* p. 338)

In a Nicholsonian twist on Wordsworthian sensibility, remembrance of youth prompts intimations of mortality, leading him to pray:

Let my eyes at the last be blinded
Not by the dark
But by dazzle. (p. 339)

Perhaps that intratextual association snagged at my unconscious mind when, newly bereaved, I stumbled on ‘Songs of the Island II’; at any rate, what leapt out at me on first reading was a

by Ann Thomson

longing for heaven. The generous punctuation of 'There, westward, there, stretches the sea' is replicated and intensified in succeeding lines, especially at the end of stanza 5 and in stanza 6. That almost breathless sense of yearning, of urgent straining towards a longed-for goal, is reinforced by repeated words (for example 'beyond' in stanza 4 and again in the poem's final line), the fifth stanza's reprise of the poem's opening line, and the last two stanzas' echoing phrases, internal rhymes, and further reiterations of 'there', while the closing triple rhetorical flourish hints at eventual resolution:

For there, if the mist lifts, if the sky shifts, there,
There, as we remember it, there, lies,
As we hoped for it, under westward skies,
As we dreamed of it, the island beyond the light of our eyes.

Is this island more than an earthly destination – a realm unseen for now, yet separated from the traveller only by an essentially permeable frontier?

Having first discovered and used 'Songs of the Island II' as a discrete item, I only later paid attention to 'Songs of the Island I' (CP p. 33) and the two other poems, both with 'Song' in their titles, that flank this pair in *Collected Poems*. 'Song' (CP p. 32), a rueful elegy for lost young love, stands apart from the others in structure and theme; but 'Maiden's Song' (p. 35), subtitled 'A Song of the Island', follows 'Songs of the Island I and II' in form as well as in sequence. It is illuminating to consider these as a triptych of companion pieces. The number three is structurally fundamental: each poem comprises six tercets, each tercet having full or half end-rhymes throughout to accentuate its threefold nature. The associations of 'St Patrick's trinity-flower' ('Songs of the Island I', stanza 2) are surely not coincidental, nor is the naming of the 'elder'. Other trees are available; but legend and tradition link the elder variously with the wood of Christ's cross and the tree from which Judas hanged himself. In leaving behind these emblematic flora, do the poem's protagonists repudiate Christian faith, or use it as a spur to risk striking out from the security of the known? What we can say is that their endeavour has a spiritual dimension.

'Songs of the Island I' (p. 33) conjures a sweeping picture of unnamed (Viking?) seafarers venturing 'Westward from Britain' to seek more distant islands (Greenland and Iceland?), approaching the magnetic North where compass bearings waver (stanza 5). Yet the poem's opening line destabilises any simple narrative interpretation by referring to the voyagers as 'souls'. This nautical idiom is not unfamiliar, especially where a fatal shipwreck is concerned; yet the fourth stanza's emphatic 'ballast of souls' lends the image a more purposeful freight. The ambiguous horizons in 'Songs of the Island II' are prefigured in stanza 3 with its repetition of 'Westward' and its conjuring of capricious maritime weather: 'The clouds like islands. The rain falls || The mist rises ...' But even the rain is 'shining', 'the flying foam reflects the sun' (stanza 4), and:

Eyes on the prow discover the sky,
And the tides teach new tongues to the sea,
And the compass points in more than one way.
The known land is forgotten; the name
Of the unknown land is a charm,
And the sea flows above the drowned bones of time. (Stanzas 5 and 6)

'Under Westward Skies' (continued) by Ann Thomson

When time is drowned, what is left but eternity?

For the female protagonist of 'Maiden's Song' (p. 35) the horizon is a hard reality, an edge over which ships 'topple' (stanza 3) carrying the menfolk on whatever their quest may be – for discovery, new lands, enlightenment, perhaps even eternal life. Occasional washed-up wreckage hints at a more dismal outcome (stanza 4); at any rate 'The ships sail to the island and never come back'. The seemingly solitary woman is left behind to keep the home fires burning. Her lexicon is as earthy as her daily tasks: hers is a world of stone walls, turnip fields, sheepdogs, driftwood and sea-coal, warehouses and wharves. The gendered nature of the contrasted callings in these poems is unmistakable. The 'tug of the tide in my blood', physically manifest in the speaker's menstrual cycle, suggests also the lure of the vastness beyond, to which she is not immune.

Yet still I remain when the ships and the gulls are gone,
Feeling the rock beneath my ankles, feeling the bone
Spliced in the iron roots of the dead stone. (Stanza 6)

Those lines foreshadow Nicholson's explorations in later poetry of deep time, the identification of bone with rock, and the idea that the geology of Cumbria and the character of people rooted there are mutually formative. Much more could be said about this relatively neglected group of poems and their place in the Nicholson canon. Questions abound: in what sense, for example, are these poems 'songs'? Plenty for others to ponder.

Finally, one contributor to the Birthday Zoom noted that Nicholson's poems of the 1940s often embrace a strikingly 'mystical' viewpoint not always evident later. The example chosen was 'The Candle' from *Rock Face* (1948). Its imagery conceives altered states and continuity as somehow indivisible; indeed it seems to point directly towards what I have discerned in 'Songs of the Island':

The flame is where the candle turns
To smoke, solid to air,
Life to death, or say,
To that which still is life in another way. (*Collected Poems* p. 162)

Ann Thomson January 2022



The Isle of Man
from Scafell
Pike

[cc-by-sa/2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/) - ©
Karl and Ali -
[geograph.org.uk/
p/5213207](https://www.geograph.org.uk/p/5213207)

Nicholson-related MA Successes

Two members of the Society, Ann Thomson and David Boyd (Hon. Vice-President) were awarded Master of Arts degrees in Literature, Romanticism and the English Lake District by the University of Cumbria in April 2022. Both their dissertations were partially based on the work of Norman Nicholson.

Ann's dissertation was entitled: *'A Telling of Our Days': Disability, Poetics and Performance in the Work of Norman Nicholson and Kate Davis*. Part of Ann's dissertation focused on *A Local Habitation* (1972), the fiftieth anniversary of which we are celebrating this year. She is currently writing an article based on that section of her research, which will be published in the next issue of *Comet*.

David's dissertation discussed the proposition that West Cumbria should be regarded not only as a distinct geographical and topographical region within Cumbria, but also as a distinct socioeconomic and cultural entity. He examines the work of three West Cumbrian authors, Melvyn Bragg (b. 1939); John Murray (b. 1950) and Norman Nicholson (1914-1987) and argues that their work is reflective of their West Cumbrian origins and outlook.

Members of the Society interested in reading either dissertation are invited to contact the editor of this magazine, who will put them in touch with the authors. AF



Ann Thomson and David Boyd at their University of Cumbria graduation, April 2022. Fellow graduates are Nada Saadaoui and Georgina Harland

'Fossils'—A Song Setting

It is always exciting to report on new ways of presenting Nicholson's work and to see how his poems continue to inspire artists, writers, musicians and composers.

Last October the Oxford Lieder Festival opened with *A Cumbrian Idyll*, a performance featuring the contralto [Jess Dandy](#), pianist [Martin Roscoe](#) and author [James Rebanks](#), singing, playing and talking about Cumbria and the notion of the 'pastoral'.

Norman Nicholson's work played a central part, as Jess is a great admirer. She focused particularly on Nicholson's geological poems and on 'his writing of the Estuary as a site of transformational cleansing' (concert programme notes).

The most exciting part of the concert for lovers of Nicholson's work was her singing of a new musical setting of Nicholson's poem 'Fossils' by the composer [Joel Rust](#) (b. 1989). Jess's strong contralto seemed to rise from the depths of time, bringing the fossils and the rock back to life. Joel says of this piece: 'Fossils, our very distant cousins, remind us that there have been, and will be, more ways of living on this planet than we can possibly know. Nicholson's poem treats these creatures with respect, admiration and warmth; I wanted my setting to do the same — and to reflect the gently undulating landscape unfolding around it'. Watch out for more work by Joel and Jess. They both deserve support, with or without the Nicholson connection! AF

Fossils

Norman Nicholson Joel Rust

♩ = 75 (very freely)

In the bones of the rock the fos-sils... are li - ving, cri - noid and am - mo - nite;
In the red of the rock the fos-sils... are mo - ving, coi - ling, craw - ling, ach - ing for the sea.

Norman and I by Jean Crosbie

The man who was to become my husband and I were appointed by the National Trust to be joint custodians of Wordsworth House (a Georgian mansion and Wordsworth's birthplace) in Cockermouth in 1978. It had previously been tenanted, with only 2 rooms open to public view—the tiny morning room and much larger drawing room on the 1st floor. It was the latter that held The Turner, painted whilst a guest at the Castle.

So when we arrived to set up home in the servants' quarters above the stables the house, which we were to show to the public, was empty.

In those days custodians had far more leeway to use their creative powers and for the time we were there we were the winners of the yearly bouquet and bottle of wine presented to the NT property with the highest increase of visitor numbers. So what did we do? How is this to do with Norman Nicholson?

First we converted the kitchen into a coffee kitchen, then turned our attention to the huge empty dining room. Here we planned a series of workshops and events, amongst which were poetry reading events with cheese and wine. Norman was included in our programme and he made quite an impression on me. I loved his poetry, his appearance and his voice.

Having listened to the Birthday Zoom programme I can't wait to find a driver for my adapted car (I'm in a wheelchair) to take me to Millom to listen to the recording of him reading his poetry.

Jean Crosbie



Jean as a schoolteacher on the Isle of Eigg c 1976—not long before she moved to Wordsworth House



The gracious dining room where the poetry readings were held—twice the size you can see in the photo and a full house on the night that Norman gave his reading.



Jean in the present

Memories of Millom by John T. Andrews

“.....Marjorie, who became the wife of a Professor and Dorothy, who became the mother of another...” Norman Nicholson, Wednesday Early Closing (p. 160)

Dorothy Andrews (née Black) and my Dad, George Andrews, were in the same Millom Grammar School class as Norman Nicholson. It is also worth noting that Marjorie Addison (née Thompson), who like my mother is mentioned in *Wednesday Early Closing*, married Cliff Addison, FRS, who became Professor of Inorganic Chemistry at the University of Nottingham. Marjorie and Cliff visited us in Boulder, Colorado, when he was on sabbatical in the USA. Cliff was Norman's schoolmate too and is also mentioned in *Wednesday Early Closing* (p. 178), as Cyril.

