

- **'The wind that entered without knocking': Disability and Poetics in *A Local Habitation*** by Ann Thomson
- **MARJORIE SECHER: An Addendum to "M" - A Double Mystery'** by Mary Robinson
- **LitHouses Conference 2022—Halifax** by Antoinette Fawcett
- **A Local Habitation Writ Large: Norman Nicholson and Liverpool** by Charlie Lambert
- **GoFundMe Deadline** by Charlie Lambert
- **Sad News**
- **A Summer in the North Country** by Jack Threlfall Hartley
- **Beyond the Local...** by Antoinette Fawcett
- **Maurice Georg Payn—1929–2022 (Obituary)**
- **Recording a Cancer Journey, in Nicholson's Footsteps / 'Visible Music' - A Poem** by Martyn Halsall
- **Member News**
- **'At the Rock Face: in memory of Norman Nicholson' - A Poem** by Roger Garfitt
- **A Friendship Across the Generations** by Roger Garfitt

Comet: the Magazine of the Norman Nicholson Society

'an emblem [...] of human society in relation to the physical world'

In an interesting article, published in the *London Magazine* in 1976 (see p. 32 of this issue), Nicholson looks back at his life lived in the small town of Millom. He talks about change, continuity and renewal—and about the impact that his illness had on shaping his world-view. Nicholson had returned in 1932 from his long stay at Linford Sanatorium in the New Forest, not yet cured of his TB and fearful of the effects that living in Millom would have on his still fragile constitution, knowing too that, in spite of his brilliant school record, he had lost his chance of going to university. He was still just a boy of eighteen.

But his determination to make a new life for himself meant that the daily walk, prescribed as part of his system of recovery, was spent in the lanes and fields surrounding Millom, enhancing his love of nature. And when he started to explore Millom's industrial and post-industrial landscape, in search of rare flowers, he found 'Nature fighting back, recolonizing the land'. He saw that 'the town of Millom and the life of its people [were] determined by and dependent on its "environment"'. This insight led to Nicholson's main poetic subject-matter: the interdependence of human beings and their dependence on the natural world. Millom became for him 'an emblem, a model in miniature of human society in relation to the physical world' (Nicholson 1976: 61).

This year we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of *A Local Habitation*, the Poetry Book Society Choice for Autumn 1972. Many of this issue's articles focus on themes connected to this notable anniversary, including Ann Thomson's sensitive reading of *A Local Habitation* through the lens of **disability studies**. We also have an article from our Chair, **Charlie Lambert**, on the surprising connections between **Nicholson and Liverpool**, and the setting of an even broader context via **Jack Threlfall Hartley's** report on his '**summer in the north country**'. My own article focuses on the humble **poetry poster** and how that medium helped Nicholson's poetic work reach an audience beyond the traditionally bookish world of poetry lovers.

I am also delighted to share with you an article from the distinguished poet and critic **Roger Garfitt**, remembering his friendship with Norman and recalling a particular time when our poet stayed with him in Anglesey. Garfitt's poem '**At the Rock Face**', written for this issue, is a beautiful tribute to Nicholson's poetic craft, formal skills, and perceptiveness.

Our own literary society extends well beyond the local, and we have come to know and value each other through our common interests. In that context it is a joy to be able to update you on the activities of several members, including **Martyn Halsall**, **Neil Curry**, and **Mary Robinson**. We share each other's sorrows too, and so it is my sad duty to record the passing of several founding members of the Society, **Maurice Payn**, **Dot Richardson**, and the Revd. Canon **David Scott**, all of whom knew Nicholson personally. They now inhabit an elsewhere that is peopled by our warm and grateful memories.

‘THE WIND THAT ENTERED WITHOUT KNOCKING’: Disability and Poetics in *A Local Habitation*

(Copyright restrictions prevent lengthy quotations, so readers may wish to have the *Collected Poems of 1994* to hand.)

It is hard to imagine Norman Nicholson claiming a ‘disability identity’ or setting out to write ‘disability poetry’; nevertheless his work illustrates how ‘revisiting texts from [a Literary Disability Studies] orientation will yield important insights’¹ and may ‘uncover the occluded role of illness’² in artistic output. If the disabling illness of Nicholson’s late adolescence is often ‘occluded’ in his work, its influence is pervasive. Its pathology infuses his poetic diction and imagery, and sometimes influences form. We read of ‘the soft cough of death in the waiting lungs’ (‘Early March’, *Collected Poems* p. 128); we learn that ‘The bacillus interprets the sun’ (‘The Seven Rocks VII: ST BEES SANDSTONE’, *CP* p. 251) and that ‘The rocks are alive, / As a throat with bacteria’ (‘Fossils’, *CP* p. 216). The submerged iron-mine workings of ‘Hodbarrow Flooded’ are ‘Stifled cavities, / Lungs of a drowned man’ (*CP* p. 279). In prose Nicholson diagnoses the inter-war ‘athletic cult’ of outdoor pursuits as ‘a consumptive’s gasp for fresh air’³, and fears the Lake District may become ‘a convalescent home for a sick civilisation’⁴.