I have recently come across my Mother's grades from the Grammar School and note with pride that she was 1st in her class in Physics and 3rd in Chemistry. But given the times she had to leave school at 15 and worked for a local doctor, collecting insurance money. Her family is an old Cumbrian family that I have traced back to circa 1790 and in the 1860s my great grandfather was running the Ship Inn on Holborn Hill. My mother's two brothers both fought in WWII with Uncle George being deployed to Burma, while her younger brother, Joe, was a Petty Officer in the Fleet Air Arm and was killed in action flying off HMS *Furious* during the Battle of Petsamo. He was recently awarded the Arctic Star.¹

I was born in 1937 at 7 Surrey St, in the Company Houses, but we moved shortly thereafter and lived at 25 Oxford St. My back window looked out onto the Duddon Estuary and also the Iron Works, so that the night sky was always illuminated by the blast furnaces and the tipping of slag. My Grandfather Andrews initially worked on the slag engines but was severely scalded at one point and could no longer work. However, the



Millom Ironworks late 1960s?
photo supplied by John T. Andrews

family was able to buy a small grocery shop at No. 1 Surrey St and that remained in the family until 1968. In the 1950's the business letterhead read *D.M. and G. Andrews, Grocers and purveyors of Balloon yeast "We always rise to the occasion"*—in fact, the shop sold bags of 'wet yeast' to all the Millom bakers of that time (Thompson's, Greene's) and delivered groceries by horse and cart, and later by car (1946) to many of the local farms. An article in the Millom News describes the shop thus:

A DESCRIPTION OF THE ANDREWS' FAMILY SHOP CA AD 1917-1918

My favourite shop was Andrews' on the corner of Surrey Street and Argyle Street (a street without a house?). In the shop window was displayed the most attractive assortment of confectionery, ducks (shaped from red gums), potatoes and green peas

Memories of Millom

occupied the centre, Jap nougats, treasure chests made of pink icing, which perhaps had silver 3d, 6d and 1 sh. pieces if you were lucky, but usually a trinket, like tie pins, rings and brooches, with some dolly mixtures, icing sugar, watches with a mock time disc on the front, pink mice, chocolate smoker's outfits, popcorns, fibrous sweet tobacco twists in yellow and red packets. [...]

Then gobstoppers, as big as golf balls, changing colour as you sucked them to the size of marbles, flapjacks, long strips of multi-coloured toffee, Spanish strips, barley sugar sticks, twisted rainbow walking sticks and many other kinds that have now disappeared.

Inside the shop you were greeted with the fragrant aroma of coffee, yeast, bran, etc. Vinegar was on draught and maize was sold loose for poultry. On the left was a counter with numerous biscuit tins, McFarlane and Lang, Crawford and Carr's, the tops were open on some with 'display shelves' and hanging from the wall shelves were cards of Parkinson's Pink Pills, Carter's little liver pills (three in screwed paper 1d each), embrocation bottles, Carnation corn cups.

In the centre was the main counter with the brass weighing scales besides a large bottle of Indian brandy. But, like many other edibles and remedies, they have mostly vanished into the limbo of the past.

From Millom News April 9th 1976

By Wm J. Wilson

My memory of the war years (WWII) has no distinct event or time but I do remember:

- Large barrage balloons and cables protecting the ship building across the Duddon Estuary at Barrow-in-Furness
- When the air raid warnings sounded spending nights at Grandma Black's house (Albert St) in the steel Anderson shelter
- The presence of an additional person in the house—Lewis, a Welshman, who worked either at the Iron Works or in the hematite mines
- A machine gun in the parlour—my father was in the Home Guard
- Visiting my Father at the Iron Works Office where he worked during WWII
- Throwing myself on the ground—probably not needed—as a plane flew low over Steel Green heading for the RAF base at Haverigg
- A beached and dead whale at Haverigg
- Going to Ravenglass with Aunty Hilda (a teacher at Drigg School) and collecting seagull eggs (this area is now a Bird Sanctuary) for use in cooking—they often had a 'fishy' taste.
- The clatter of men's clogs as they went to work on the morning shift along the Oxford St slate pavements

In the late 1940's and 50's Millom was a great place to grow up in. It had very active sports and arts groups with an emphasis on Rugby League and Cricket, but also Rugby Union and football, and on excellent light opera productions and choirs. The Royal Holborn Hill Brass Band and the Salvation Army Band were also notable, and you could go to one of two cinemas for tuppence! In many ways the Millom of my youth was not that different from the picture of 'Odborough'

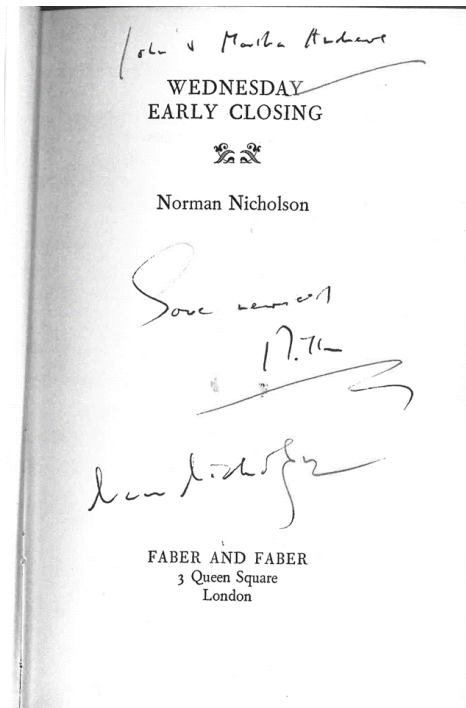
by John T. Andrews

portrayed in Nicholson's 1959 prose-work *Provincial Pleasures* (sent by Mother to Canada in 1959 for Christmas) or that laid out in his memoir, *Wednesday Early Closing*. A personal difference was that I was a student-athlete, representing the school in rugby, cricket, track and field, and badminton. Indeed I had played for both the U-15 and U-19 Cumberland and Westmorland teams and played for the England U-19 (blind-side wing forward) in 1955 and 1956. I knew 'Mr Nicholson' to speak to, and he had given 1 or 2 invited lectures to our English literature classes—indeed somewhere I recently came across a copy of poems that he shared with the class and discussed with us.

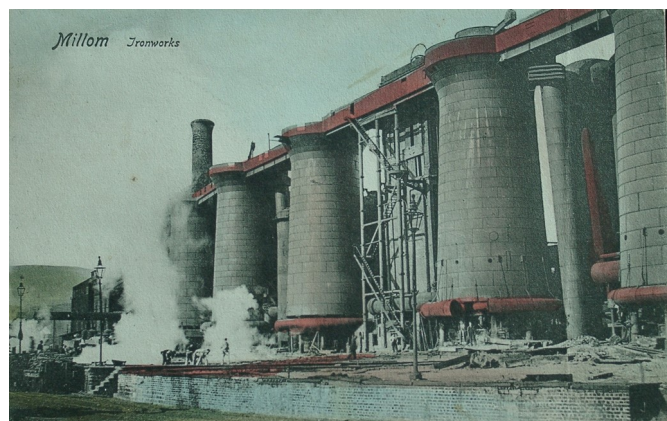
I took the A-levels in July 1956 and my Dad died shortly thereafter (my Mother and Aunt Elsie continued to run the shop until 1968). I passed and accepted a position at the University of Nottingham, where I played rugby and studied. In the summer of 1957 I was part of an undergraduate glaciological expedition to the Austerdalsbreen Ice Cap in Norway. Locked in our tents during a blizzard, I had time to reflect back on where I came from and composed the following:

Poem written on the Austerdalsbreen Ice Cap (8-24-57)
Millom (in Cumberland)

Millom, the place of my birth
Nestling below the smooth hulk of Black Combe
Which towers above us to the North
And spreads its tentacles of fells toward the town
Further away across the gap of the Duddon Estuary
Old Man Coniston reaches to the sky.
The sea is part of Millom
which sprawls facing the Irish Sea
Fixed on a green grassed plain
The tall black chimneys of the Iron Works
Pour out their load to the sky
While inside—steaming swearing men
Tend the furnaces
And all is hustle and bustle, noise and clatter
The hooter blows
And the men pour out like ants
Each to his slate grey home
Nestling under Black Combe
Millom is a grey town,
Grey slate, grey slag banks, and grey bricks
But it has a beauty of its own
And it is home



The flyleaf of Nicholson's memoir *Wednesday Early Closing*, dedicated to John and Martha Andrews with the words:
'Some memories of Millom'



An old postcard image of Millom Ironworks

Memories of Millom by John T. Andrews

In the years since I left England for Canada and then the USA my wife, children and I have visited Millom on average about every 2-3 yrs. Often these have also involved a 1956 Class Grammar School reunion. My last visit was in 2018 but we are hoping that 2022 will see us back to visit cousins and other relatives.

John T. Andrews January 2022

1. With regard to war service in WW2, my Uncle Jack (Andrews) served in the RAF and was stationed in the Orkney Islands.

Biographical Notes

John Thomas Andrews was named after his grandfather, who died in 1937.

He is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Geological Sciences, University of Colorado and Senior Emeritus Fellow, Institute Arctic and Alpine Research, University of Colorado. He is also an Elected Fellow of the American Geophysical Union, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Geological Society of America, the Geological Association of Canada, and the Arctic Institute of North America. He is a Foreign Member of the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters.

In 2016 he was awarded the Penrose Medal, established in 1927 by R.A.F. Penrose, Jr., to be awarded in recognition of eminent research in pure geology, for outstanding original contributions or achievements that mark a major advance in the science of geology.

Most of Professor Andrews' research relates to the Arctic and Antarctic but the following papers relate to Cumbria and may be of particular interest to readers of *Comet*.

Andrews, J.T., 1961, 'The development of scree slopes in the English Lake District and central Quebec, Labrador', *Cahiers de Géographie de Quebec*, v. 5, p. 219-230.

Andrews, J.T., King, C.A.M., and Stuiver, M., 1973, 'Holocene Sea Level Changes, Cumberland Coast, Northwest England: Eustatic and Glacio-isostatic Movements', *Geologie en Mijnbouw*, v. 52, p. 1-12.

*Andrews, J.T., Beaumont, H., Cove, S., Heinz, I., and Schroeder, H., 2021, 'A rapid rise in relative sea level similar to 9-7 cal ka bp along the SW Cumbria coast, NW England', *Journal of Quaternary Science*, v. 36, p. 497-507.

* Note that Helen Beaumont and Stephe Cove live in Millom and belong to the Duddon Local History Group.



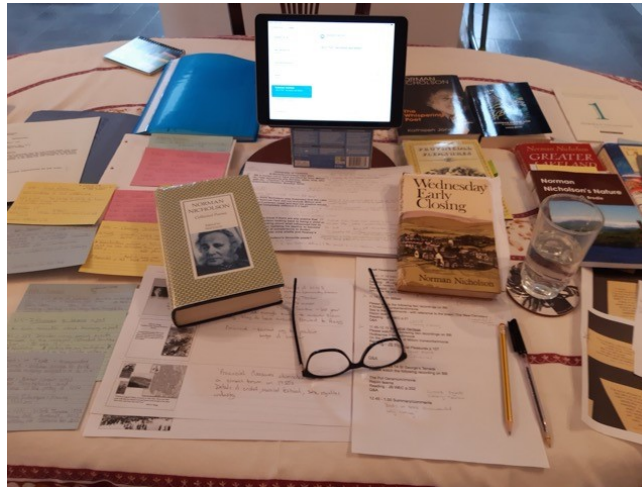
Albert Street, Millom, as it was in John T. Andrews' childhood and up to the dismantling of the Millom Ironworks. The photo appeared in the article by John Ardill, 'Let Millom Die' (The Guardian, Oct 12 1968, p. 9).

Notice the immense slagheap at the bottom of the street.

Image supplied by J.T. Andrews

University of Cumbria Virtual Visit – March 2021

by Sue Dawson



Sue's table, ready for her Virtual Tour of Norman's Millom.

In 2020 a group of students from the University of Cumbria, studying for the MA in Literature, Romanticism and the English Lake District, made a study visit to Millom, Norman Nicholson's home town, and visited some of the locations which had provided him with the inspiration for his writing. This proved to be a real success and, in spite of the cold and rainy weather, won more converts to Nicholson's writings.

Fast-track now to 2021, when Dr Penny Bradshaw, Senior Lecturer in English Literature and Programme Lead for the MA course, was keen for the Norman Nicholson Society to provide this year's MA students once again with something about the 'importance of location/lived-in experience in the shaping of Norman Nicholson's poems'. Owing to the Covid restrictions, however, it was not possible for the students to make a visit in person. The challenge was how to create something of the experiences of the different locations around Millom that the previous year's students had been able to experience. After realizing that a live link to 14, St George's Terrace would not work, because of the lack of a Wi-fi link from the house, I decided to create a series of iMovies combining images, video clips and readings of specific poems to create a 'Virtual Visit'.

The Virtual Visit to Millom featured three different areas relating to the poems the students were studying. These were:

Millom and District—which included iMovies illustrating 'A Street in Cumberland' and 'Sea to the West', where I took photographs and videos at Silecroft. I also included a video clip of the waves rolling on to the beach at Silecroft, followed by a photograph of the memorial window and a quotation from 'Nicholson's Sea to the West' which is placed in the stained glass. This shows Christine Boyce's interpretation of this poem with the white tops of the waves and the deep blue of the sea.

Industrial Heritage—in this section I created iMovies for 'Hodbarrow Flooded' and 'On the Dismantling of Millom Ironworks'. I combined old photographs of the two different industrial sites and then contrasted them with what is actually on that site now, so that the students could see the changes in the locations since Nicholson's time.

University of Cumbria Virtual Visit—March 2021

14 St George's Terrace—during the students' visit to Nicholson's former home in 2020 they listened to a recording of him reading 'The Pot Geranium' in his attic room where he did most of his writing. Penny had commented that this had '... a very powerful response hearing that poem in the little room with its tiny window.' This was probably the most difficult experience to replicate for the Virtual Visit. However, I made a number of video recordings from the attic room window and along the street below. I also took photographs from all around the room and particularly from the corner where Nicholson's bed was situated, looking out to Black Combe in the distance. All of these images and video clips were combined with Nicholson reading 'The Pot Geranium' to try and provide the students with the most effective experience of this unique and important location.

On the day of the Virtual Visit, I was assisted by Janice Brockbank who read extracts from various Nicholson texts which were chosen to add more insight and information about each poem that was featured. For example, after listening to the reading of 'The Pot Geranium' she read an extract from Nicholson's autobiography *Wednesday Early Closing* (p.202), a passage which emphasized the importance of Millom to him and how glad he was that he had lived there for over forty years.

As well as watching and listening to a range of poems, I provided the students with a list of additional poems for further reading, based around the different sections we were focusing on



An original Cumberland County Council drain cover still in place in a Millom street. Photo by Sue Dawson.

during the Virtual Visit. For example, in the industrial section I included 'Glen Orchy' and 'On Duddon Marsh' as poems to develop their understanding of the impact of the decline of the industry and also the geographical location of the industrial site next to the Duddon Estuary.

Another feature we included during the visit was a range of questions submitted by all of the students prior to the event. During a personal visit it is much easier to answer questions, provide additional information on site or add other biographical details about

Nicholson when moving around the various locations. This aspect was not possible for the group this time, so by submitting questions prior to the event we were able to cover a range of subjects connected to Nicholson and provide the students with further insights. The questions covered many topics including one about his sense of humour, how he acquired his knowledge of local flora, and if he ever walked across the Duddon sands! Friends of Nicholson were contacted to help with answering some of the questions.

This was a first-time experience for me providing online learning resources for the MA students, but it was really enjoyable interpreting Nicholson's poems in such a way that would provide them with an insight into some of the places around Millom which had inspired his

by Sue Dawson

writing. Nothing quite replaces visiting the actual locations, following Nicholson's footsteps and standing in the places where he would have stood. Also having time for reflection and to look around and see what he would have seen—but it was the best alternative available owing to the restrictions placed on us during the pandemic.

The Nicholson House Group have recently developed a walking trail App for exploring the local area and visiting places important to Nicholson during his lifetime. It includes many Nicholson quotations linked to the different locations covered by the walk. As part of the introduction to the App the Society's President, Melvyn Bragg says:

Nicholson mapped Millom as keenly as John Clare, Burns and other poets with deep provincial roots and found world enough in the place where they were born, bred, and lived.

Hopefully the 2021 batch of MA students from the University of Cumbria will have been able to glean the essence of what Millom, his home in St George's Terrace and local places meant to Nicholson after their Virtual Visit and be better able to understand why there was 'world enough' for him here to inspire him in the 'shaping' of his poetry.

Sue Dawson December 2020



Above—'A Street in Cumberland'
Below—'Hodbarrow Flooded'
Photos by Sue Dawson



Above—'Sea to the West'
Below—'On the Closing of Millom Ironworks'
Photos by Sue Dawson



Rocks to the West Part 8: Iron in the Soul of Millom

In this edition of 'Rocks' I shall look, not so much at the poems associated with *A Local Habitation*, but rather at links between geology, iron and its ore, hematite, in and around Millom. If it wasn't for the iron ore mined at Hodbarrow and the ironworks being centred on Millom, then Holborn Hill might still be the main settlement and the Cornthwaite, Nicholson and Sobey families would not have settled in the area. As the epigraph (from the 'Investors Chronicle') to Chapter 3 of Alan Atkinson's *Millom: A Cumberland Town and its Railways*¹ (2012) has it:

Millom is a town that but for an accident of nature would never have become involved in any other industry than tourism.

While the epigraph for Chapter 4 of the same book, from W.G. Collingwood's *The Lake Counties* (1932, p 68), emphasizes the same point in rather more poetic terms:

the tall chimneys of Millom, wealthy through the riches of its ore beneath the sands.

These quotations epitomise Norman Nicholson's Millom through his personal involvement on a day-to-day basis in the town and through the 'accident of nature' which is the basis for this piece. Collingwood's note, however, belies the fact that Millom was actually in a slump when his book was published, and had been so, on and off, for many years, although the opening of the Moorbank Pit in 1928 (Harris and Davis 1968, p. 168) prolonged the iron mining industry up to 1968. This, of course, is noted by Nicholson, and in *Wednesday Early Closing* he describes Millom (as Atkinson notes) as 'a town abandoned by the industry which had yanked it into being, [where] huge heaps of unsold ore lay beside the shafts at Hodbarrow and, at the iron works, the unsold pig-iron was stacked like enormous, dirty grey bamboo huts' (Atkinson 2012, p. 67).

Local explorations and landscapes

'The Bloody Cranesbill' (*Collected Poems* p. 361), which is set on the site of the iron ore mines and the surrounding countryside, encapsulates Nicholson's memories of his childhood Sunday walks with his father and uncle, contrasting his recall of the past with observations about the present. Nicholson remembers the little family group making 'the weekly fraternal walk'

To the links and warrens and foreshore of the already dying mine
That yet had thirty more years of dying to live through.

The memories of the mined landscape are carefully placed in a particular time-period. Nicholson is 'ten or twelve' years old, and it must, therefore, be the mid-1920s, when the town is full of men queuing to sign on for their unemployment benefits at 'the Brew' (the 'labour bureau' or 'unemployment bureau'). So, what Nicholson remembers are the signs of that slump in the sight of 'one single locomotive, straining at the week-by-week / Ever-steepening gradient of a hill of unsaleable ore', and:

.... screes of ore
Dustbinned on to rusty willows; the romanesque brick pit-head
Towers of Number Ten now and then twirled their wheels...

But the same limestone which contained 'one of the largest bodies of hematite ever discovered' (Cumbria GeoConservation leaflet: Hodbarrow Point LGS 4/042) also nourishes the wild flowers which interested Nicholson so much, both as a teenager and an adult. The family group of father, son and uncle would walk to 'Cumberland's southernmost point, a headland, half-blasted-away, / Where the limestone met the tide', to find 'Sunday's flower, the Bloody

by Brian Whalley

Cranesbill, red as the ore / It grew from, fragile as Venetian glass, pencilled with metal-thread / Haematite-purple veins’.

Geology, human industry, botany, history and aesthetics combine in one beautiful image that captures the contradictions inherent in Nicholson’s home-town landscape. It is difficult, in fact, to think, even in Nicholson’s output, of any depiction of a closer relationship between the rocks and the commercial exploitation of their natural resources, along with the ensuing natural and human consequences in a post-industrial edgeland. The following quotation from the American poet Rebecca Solnit is what Daniel Weston (2016, p. 47) used in his narrative mapping of the poetry of Ciaran Carson and applies to Nicholson too:

Walking the streets is what links up reading the map with living one’s life, the personal microcosm with the public macrocosm; it makes sense of the maze all around.

With a little geological knowledge, we can also start to explore the maze belowground as well as the despoiled landscape. What follows is geological-industrial archaeology rather than the ‘non-representational theory’ followed by some authors viewing literary landscapes, but I hope that it will be useful to those who do not know Millom or are unaware of its industrial past.

Iron and limestone

Visiting Millom today you would be hard-pressed to find evidence that it was a flourishing town with the ironworks ever-present. For Nicholson that presence was evident both in its sounds and in the smells that blew across the town when the wind came from a particular quarter: ‘Waking at night in winter, with a south-east wind / Coddling the town in smoke and the marsh smell’ (‘The Buzzer’, CP p. 226). In this poem, named after the Ironworks Buzzer that marked the start and end of shifts, Nicholson characteristically melds homely, familial images with industrial and natural imagery.

John Ruskin (1819-1900), if he were still living, might be pleased that the pollution from the coast no longer penetrates to Coniston. In his lifetime, however, there would still have been smoke from charcoal burning and from the iron works at Duddon Bridge [54.2839,-3.2354]², not to mention the local house fires and the production of lime from the kilns along the edge of the Coniston limestone outcrop (‘Rocks’ 1). From 1866 onwards, the new blast furnaces at the Millom Ironworks may quite well have contributed to the ‘dense manufacturing mist’ and ‘plague-wind’ that Ruskin so passionately hated (Ruskin 1884).