Norman Nicholson in his attic room, c. 1975.

The narrative arc of Nicholson’s memoir *Wednesday Early Closing* unsurprisingly positions the experience of tuberculosis as a defining crisis in his life trajectory. Its onset dashes his hopes of university and a career beyond Millom, and threatens his life: TB of the larynx as well as the lungs is a serious complication with an increased mortality rate.⁵ The alien yet formative environment of a private sanatorium in the south is the context of his transition to young adulthood. He returns to Millom resentful and afraid –

‘There was not, I feared, a lungful of breathable air in all those streets and back-alleys’ (*WEC*, p. 201) – and his attic bedroom becomes the permanent hub of his life and work. Yet his confinement in the sanatorium, ‘locked in a universe of tiny perspectives which yet seemed to take on tremendous significance’ (*WEC*, p. 184), has yielded unanticipated gains. To read any Nicholson poem is to encounter a poet finely attuned to the infinite creative potential of a narrow world.

Conscious of his body’s fragility and transience, Nicholson reminds us often that the human

by Ann Thomson

organism is formed of the stuff of the universe and will return to it. In 'Rockferns' (*CP* p. 47) the poet pictures his mortal remains nurturing Earth's fertility, and hopes that even his soul may 'plant itself in cracks of sky'. But will some essence of himself endure in his life's work of poetry? The question haunts *A Local Habitation*. Considered as an integrated construction where, in Peter Barry's words, 'the boundaries of the individual poem are breached, and a realm of "co-textuality" is explored'⁶, *A Local Habitation* offers clues to a faltering creative confidence that may partly explain the collection's much-debated timing. It illuminates the relationship between Nicholson's disability and his poetic practice, deploying a marked physicality engendering what I call 'body empathy', a term I have coined since it seems absent from critical discourse.

**'And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name'.**

(Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* V.1.14-17)

In these twenty-six poems the poet's pen proudly names subjects that might well seem 'airy nothings' outside his own local habitation: its flora, fauna, landscape, industry. Millom 'characters' (including some of Nicholson's kinsfolk) are recalled in the conversational tone of a family gathering. Yet that is not the expectation raised by the first few poems. 'The Dumb Spirit' (*Collected Poems* p. 265) opens the collection, conjuring a dissociated state in which insights and sensory experiences go unspoken because 'The dumb spirit | Stifles the breath'. The first three stanzas' bald initial monosyllables and predominantly short lines enact abortive attempts at articulacy. The final stanza invokes a Gospel miracle, craving divine intervention to end the protagonist's silence and let him 'speak plain again'.⁷ The repetition of 'breath' echoes the first stanza while the plea for 'no impediment of lung or larynx' recalls Nicholson's bodily experience. *Wednesday Early Closing* (pp. 104-106) foregrounds the link between poetry and its vocal performance. As a popular young recitalist Nicholson 'had a good voice' and 'felt the lovely, dangerous, electric power of verse to excite and communicate': 'I wanted an audience; I wanted to make people listen.' In time he rediscovered his relish in performing through broadcasts and public readings. But losing the 'electric power' of his voice to TB had been profoundly undermining. He was trained to enunciate clearly without vocalising, a skill that lends itself well to the often forceful consonants of Cumbrian speech - 'the crackling Northern tongues' ('For the Grieg Centenary', *Collected Poems*, p. 36). Nicholson later professed himself 'very much concerned with poetry as sound' and said his poems were 'designed to be read aloud and listened to'.⁸ 'The Dumb Spirit' prays to be free of 'impediments' that, physically, were four decades past.

The next poem forms a bridge to closer reflection on the poet's literal and metaphorical voice. 'The Borehole' (*Collected Poems*, p. 266) has a mundane title and a down-to-earth diction. Bore drills are seen testing for iron ore deposits. Picturing the machines as herons —

Disability and Poetics in *A Local Habitation*

colloquially ‘jammy-cranes’ – Nicholson creates a verbal double exposure blending avian and mechanical actions. His consonantal writing is vividly showcased in the poem’s onomatopoeic clatter. Multi-sensory images urge a physical response to the seismic onslaught as humanity’s mechanical proxies pillage the strata of aeons. The anthropomorphic metaphor of worked-out pits that ‘Lounge round the banks, | Turning out red pockets’ will become literal reality later in the collection, in Nicholson’s bitter response to the titular ‘Closing of Millom Ironworks’ (*CP* p. 297).⁹ But now, as the works buzzer signals a change of shift, the poem shifts gear and hurls a question: ‘But what is it sticks in the bird’s gullet – | Rubble or crystal, dross or ore?’ An industrial project’s *raison d’être* is at risk; is the poet conscious also of a choked-up creative ‘gullet’? We have only to glance across at the facing page to find ‘The Whisperer’ ‘from the mine | Of my throat, hauling up my voice like a load of metal’.

‘The Whisperer’ (p. 267) is Nicholson’s first literary handling of his time at Linford sanatorium. (Line numbering, not featured in the published work, is used here for convenience.) We accompany the narrator from silent confinement in his chalet to strolls in peaceful countryside, then indoors to a communal area where polite social noise seems cacophonous. The poem’s blunt opening introduces a parallel journey, that of his fugitive voice:

For twenty months I whispered,
Spoke aloud
Not one word (ll. 1-3).