There had been iron smelting in Cumbria in the Middle Ages, in ‘bloomeries’ scattered in the woods and coppices that were used to produce charcoal. The iron ore was brought to the woods and ‘by 1565 the woodlands of the Furnace fells was being consumed at such a rapid rate that these bloom-smithies were suppressed by the Crown’ (Rollinson 1967, p. 110). Marshall and Davies-Shiel (1977) have a chapter on the early iron industry with a plan of the Duddon Furnace where the size of the charcoal store can be seen, together with the expanses of slag



Bloody Cranesbill by Phil Gates

© <https://cabinetofcuriosities-greenfingers.blogspot.com/>

Iron in the Soul of Millom (continued)

banks.

Later, of course, slag banks were a large feature at Millom and were frequently described in Nicholson's poems and prose. Although not immediately obvious today, 'the creeping screes of slag' ('Boo to a Goose', CP p. 273) are clear in the photograph shown in Alan Atkinson's book (2012 p. 61), 'the slag bank almost reaching the oldest terraces', and also on the map on p. 60, which shows the proposed model town with slag bank encroachment at Furness St (see also p. 10 of this issue of *Comet*). There is also a 'slag bank' east of Mainsgate Rd next to the Red Hills quarry (now the recycling area). Rather than slag, in fact, this is probably mostly spoil from the limestone extraction of the Red Hill formation. Limestone is used as a flux in the iron-making process so having it on the 'doorstep' is useful as it does not have to be transported far. I mentioned something about limestone and its importance in 'Rocks 5'. Nicholson (1984 p. 7) writes, 'The rubble tips and spoil heaps – *never* call them slagbanks! – are like dark red tumuli ... At Hodbarrow, the rock – a beautiful white limestone, tinged with pink – could be seen breaking through the surface, quarried and blasted into cliffs and chasms and potholes'. However, it is not always clear from his poems that when he mentions 'slag' he makes the same distinction. The 'proper' slagbanks were near the blast furnaces where the molten residue from the blast furnaces was poured 'down the rocks and screes like molten slag' ('The Holy Mountain', CP p. 92). Atkinson (2012 p. 51) has a spectacular colour photograph of molten slag being tipped from a locomotive truck.

Iron ore in the limestone

Iron occurs commonly and naturally throughout the earth's surface but is very rare in its elemental, metallic state, although it does occur as iron meteorites. It is usually seen in the form of the ferric (**Fe^{III}**) red-coloured form, the equivalent of 'rust'. In this form it is chemically stable and occurs as the red coloration in, for example, St Bees sandstone, the quartz grains having a thin coating of iron oxide. Iron ores, that is mineral deposits of sufficient quantity or purity to enable mining economically, occur in many places in the British Isles. In the coal measures 'ironstones' of varying purity are found that have been mined and were the basis for local ironworks as at Consett, in County Durham, and in Jurassic rocks in Cleveland. As Mike Leeder (2020) points out in his survey of the importance of geology in the Industrial Revolution, the Consett Iron Company was the first to integrate iron production with local coking coals and Lower Coal Measure ironstones. However, the iron content of sedimentary ironstones is typically about 25%, perhaps up to 40% for some of the opencast mined deposits in Weardale and Consett. It is not surprising, therefore, that attention moved to the rich hematite deposits of west and south Cumberland with iron contents of 50-60% and with low phosphorus content (<0.02%) which made it suitable for making high grade iron and steel. West Cumberland coal was high in phosphorus and sulphur, however, and coke produced from it was not suitable for the blast furnaces, so eventually coke from Co Durham was used. Atkinson (2012 Chapter 3) provides interesting data on the costs of production and the railway routing of the coke from Durham to Millom.

We have touched on the emplacement of the hematite in the limestones of south Cumbria previously, in 'Rocks 4'. As a result of earth movements in Cenozoic times (about 60 Ma), slow-moving, heated waters dissolved the iron from the Triassic 'red beds' (sandstone) in the Irish Sea. These mineralising waters moved upwards and east along and into the joints and bedding planes of the limestones where Askam-Millom-Egremont are now and eventually hematite was

by Brian Whalley

precipitated. Mike Leeder (2020) has some fine illustrative diagrams (page 263) showing the ore bodies in the stratigraphic succession. These diagrams include the 'sops', flat ore bodies, that were mined at Askam by opencast methods, and also the representation of some ore bodies that were steeply inclined and relate to faulting. It will not be surprising to readers of Nicholson that there was iron ore mining further north than Millom, in Cleator Moor, for example, where famously from one single shaft they mined for both coal and iron ore (CP p. 16). Leeder (Figure 22.4, p. 264) has a reproduction of an engraving from 1856 which Warrington Smyth (1817-1890), a lecturer at the Royal School of Mines, used to illustrate his description of iron ore workings at Cleator Moor. This illustration, of the flat, at Todholes [56.047,-4.131], shows the 'thick' (5-10m) being worked by hand a few metres below the land surface. This easy access was also one of the reasons for the exploitation of the Haverigg deposits. Further below ground, ore extraction was generally by the 'pillar and stall' method (see also 'stope', [Word of the Month, March 2015](#)).

The ability to mechanically extract high grade ore and limestone at the same location, Hodbarrow, bringing in coking coal via the railways, already established by 1860, led to the establishment of The Cumberland Iron Mining and Smelting Company in 1865. The development of Holborn Hill and the establishment of Millom followed directly from these events with the need to provide housing for incoming workers.

Hematite mining at Hodbarrow

Unlike the Florence mine near Egremont there is no pithead winding gear preserved at Haverigg. The only trace is seen in the stylised outline on the plinth of 'The Scutcher' in Millom Market Square (Figure 1) and on the NN Society's 'emblem'. These are the usual notions associated with 'mining'. Atkinson's account (Atkinson, 2012 p.28) in his chapter 'Hodbarrow – A Great Mine (1855–1968)' has an illustration of the 'Engine Shaft', started in 1855, with the wheels at ground level and a map (p29) of the Hodbarrow mines in 1873. Such mine shafts were required to reach the hematite seams well below the surface, where Nicholson's Uncle Jack 'was killed / With half a ton of haematite spilled on his back' ('Hodbarrow Flooded', CP p. 279). The accident occurred in 1896 and [an online record](#) is kept by the Durham Mining Museum. Uncle Jack was only 29 and was killed 'on the spot'.

The railway lines, of mixed and narrow gauge to get the ore to the blast furnaces, are covered by Atkinson in maps, with the final one, from 1950, showing the maximum extent of operations (p. 38) and the progression of mining gradually moving to the northwest compared with the mining in 1873 (p. 29). This area, termed the 'New Mine', was brought into production in 1874, but there are further differences between the two maps. On the 1950 map the Inner Barrier and Outer Barrier are now shown, but there is no lagoon behind the Outer Barrier, as there is nowadays. The modern visitor may not even ask the question: 'Why is the lagoon there?'. The answer is not immediately obvious but lies with the 'flats', the extraction of ore that had been in the near surface limestones. This area had been extracted first: 'In 1856 the prospectors reached "about 80ft of solid haematite" and eventually revealed a body of ore that was the largest in England and the biggest in the world until the opening of the Lake Superior deposits in Canada' (Atkinson, 2012 p.28). This extraction, 'top slicing', lowered the extraction level gradually below sea level until in 1880 a clay embankment was built seaward, then a timber revetment. The extent of these workings are shown in a photograph (p 33) in Atkinson's book. In 1888 a masonry wall was built to keep the sea from encroaching but 'the disastrous

Iron in the Soul of Millom

consequences of top-slicing are demonstrated by the remains of the ruined Inner Barrier' (Atkinson 2012, p 34).

Iron Furnaces at Millom

Although 'The Scutcher' (Figure 1) is now the dominant element in Millom's Market Square, the ironworks, long gone from the skyline that Collingwood (and Nicholson) saw, appear only on the sculpted plaque below it.

The purpose of the coke (or charcoal once upon a time) in furnaces is that it has few impurities and when ignited can reach the temperature of molten iron, but before this (at about 1250°C) the oxygen is chemically removed from the iron oxide (or carbonate or sulphide for other ore types), that is, the oxide is 'reduced'³. Carbon dioxide is emitted and impurities float on the surface and are removed as 'slag' when the liquid iron is tapped off into moulds to form 'pig iron'. Early small-scale furnaces (bloomeries) produced a mixture of slag and iron (the bloom) and did not reach very high temperatures but this was improved by blasting air in via bellows—as at Duddon Bridge. The furnaces at Millom were always blast furnaces. As well as the furnace towers, others on the skyline (and Collingwood's chimneys) were regenerative heat exchanges (Cowper stoves) for hot air blown into the furnace.

Nicholson mentions 'the Bessemer process' near the end of 'On the Dismantling of Millom Ironworks', and also says, in the poem 'Old Railway Sidings, Millom' (CP p. 427), that 'ten-ton conveyances of coke were shunted / Down to the Bessemer furnace'. In fact, there was no Bessemer furnace, a steel-producing process, at Millom, only iron blast furnaces, as already mentioned. (This 'Bessemer problem' will be discussed by David Boyd in a subsequent issue of *Comet*.) The only steel made in Millom was in the 1960s, via the experimental spray steel method, which produced 'steel direct from the iron already produced at the works – without the addition of a steelworks' ([The Mail, 19th October 2019](#)). This will also be discussed in David's article.

Conservation, Preservation and Anthropocene aftermath

To return now to the end of 'The Bloody Cranesbill': Nicholson notes that 'it's hard to tell there ever was a mine', yet the delicate flower continues to grow 'out on its stubborn skerry, / In a lagoon of despoliation'. In spite of all the devastation, this flower has become a symbol of hope and continuity, signalling the regenerative capacities of the natural environment.

In *Provincial Pleasures* (p. 107)) Nicholson expresses the opinion that

The National Trust ought to preserve some typical examples of the landscape created and shaped by industry and then deserted: abandoned ironworks and slag-banks, old clay pits, old quarries ... and worked out iron-ore mines. It's not just that all such places have an obvious romantic charm, with their reminder of mortality and of the vanity of human wishes. It is rather



Fig. 1—'The Scutcher' - a sculpture by Colin Telfer (1938-2017)

The plaque on the plinth shows the towers of the blast furnaces at Borwick Rails, winding gear for the mines, and the lighthouse on the Outer Barrier.

by Brian Whalley

that they give a glimpse beyond the scale of history...the greater perspective of biology and geology, of the pre-historic and post-historic processes of nature. Here, in the flashes among the slag-banks, or in the rubble heaps of collieries, we can see nature fighting back, re-colonising the former enemy-occupied territory. It is not a ruin but a renaissance.

Nicholson was there, before the Anthropocene was named and before edgelands were yet to be described (Farley and Roberts, 2012). As well as mentioning Nicholson on Millom (p. 178) and Jack Clemo on the China clay country of Cornwall (p 179), Farley and Roberts remind us that Auden, as well as being interested in geology (Rocks 5), was perfectly at home in edgelands such as these: 'Tramlines and slagheaps, pieces of machinery, / That was, and still is, my ideal scenery' ('Letter to Lord Byron', first published in 1937). You always know that Nicholson was perfectly placed, and was far more rooted in such scenery.

Brian Whalley February 2022

NOTES

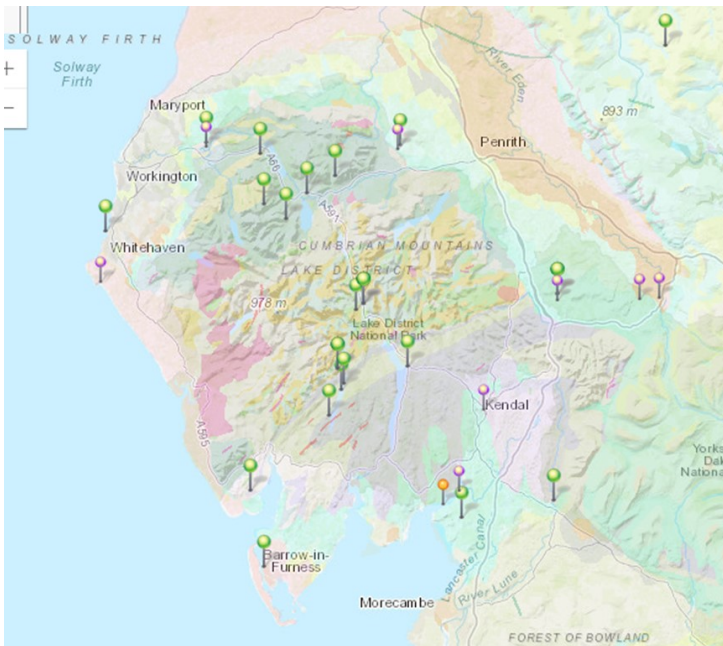
1. I have made extensive references to Alan Atkinson's excellent book, *Millom, A Cumberland Iron Town and its Railways*. This contains some interesting photographs from various collections as well as well-drawn and researched maps by Alan Johnstone. The earlier book on Hodbarrow mine by Harris (1970) has different images but is equally fascinating for the industrial archaeologist. My copy cost me £4.50 several years ago, the current cost on Amazon is £100. I bought my copy of Atkinson from the Discovery Centre but it is available on Amazon for about £12. If you are interested in Millom, mining and iron extraction, even if not railways, then this is an excellent, well-researched and well-presented book at an affordable price.
2. This designation, [54.2840,-3.2354], specifies the Latitude and Longitude co-ordinates of the feature as decimal degrees rather than the 'traditional' degree, minutes seconds (°, ', "). It is more compact in this, decimal Lat-Long, dLL, form and can be pasted into the search bar of Google Earth (including the square brackets) to locate the feature. In some places, including the Furnace at Duddon Bridge, images have been posted to Google Earth to give the feeling of the place with a 'virtual tour'. The locations are here specified to 4 decimal places and are sufficient for most purposes. If the Latitude, first term, has a minus sign this shows a southern hemisphere location; if the Longitude is negative, as here, it shows a position west of the Prime (Greenwich) meridian.
3. The Wikipedia pages on 'Blast Furnace' provide a very good overview of the components of a typical blast furnace together with the chemical reactions necessary for the reduction of hematite to iron.

References

- Atkinson, A., 2012. *Millom, A Cumberland Iron Town and its Railways*. Cumbrian Communities and their Railways. Cumbrian Railways Association.
- Auden, W.H., 1937. 'Letter to Lord Byron'. https://arlando-correia.com/lord_byron.html
- Brodie, I.O., 2015. *Norman Nicholson's Nature*. Wildtrack, Sheffield.
- Collingwood, W.G., 1932. *The Lake Counties*. Frederick Warne, London.
- Cumbria GeoConservation, *Hodbarrow Point LGS 4/042*. https://www.cbdc.org.uk/CumbriaLGS/Leaflets/4_042.pdf
- Farley, P., Roberts, M.S., 2012. *Edgelands: Journeys into England's True Wilderness*. Cape, London.
- Harris, A., 1970. *Cumberland Iron. The Story of Hodbarrow Mine 1855-1968*. D. Bradford Barton, Truro.
- Leeder, M., 2020. *Measures for Measure: Geology and the Industrial Revolution*. Dunedin Academic Press Ltd.
- Marshall, J.D., Davies-Shiel, M., 1977. *The Industrial Archaeology of the Lake Counties*. Michael Moon, Beckermeth.
- Nicholson, N., 1984. 'Ten-yard Panorama'. In: R. Mabey, S. Clifford, A. King (Eds.), *Second Nature*. Cape, London, pp. 3-11.

(continues overleaf)

GeoWeek 2022 (7-15 May)—A Report by Antoinette Fawcett



The Norman Nicholson Society took part in this year's Cumbrian GeoWeek events, coordinated by the [Tullie House Museum](#), Carlisle. These formed part of a nationwide initiative 'that seeks to introduce geoscience to as many members of the public as possible' (earth-science.org.uk). Geology was hugely important to Norman Nicholson and his work, and his relationship to the rock was explored in various events throughout the week, including one organized by the NN Society in Millom on Saturday, 14th May. Prof. Brian Whalley gave two talks in the morning at the [Millom Heritage and Arts Centre](#) about the

local geology of Millom, with a particular focus on the hematite that led directly to the founding of the Hodbarrow Iron Ore mine and indirectly to the Millom Ironworks. Nicholson's poetry was explored in more detail in the afternoon, at St. George's Church, Millom in a session led by Prof. Whalley, Antoinette Fawcett and Glenn Lang. The focus was on Nicholson's poetry collection, *A Local Habitation* (1972), specifically on 'The Borehole', 'Hodbarrow Flooded', 'Bee Orchid at Hodbarrow' and 'The Closing of Millom Ironworks'. The event attracted about twenty-eight people in the morning, and around twenty-two people in the afternoon, many of whom were new faces and some of whom joined the Society. As you can see from the image above, the event was featured with a pin on the [GeoWeek map](#). Millom is an important Earth Sciences location, as is the whole of Cumbria.

Nicholson's work also featured in the University of Cumbria's **GeoWeek 2022 Symposium: Communication Measures to Bridge 4.543 Billion Years**, with a talk by Brian Whalley on *Norman Nicholson's Theological-Geology of Place: Millom and West Cumbria* (12th May) and by Laura Day on *Norman Nicholson: An Early Prophet of the Anthropocene* (13th May). Dr. Penny Bradshaw, of the University of Cumbria, also featured Nicholson [in a workshop at Brantwood](#) on May 9th, in an event that explored the ways in which Cumbrian writers have explored the idea that the identity of the Cumbrian people is fundamentally shaped by the geological underpinnings of the region they inhabit.

AF

References (continued from 'Iron in the Soul of Millom', previous page)

Rollinson, W., 1967. *A History of Man in the Lake District*. Dent, London.

Ruskin, J., 1884. *The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century. Two Lectures Delivered at the London Institution February 4th and 11th, 1884*. George Allen, Sunnyside, Orpington, Kent. <https://archive.org/details/stormcloudninet00ruskgoog/mode/2up>

'stope', Word of the Month, March 2015: <https://www.normannicholson.org/march-2015-stope.html>

The Mail, 19th October 2019. 'Millom's role as spray steel pioneer.' <https://www.nwemail.co.uk/features/nostalgia/16451250.milloms-role-as-spray-steel-pioneer/>

Weston, D., 2016. *Contemporary Literary Landscapes: The Poetics of Experience*. Routledge, Abingdon.

At the Musical Festival (Again) by Antoinette Fawcett

There is a map of Cumbria and the north of England in which the edges feature far more prominently than the centre, and that is the map of festivals organized by members of the British and International Federation of Festivals for Music, Dance and Speech (BIFF).

Festival Directory



The BIFF Cumbrian Festivals take place annually in Carlisle, Workington, Whitehaven, and Ulverston and biannually in Kendal. These festivals are competitive in nature and involve only amateur performances, often of school children, but also of adults, particularly in the music ‘classes’¹. Many performers are encouraged by such festivals to progress to a professional or near-professional career, as was the case for the famous contralto singer, Kathleen Ferrier (1912-1953), whose first major success was at the prestigious Carlisle Festival, in 1937.

The Cumbrian Festivals have a long history, going back to the beginnings of the amateur festival movement, with the first festival of this type taking place in Workington in 1872 and being modelled on the Welsh Eisteddfod. Further festivals soon followed, including the Mary Wakefield Festival (Kendal), the Millom Festival (also known as the Cumberland Musical Festival) and the Whitehaven Musical Festival.

The festival at Whitehaven features rather amusingly in Nicholson’s second novel, *The Green Shore* (1947), while the Millom Festival achieved fame as being another Cumbrian festival that recognized Kathleen Ferrier’s talent very early on in her career, in 1938, when she was still the wife of a Silloth bank manager! The adjudicator, Maurice D’Oisely said: *This is a beautiful voice, full of colour and lovely warm velvety quality... It makes me imagine I am being stroked*². Ferrier carried off the Gold Medal and perhaps created a lot of local jealousy as well as Cumbrian pride. The contraltos of the Millom Festival had received a round ‘telling off’ in 1924 by the adjudicator, Mr Harvey Grace of London: ‘I cannot say nice things about the contraltos...’ he remarked, asking anyone in the audience who could distinguish the words to hold up their hands. Only one person did³. But, of course, the local contraltos may have polished their technique in the intervening years!

The links between ‘our Norman’ and the Millom Festival were first explored in an article by Peggy Troll (now available on [the home page](#) of our website; scroll down to find it). Norman was a notable boy performer and reciter, and he recalls some of his own performances in the Festival in humorous terms in his memoir *Wednesday Early Closing*, memorably speaking of the

At the Musical Festival (Again)

competition as a 'favourite winter sport in our part of the world' (p. 107).

Nicholson also refers to the Millom Musical Festival in his poems. The well-known poem 'At the Musical Festival' (CP p. 367) is an obvious example, featuring the 'loved local baritone' giving it 'Wigan' as he 'Hurl'd his voice like an iron quoit / Clean into the Adjudicator's / Union-Jacked box at the back'. Readers may, however, miss the reference to the Musical Festival in the long poem 'The Seventeenth of the Name' (CP p. 311-13). Both poems were first collected

in *A Local Habitation* (1972), whose 50th anniversary we are celebrating this year.

'The Seventeenth of the Name' reviews the previous two generations of the Nicholson family, finishing with Norman's father, Joe, and then with Norman himself. By the time this poem was first published (in the *TLS* in 1965), Joe had been dead for eleven years and his name had been 'painted out on the sun-blind' of the shop window. But, as Nicholson reminds us, his name still 'yellows... / In files of *The Millom Gazette*, / And in minutes of the Musical Festival and the Chamber of Trade'. In other words, in addition to his



Joseph Nicholson's name on a rubber stamp used in the shop at No. 14, St George's Terrace—photo by Jonathan Powell of the original stamp.

commercial activities, Joe Nicholson was on the committee of the Musical Festival, an important role and one of great service to the community. It is very interesting in the context of this present article that Nicholson chose to remember his father in this role.

The term 'Musical Festival' was, of course, a shorthand that included the speech, drama and dance classes that also took place, and in which Norman performed (in speech, not in dance!). In 1926, when he was 12 years old, he won 1st Prize in Elocution in the Under-16-years Class. This was noted in the *Manchester Guardian* of Dec. 18th 1926, which reported that there were **800** competitors in the Cumberland Musical Festival, Millom, and large audiences. What a contrast to the South Cumbria Musical Festival (SCMF) in National Curriculum and Covid days! It was somewhat sad to see how few children were performing in the Speech Classes, and indeed how, with the exception of the Nicholson class (206) and choral speaking, a private school, Chetwynde, Barrow-in-Furness, provided the most entrants. In the Nicholson class, however, the Millom children were outstanding.

In 2019 the Norman Nicholson Society decided to sponsor the SCMF, in memory of Peggy Troll, our inaugural Chair, with the first sponsorship due to take place in March 2020. Peggy had been a great supporter of the original Millom Festival, and of its successor, the SCMF. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic meant that the festival was cancelled and the sponsorship was left in abeyance until this year. The two classes we sponsored were Class 206 (up to school year 6) and Class 212 (school years 7-9). Both categories featured poems by Norman Nicholson, the first 'Road Up' and the second 'Wall'. In addition to the sponsorship, the Society provided book tokens to the total value of £50 for the winners. The winner of Class 206

by Antoinette Fawcett

and the commended entrants were:

Ben Chen, with a mark of 87 (Distinction). He was awarded a South Cumbria Musical Festival Cup + a £20.00 book token from the NN Society.

Florence Tyson, with a mark of 86 (Commended).

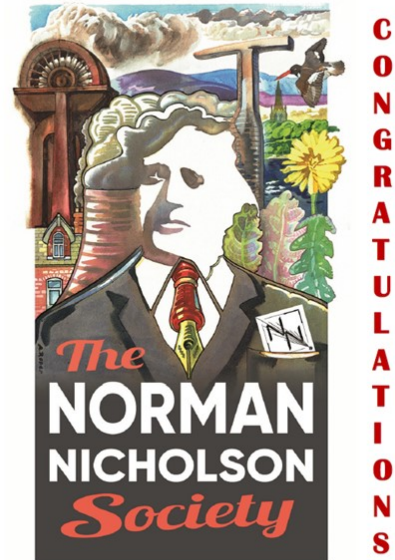
Max Milburn, with a mark of 85 (Commended).

Ben's performance was really excellent. He conveyed a very good sense of the poem's meaning, which he brought out very naturally, with brilliant vocal and facial expression. His communication with the audience was bright, cheerful and warm, and really suited the light-hearted nature of the poem. **Florence Tyson** did outstandingly well across a number of different speech classes. She performed in five classes in total, including in the 'Write and Recite' class, which she won! Florence is from Millom and may well be another poet in the making! **Max Milburn** was also a very good, clear performer who recited the poem with confidence and panache. Congratulations to all three children. We hope to see them performing at next year's festival too!

Class 212 was cancelled due to the children who had entered it being unable to perform. This was disappointing, but perhaps understandable in an ongoing pandemic. The prize book token will once again be held over until the next festival!

Participation in the performing arts is just as important now as in Nicholson's day, so it is strange to see that a prestigious community event like the South Cumbria Musical Festival does not attract the huge numbers of entries, or audience, that it once did (in its prior life, as the Millom Festival). Those who do take the opportunity to perform will acquire skills and knowledge that will serve them for the rest of their lives and some may achieve national fame, as Kathleen Ferrier once did, and as Norman Nicholson also did. Nicholson always acknowledged that his interest in poetry was kindled by his 'career' as a boy performer. Indeed, in the realm of music the Cumbrian festivals are still nurturing talents that reach a national audience; think of Jess Gillam of Ulverston, now performing and presenting regularly on the BBC; Jess Dandy of Barrow (also featured in this issue); and Anthony Hewitt (pianist).

If you can encourage any children of your acquaintance to enter the festival, and the Norman Nicholson classes, next year, they are sure to enjoy the experience and reap lifelong benefits, whether or not they win! And they will probably carry a Norman Nicholson poem in their heads for the rest of their lives!



Front cover of card presented to Ben Chen with his book token and SCMF Cup

NOTES

1. A 'class' in competitive Festival terms is a set, division, or category of performance, which groups entries by age, instrument, performance type, etc. The South Cumbria Musical Festival has 9 types of classes, from Brass through to Vocal, which are further sub-divided to ensure fairness in competition. There were 21 Speech Classes in the SCMF in 2022, all taking place on Monday 21st March.
2. See: https://h2g2.com/approved_entry/A25068918 [accessed 16.05.2022].
3. <http://www.acji.co.uk/furnesschoirs.htm> [accessed 16.05.2022].

'M' – A Double Mystery



Marjorie Secher (née Metcalf) as a young woman—as Norman Nicholson may first have known her...

I was contacted last October by one of our members with what she described as 'a mystery'. She had recently come across the [online obituary](#) of Marjorie Secher (née Metcalf) (1919–2015) and was particularly intrigued by the statement that 'a poem by Lakes poet Norman Nicholson, who was a good friend of hers, was read at her funeral service'. She had then checked the two biographies of Norman Nicholson, by Kathleen Jones and David Boyd, but could find no reference to Marjorie. Of course, I couldn't resist the challenge and vowed that I would do my best to solve the mystery!

Marjorie's obituary in the Times and Star provided an excellent starting point, giving a portrait of a life lived to the full, with service to the local community through her work for Save the Children, the YHA, the Cockermouth Cricket Club, the Inner Wheel and much more beside.

Marjorie Victoria Metcalf was born in Whitehaven, Cumberland on 12th November, 1919 and attended the town's grammar school before training as a teacher in London. She returned to Whitehaven after her training and became a teacher at her old school, Whitehaven Grammar School, where she taught English, PE and Games. The obituary says that this was in the early to mid-1940s, during World War Two, when Marjorie also served in the Auxiliary Fire Service. At some time during this period she met Otto Secher (1905-1985), a Jewish refugee who had come to Whitehaven in 1940 to work with his brother-in-law Frank Schon, the founder of Marchon Products (with business partner Fred Marzillier). Otto Secher became the Sales Director of Marchon, and later its Chairman and Managing Director. The factory was to become a major producer of chemicals, particularly for detergents, and at its height employed as many as 2,500 staff (Kennedy & Atkinson 2014).

Marjorie and Otto married in 1946, and their sons David, Paul and Denis were born in 1948, 1951 and 1955 respectively. Marjorie and Otto moved to Cockermouth with their children in 1956, shortly after the birth of their third child. It is likely, therefore, that the roots of any friendship that Marjorie had with Norman date back to the period *before* her marriage to Otto, although given the distance between Millom and Whitehaven, and the age gap of almost six years, it seems unlikely that the friendship dated back to her childhood.

I was able to get in touch with David Secher, and through him with his brother Paul, via some clues in another Times and Star article, and received some very valuable and interesting information from both brothers. David replied to my enquiry as follows:

Marjorie had met Norman and treasured an autographed copy of his poetry. She was coy about the extent of any further relationship. Was it a teenage crush? A platonic friendship? An unrequited love? An extra-marital affair? Whatever it was, I know that she played on it, to the annoyance of my father.

In her last few years, when she was no longer very mobile, nor mentally sharp, I spent many days, and hundreds of miles, driving her round the Lake District, evoking memories of her childhood and pre-marital life. On one of those trips the destination was Millom and there she claimed to remember the very house that "Nick" had lived in. It certainly produced one of the strongest reactions in her, by then, foggy memory.

by Antoinette Fawcett

I am sorry that I cannot give you anything substantial – and I don't suppose we shall ever know more – but her “friendship” with Norman certainly represented an important part of her life.
(David Secher, email to AF, 25/10/21)

Paul Secher soon joined in the email discussion to confirm that their mother, Marjorie, always referred to Norman as ‘Nick’, and to say that he had recently bought a copy of Norman Nicholson’s *Collected Poems* (ed. Neil Curry), in the hope that he ‘might discover something in one of his poems that might connect’ Nicholson to his mother.

In a later email Paul was able to send me the Order of Service for the celebration of the life of Marjorie Victoria Secher, from which the two lovely photos of Marjorie in her youth and older age are taken. The service included Bach’s Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major, a song from a musical (‘Some Enchanted Evening’, from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific*) and Norman Nicholson’s poem ‘Scafell Pike’, read by Paul. We can see from this Order of Service how important the family felt that Nicholson’s poetry was to her, and can sense her love of the Cumbrian landscape in the specific choice of poem. We can also see that Marjorie shared Norman’s love of Bach’s music and his interest in musical theatre. The choice of the song may even suggest that Marjorie was blessed with a rather romantic nature.

But many of the questions that David voiced in his email remain unanswered. We probably won’t ever know the extent and nature of the friendship that Marjorie had with ‘Nic’ (as his literary friends of the 1940s and 50s called him), particularly as many of Marjorie’s papers remain unsorted and most of the house contents were cleared by local auctioneers (personal information from Paul Secher). Similarly, we know that many of Nicholson’s own papers were destroyed by Nicholson himself, perhaps because he felt that his personal life was not all that relevant to his literary reputation (see Boyd 2015, pp. 45-6).

Nevertheless, some of the questions about the nature of the relationship can in all likelihood be set to rest, while the evidence that David and Paul gave me can lead to an educated guess about the friendship.

I think it is highly unlikely that Marjorie had a teenage crush on Norman, who was nearly six years older than her, as this would mean that she first made friends with him between (say) the ages of 12 and 18 (i.e. from 1931 to 1937). As we know, Norman was seriously ill with TB from 1930 to 1932, and was, moreover, based in the Linford Sanatorium, Hampshire during that time. When he returned to Millom, in late 1932, his life was so restricted by the illness for a number of years afterwards, that it seems highly unlikely that he could have met Marjorie then. But we do know that Norman began teaching for the WEA in Millom in 1938, and then extended his teaching activities up the Cumberland coast, to St. Bees and Whitehaven, in 1939. He continued his WEA lectures until 1943, when his book *Man and Literature*, based on the lectures, was published. Nicholson’s first solo collection of poetry, *Five Rivers*, was published in 1944 and won the prestigious Heinemann Award in 1945. My guess, therefore, is that Marjorie’s



Marjorie Secher in later life, in her beloved Cumbrian landscape.

'M' — A Double Mystery

friendship with Norman had its origins in the 1940-1943 period, when she would have been a young English teacher and may well have attended his WEA lectures, in Whitehaven or St Bees, or both. I can imagine that the 'autographed copy' of the poetry she cherished was *Five Rivers*, which is so redolent of the 2nd World War and its effect on the people and landscape of the Cumberland coast and, moreover, is firmly rooted in locations she would have known and loved.

Both Paul and David Secher mentioned in their emails to me that their mother always referred to Norman as 'Nick' (i.e. 'Nic'). I think this is very strong evidence that Marjorie's friendship dates back to the (early) 1940s, as from the correspondence I have seen with Norman, the friends he made *before* his marriage to Yvonne Gardner in 1956 were the ones who addressed him as 'Nic'. The fact that Marjorie recognized his house on her trip to Millom with David Secher in her later years also makes me feel that she had visited him there, quite possibly in that 1940–1943 period. As David Secher said in his email to me, the car trips he made with his mother in her later years were intended to awaken memories of her childhood and 'pre-marital life', and it seems the trip to Millom did exactly that.

The other period in which Norman could have become acquainted with Marjorie Secher is after the war, and after Marjorie's 1946 marriage, when he used to travel up to Whitehaven for cultural and social events. As we know, he had a very good relationship with Daniel Hay, the librarian and museum curator at Whitehaven, and Hay organized a number of exhibitions of his books there (see *Comet*, Winter / Spring 2019, Vol. 13: 2, p. 26). In later years Nicholson gave at least one reading at the Rosehill Theatre¹, the small Whitehaven cultural centre primarily initiated by the silk merchant Sir Nicholas Sekers (another Jewish refugee), and, moreover, he is likely to have moved in the same social circles as Marjorie, who was clearly a cultured woman.

I think we can firmly discount the suggestion that Norman and Marjorie had an affair of any kind. Norman's relationship with Enrica Garnier lasted from around 1937 to 1946 (see Boyd 2015, pp. 55-66) and although there may have been other (chaste) romantic attachments in that period and after, there seem not to have been any serious relationships until he met, and eventually married, Yvonne Gardner. It also seems likely that both his devout Christianity and a fear of strong sexual feelings (perhaps prompted by the apprehension that too much excitement would cause a recurrence of his TB—see WEC, pp. 196-99 and Jones 2013, pp. 153-4) would have restrained him from any kind of physical affair, let alone an extra-marital relationship. Nevertheless, we also know that Nicholson liked women and was comfortable in their company, perhaps more comfortable than with men (see Jones 2015, p. 205) and that he could be really quite flirtatious (Jones 2015, p. 214), or gallant, as he may have perceived it!

From Marjorie's side, especially in her years as a teacher in the early to mid-1940s, Nicholson could have struck her as being a romantic figure, a worthy object of a platonic friendship. After all, he was a handsome published poet, as well as a literary critic and dramatist, who was making quite an impact with his work at a national level and internationally (hence the award of W.H. Heinemann Prize, in 1945, and his election to the Royal Society of Literature). If this was when she first made friends with Norman, she may have retained an element of being star-struck by his work and persona throughout her life, as the evidence shared with me by her sons suggests. As an English teacher, rooted in almost the same landscape as Nicholson, she would also have been drawn to his work.

But could something more than these suppositions lie behind Marjorie's love of Nicholson's poetry? I felt that I should look carefully at the poems again, in response to Paul Secher's

by Antoinette Fawcett

wistful desire to 'discover something in one of his poems that might connect him [i.e. Nicholson] to my Mother'. In *Five Rivers* I found one poem dedicated to 'M.'. It is entitled 'Song' and is clearly a love poem, if also very wistful in tone. This poem has already been briefly mentioned by Ann Thomson in the first article in this issue as 'a rueful elegy for lost young love' which 'stands apart from the others in structure and theme' (see p. 3 of this issue). Could 'M.' be Marjorie?

'*Song For M.*' was first published in *The Spectator* on September 15, 1944 (Vol. 173, 6064, p. 242), so the date of publication fits remarkably well with my guess that Marjorie's friendship with Norman was in the 1940-43 period. The imagery of love lost would then be explained by Marjorie's meeting Otto Secher and her subsequent engagement and marriage.

'*Song For M.*' was republished in *Five Rivers* (1944, p. 23) and then in the *Collected Poems* (1994, p. 32) but, as far as I know, was never reprinted in any other book, perhaps because it was not perceived as being typical of Nicholson's work. Yet, as well as being an elegiac love poem, it is set in the familiar coastal landscape of many of Nicholson's poems, both early and late, and includes three botanical references ('burnet rose', 'harebell' and 'cranesbill'). It is true that these flowers are used somewhat symbolically and analogically, rather than for their own sake as, for example, in 'The Bee Orchid at Hodbarrow' (CP p. 276), but it is interesting to note the presence of these coastal flowers, which add precision and atmosphere to the setting.



A Burnet Rose in full bloom.

By kind permission of First Nature:
<https://www.first-nature.com/flowers/rosa-pimpinellifolia.php>

© First Nature

There are 16 poems with the word 'Song' in their titles in the 1994 *Collected*, and possibly four more songs, as yet uncollected (as suggested by Andrew F. Wilson's 1992 bibliography). It is clear, therefore, that the song, as a poetic form, had a special place in Nicholson's oeuvre, certainly in the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s. These songs, although sometimes in the voice of a persona (e.g. 'Maiden's Song', CP p. 35), can be taken as concise expressions of mood, feeling and emotion, and are often personal in nature. They are lyric poems in the old sense of the word 'lyric'—words written to be sung, perhaps to the accompaniment of strumming or plucking (a lyre, a lute, a harp, a guitar). That doesn't necessarily mean that Nicholson sung them (or imagined someone else singing them), but that he wrote them in a mode which he perceived as being song-like. Nicholson must have at least toyed with the idea of being a composer himself in the years immediately after 1932, as musical scores in manuscript exist in his papers in the John Rylands Library archive (GB 133 NCN3/2).

Ann Thomson's article on pages 2 and 3 of this issue comments on the formal aspects of 'Songs of the Island: I and II', noting the use of internal rhyme, full and half-rhyme, the rhythms created by the punctuation (adding to a sense of breathless yearning), and the structural importance of the tercet form. At first sight '*Song For M.*' seems freer: the lines are unequal in length and the underlying beat is harder to find. But that free-flowing turn and return of the lines is also structurally important in reflecting 'the flush of the tide', and the flood and ebb of

‘M’ — A Double Mystery by Antoinette Fawcett

feeling. Careful listening to the poem, with the inward or actual ear, reveals how precisely Nicholson has constructed the sounds of the poem, drawing on every kind of sound-play available in English (assonance, alliteration, consonance, half-rhyme, near-rhyme, full rhyme—and more).

As in the lyrics of a medieval *Minnesinger* or troubadour, the sounds of the words carry both the feeling and the message. Follow the long ‘oh’ sound through this song, for example, from ‘rose’/‘Grows’/‘Flows’ in the first stanza, via ‘hopes’/‘ropes’ in the second, through to ‘closes’/‘blown’/‘foam’ in the third stanza, culminating in ‘roses’—the last word of the poem. Note, too, that although the delicate, dare I say virginal love, remembered in this song did not come to fruition (just ‘one kiss found / Whorled like a shell...’), the dream of that love remains, as firmly and deeply rooted on the ‘wide/ Turn of the dune’ as the burnet roses themselves. This deep rootedness of affection makes me feel ultimately that the dedicatee was *not* Marjorie, but perhaps a childhood love, closer to home than Marjorie could have been, and closer therefore to the psychic origins of Nicholson’s attachment to his landscape and its native wildflowers. This childhood love was quite possibly another ‘M.’ entirely: the ‘Maureen’ whom Norman describes in *Wednesday Early Closing*, and with whom he fell in love when he was about fourteen (WEC pp. 169-71). Significantly, he does say that his drawing of a rose at school ‘was really a picture of Maureen’ (WEC p. 170).

As David Boyd said in a personal email to me, when I asked him if he had any knowledge of a possible love relationship between Marjorie Metcalf and Norman in the early 1940s: ‘as “Five Rivers” was apparently most affectionately dedicated to Enrica [Garnier], I’d think this makes it unlikely that he’d have included a dedication to a rival for his affections.’ David mentioned, in a later email, that the atmosphere and imagery of ‘Song For M.’ are redolent of Nicholson’s 1947 novel *The Green Shore*, in which adolescent passions play a central part. David also pointed out that Marjorie’s husband, Otto Secher, is thanked for help and information in the Acknowledgements in Nicholson’s *Portrait of the Lakes* (1963).

So, did Nicholson have a special relationship with Marjorie Secher (née Metcalf)? And who was the dedicatee of ‘Song For M.’? I have supposed in this article that there was a friendship of some kind between Nicholson and Marjorie, most likely with its origins in the period between 1940 and 1943, when they were both young adults, but I have discounted a relationship of a deeply intimate nature between them, whilst allowing for possible romantic-platonic emotions on one or both sides.

I have also come to the conclusion that ‘Song for M.’ was probably not written for her. Whatever the truth behind these two mysteries, however, we can certainly agree with Marjorie’s son Paul Secher that ‘in the absence of further information’ which would throw ‘further light on the identity of ‘M.’, it is moving both to read the poem and to learn of Marjorie’s lifelong admiration for Nicholson’s work and of the friendship with him, however fleeting, that she cherished.

Antoinette Fawcett May 2022

Notes

1. Papers of Norman Nicholson (John Rylands Library) GB 133 NCN10/36: Rosehill, Whitehaven [Cumbria] (3 Mar 1981). It is quite possible that Nicholson gave other readings at Rosehill too, especially in an earlier period (Rosehill was founded in 1959, on the initiative of Sir Nicholas Sekers). Nicholson’s papers at the John Rylands Library do not, by any means, chart the whole of his life.

For the bibliography for this article, please see p. 27 (facing).

List of Recent Works Published on Nicholson or With a Mention of Nicholson supplied by Dr. Chris Donaldson, University of Lancaster

- Brannigan, John, Ryfield, Frances, Crow, Tasman and Cabana, David, “‘The Languo of Flows’”: Ecosystem Services, Cultural Value, and the Nuclear Legacy in the Irish Sea’, *Environmental Humanities*, 11.2 (2019), 280–301.
- Gibson, Andrew, “‘At the Dying Atlantic’s Edge’”: Norman Nicholson and the Cumbrian Coast’, in *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge*, ed. by Nicholas Allen, Nick Groom and Jos Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 77–90.
- Hannigan, Tim, ‘A Voice in the Wilderness: James Rebanks’ *The Shepherd’s Life* as a “travellee Polemic”’, *Studies in Travel Writing*, 23.4 (2019), 378–90.
- Long, Max, ‘Light, Vision and Observation in Norman Nicholson’s *Topographical Notes*’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 96.2 (2020): <https://doi.org/10.7227/BJRL.96.2.7>.
- McDowell, Stacey, ‘Rhyming and Undeciding in Wordsworth and Norman Nicholson’, *Romanticism*, 23.2 (2017), 179–90.
- Morra, Irene, *Verse Drama in England, 1900–2015: Art, Modernity and the National Stage* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).
- Pitches, Jonathan, *Performing Mountains* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).
- Whalley, Brian, ‘An Exploration of Elliptic and Hybrid Poetry from a Geomorphological Viewpoint’, in *Poetry in Pedagogy: Intersections Across and Between the Disciplines*, ed. by Dean A. F. Gui and Jason S. Polley (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 24pp.
- Widmer, Matthias, ‘The Second Edition of Cowper’s Homer’, *Translation and Literature*, 28.2–3 (2019), 151–99.

A Birthday Candle for Norman—January 8th 2022 (Norman’s 108th Birthday Celebration) by Charlie Lambert

‘The flame is the poem’, wrote Norman in *The Candle* in his 1948 collection *Rock Face*. This wasn’t planned as the theme of our celebration of his 108th birthday on January 8th, but it might as well have been. As a Society we always look for new ways to enjoy Nicholson’s work but when it comes down to it, we can’t beat simply reading and listening to his poems. So, led by Brian Whalley, we recruited twelve volunteers to choose and read a Nicholson poem, one for each month of the year—including *The Candle*. It was the perfect birthday treat.

Because of Covid restrictions this was the second year we’ve held the birthday celebration on the Zoom platform, and – as we’ve discovered in other events – the disappointment in being unable to meet in person was wonderfully balanced by the delight in welcoming Nicholson enthusiasts from across the UK and beyond.

Bibliography (‘M’—A Double Mystery; see pp. 22-26, this issue).

- Boyd, D. (2015) *Norman Nicholson: A Literary Life*, Seascale Press: Seascale.
- Jones, K. (2013) *Norman Nicholson: The Whispering Poet*, The Book Mill: Appleby.
- Kenney, J. and Atkinson, G. (2014) ‘A History of Marchon Works at Whitehaven’: <https://www.cumbria-industries.org.uk/a-z-of-industries/chemicals/a-history-of-marchon-works-at-whitehaven/> [last accessed: 15/05/2022].
- Nicholson, N. (1994) *Collected Poems* (ed. Neil Curry), Faber & Faber: London.
- Nicholson, N. (1975) *Wednesday Early Closing*, Faber & Faber: London.
- Times and Star* (2015) ‘Obituary—Marjorie Secher, of Cockermouth’: <https://www.timesandstar.co.uk/news/17029573.obituary-marjorie-secher-of-cockermouth/> [last accessed: 15/05/2022].
- Wilson, A. F. (1992) *Norman Nicholson: Bibliography* (unpublished).
-

‘What is Natural Beauty?’ A Symposium 1/12/2021 A Report by Laura Day



Harter Fell at Haweswater

When I first saw the symposium, ‘What is Natural Beauty’, advertised, it was immediately something I knew I wanted to attend, for both personal and academic reasons. My PhD on the poetry of Norman Nicholson examines issues of landscape and self-identification, as well as the personal sense of attachment human beings can develop with a place, whether it’s the place they were born, or a space they gradually define as ‘home’. Personally, the symposium ticked a lot of boxes: I volunteer with the Yorkshire Dales National Park (I live in the Westmorland Dales in Cumbria), and have taken a keen interest in hillwalking and mountain exploring

during my life lived on the edge of both the Dales and the Lakes. I am interested in how my version of Cumbria, as a 26 year old, is constructed mainly through boundaries of the National Parks, as well as the M6 and the county boundary as we know it today—yet for the major part of Nicholson’s lifetime the Lake District National Park (1951), the M6 (completed 1971), and Cumbria (1974) did not yet exist.

The symposium was organised by the PLACE Collective (People, Land, Art, Culture, Ecology – PLACE), chaired by Harriet Fraser (co-founder of the Collective), and Andrew Blake (Manager of the Wye Valley AONB). After opening comments from BBC presenter Kate Humble, who detailed her thoughts on how human beings are conditioned to love certain curated landscapes instead of ones that are truly wild, and argued that we must fight for diversity of landscape in the British Isles, panel discussions and short talks from a range of speakers ensued.

Many questions were raised from the various panel discussions, of which I found the question mark over the importance of the role of childhood in shaping personal interpretation of landscape the most important and thought-provoking. I suppose our childhood ‘home’ is something that persists in the memory—though that persistence is perhaps dependent on the amount of time spent in a particular place, and at what point in childhood one lives there. I have had the privilege of living in the same place my entire life, apart from a few years spent here and there for university education. When I return ‘home’, it is always to the same place, and thus the landscape is intensely personal for me. I don’t just see the farm buildings and the demarcated field boundaries. I see where I took my first puppy for a walk (and where I’ve taken subsequent dogs for walks since), and I see the woods where Dad let me camp with friends as a teenager. The symposium inevitably addressed issues covered in COP26 (Glasgow), and encouraged participants to



Hodge Close Quarry
Photo by Laura Day

‘What is Natural Beauty’ A Report (continued) by Laura Day

think about climate change as a human emergency, as well as a natural one. Crystal Moore, from the Environment Agency, likened the climate crisis to Covid-19 – the only difference being that the climate crisis is happening much more slowly. It was shocking, and a bit scary, to think that the outcome of both could be very similar. Crystal also addressed how renewable beauty is about sustainability, and emphasized that we must start living sustainably at home – recycling, switching lights off, and thinking about how we choose to power our home lives.

Other panel speakers discussed how landscape is part of self-definition: how the landscape is a keystone for what it means to be British; Mike Collier commented on how the UK countryside is oftentimes perceived as a ‘white’ landscape, and Dr Anjana Khatwa suggested that we must start looking at the landscape through an intersectional lens. When it comes to National Parks and AONBs (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty), they can be defined as spaces of imagination and cultural memory, and are also places where nature is given the ability to thrive. Yet, with the creation of National Parks comes a degree of fetishization of the landscape – and this is mainly done via social media. This can create issues in natural habitats overrun with Instagram-image-hunting millennials, and ignorance toward other spaces worthy of attention and admiration, too.

Finally, one of the brief discussions I found most interesting was when Neil Heseltine’s talk (Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority) led to questioning literature’s role in the evolution of perspective on place in the landscape. Thinking of Norman Nicholson’s writing, landscape features heavily, and I remember wanting to visit Millom in the early days of my PhD to get a feel for the space the poet occupied. Certainly, in the central Lake District, the writings of the Wordsworths, Coleridge, Potter and others has brought many tourists to the area, keen to spot daffodils and walk over Loughrigg Terrace. So perhaps literature does rightly play a huge part in our perspective on a particular landscape. But, it is interesting to take note of how literature influences us before we’ve even seen a space; an image is constructed in the reader’s mind before they’ve physically set foot in the space, and so expectations must be managed.



Mardale at Haweswater

Photo by Laura Day



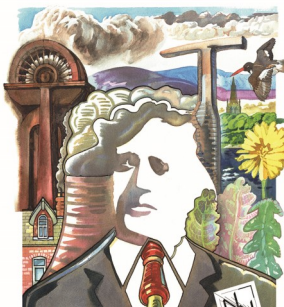
Whinlatter

Photo by Laura Day

The symposium was a full day of talks and discussion, but was well worth the time spent. There were a great many participants, and a wonderfully diverse selection of speakers from across the UK, from National Parks and academic circles, as well as groups dealing directly in environmental affairs. LD

FUTURE EVENTS

Please keep a careful eye on our [website](#), social media channels, and newsletters, so that you are informed about forthcoming events. The ongoing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic have made it hard to do the forward planning for in-person events that we usually do, but we do expect these to occur this year. The **GeoWeek event** on the 14th May 2022 (see p. 20) was our first in-person Society event since March 2020, but more will follow. We also hope to hold further online events, for the benefit of people who may find it difficult to travel to Millom and Cumbria. Spread the word and follow our [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) channels!



WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS

We are pleased to welcome the following new members to the Society:

Helen and Peter Eichler—Cumbria
Kate Jackson—Cumbria
Helen James—Cumbria
Tess Pike—Cumbria
Stuart Paterson—Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland

CONGRATULATIONS

The Society congratulates **David Boyd** (Hon. Vice President) and **Ann Thomson** for their recent success in their MA studies at the University of Cumbria (see page 5 for further details). Congratulations also to **Laura Day**, who has had two papers published recently on Nicholson (full details in the next issue of *Comet*) and who has read other papers at various conferences and symposia, including at the University of Huddersfield (Apocalypse Poetry) and at the University of Cumbria (GeoWeek). Finally, our congratulations to **Jack Threlfall Hartley**, for the appearance of a piece of creative-critical writing on place-names and poets in Karen Lloyd's forthcoming anthology on place writing (Saraband Books). Central to Jack's thinking in this piece is Norman Nicholson's poem 'Scarf Gap, Buttermere' (CP p. 199). Links to Laura's work will be included in the next e-bulletin. Details of Jack's piece will appear when it is published.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank the following people for their responses to my enquiries and/or for permission to use information, materials or images: **Paul and David Secher**; **David Boyd**; **Sue Parker** and **Pat O' Reilly** (First Nature); **Jonathan Powell**; and **Phil Gates** (whose images in his Cabinet of Curiosities are freely available for educational purposes). Thanks also to Geograph and to Karl and Ali, who provided the photo on page 4 under the Creative Commons Licence. The graphic images of Norman Nicholson were created by [Alan Roper](#).

Abbreviations used in *Comet*: CP = *Collected Poems*; WEC = *Wednesday Early Closing*.

Please note: membership enquiries should be addressed to Prof. Brian Whalley, 11, Church Fold, SHEFFIELD, South Yorkshire S6 1TZ.

Email: nnsmembership@gmail.com.



Comet: The Newsletter of the Norman Nicholson Society. Editor: Antoinette Fawcett, 3, Burlington Street, ULVERSTON, Cumbria LA12 7JA.
antoinettefawcett@hotmail.com

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!

The copyright of all articles and other pieces remains with their authors, but online versions will eventually be placed on <http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/nns/>. If you would prefer your piece not to be included in the online archive, please contact me.