Eventually attempting ‘normal’ speech, he is dismayed by the tremulous, wheezing sound he produces (ll. 41-43). His desperate efforts to be heard make him seem antisocial (ll. 71-78). Attracting notice at last, he finds that being habitually unheard has robbed him of utterance (ll. 73-80). He then jumps without pause from past to present, contrasting a larynx once more ‘afloat’ with a life that, forty years on, ‘drifts in whispers’ (l. 84). In the final section, his quest for an artistic hearing takes metaphorical force from those past struggles to communicate physically, echoing ‘The Borehole’ in the aural assault of whistle and clanging bell (ll. 99-102). In a recorded television performance Nicholson delivers ‘The Whisperer’ with waggish drama, enacting finger-clicks, ‘toss[ing]’ words, exploiting the gravelly timbre of his voice at ‘Life roars around me’, pointing urgently at onlookers to ‘Wait! Wait!’ The concluding summons: ‘Come closer; | I’ve something to tell’ is wheezed between rasping intakes of breath, his voice fading away as if his audience is retreating out of earshot.¹⁰ The listener – or any reader speaking the poem aloud – is inescapably drawn into the poet’s somatic travails through his command of what I term ‘body empathy’. Neurologically this is traceable to mirror neurons which ‘enable motor neurons to register or simulate an action either physically seen or mentally envisioned while reading about or hearing descriptions of actions’, so that ‘the modal structuring of the brain enables simultaneous neural work of simulation, situated action, and bodily states.’¹¹ This is understood to be the basis of empathy in the everyday sense. I believe poetry can harness it more viscerally to induct readers into actual bodily sensations. Its striking effectiveness in ‘The Whisperer’ owes much to the poem’s form.

On the first recto page (p. 267) the poem appears reassuringly regular in its pattern: one

by Ann Thomson

longer line followed by two short ones. Each short line comprises three or four syllables, with a final rhyme, half-rhyme, consonance or assonance for each pair. The longer lines vary in length and are almost all unrhymed. There is no consistent metre. At line 49 (p. 268) an extra line-space, where two short lines would be expected, represents the 'Two winters' time-lapse. The volta at line 80 is also signalled visually. The closing lines (102-106) extend the previous form, creating suspense and resolving it with a rhyme:

Can lip-read the words of my whisper as clear as the clang of a bell,
 Can see me say:
 'Wait! Wait!
 Come closer;
 I've something to tell.'

Approachable structure, homespun language and concrete imagery offer little challenge to the reader's eye or brain. A more unsettling experience emerges, however, if the poem is spoken aloud observing line endings and punctuation. Short lines replicate the speaker's limited breath-span; longer ones enact his frustrated striving for fluency. The poem's first five lines flow easily, line-breaks reflecting the sense. Then the first enjambment ('from the mine | of my throat...') leads to the stranded pronoun 'I' as the speaker's determination to enunciate this line – the longest so far – exhausts him. Snatching an inadequate breath, he is forced to interrupt a phrase: 'From sixteen- | years-old ...'. A semi-colon at line 11, and the end-stopped line 18, allow brief respite. Variations on the process accumulate in fractured sentences, phrases, and even words ('my police- | man's whistle', 'tea- | time'). Prevented by the poem's construction from inhaling fully, the reader feels a tightening of the chest, a constriction in the straining throat. Being unable physically to enunciate a coherent thought induces hyperventilation and the exasperated distress of 'Stunned', 'baffled', 'bawled', 'frantic', the near-hysteria of 'Listen, for God's sake listen!' Gasps of panic attend the tumbling strings of verbs ('Nod, nudge, wink, beckon, signal'; 'stump, stamp, blow, | Whistle'). As the indifferent others drift away, the final 'I've something to tell' has a dying fall. We move on to other poems only after we have palpably shared in bodily constraints that portend the pain of blocked connection and creative self-doubt.

Speculation surrounds the eighteen-year gap between *The Pot Geranium* and *A Local Habitation*. Nicholson's life-changing illness and disability are not usually cited in this context, but I want to suggest a connection. Nicholson is on record as saying he had 'lost his first wind and was not yet sure of his second',¹² and that he had 'finished a particular phase' of work.¹³ He suggested that Robert Lowell's 1959 collection *Life Studies* seeded the idea of writing about his own family and townsfolk; if so, the impetus bore fruit only slowly.¹⁴ He promoted 'provincialism' and professed gratitude for 'a lifetime spent in that same town' (WEC, p. 202); but the tension between choice, psychological predisposition, and *force majeure* breeds ambivalence. Some contributors to the Nicholson Audio Archive recall little local esteem for the poet in his lifetime.¹⁵ David Boyd detects signs that even as *The Pot Geranium* was published in 1954, Nicholson already felt 'rather ignored and side-lined': he was reported as saying that an exhibition in his honour in Whitehaven 'made him feel that at least some people were trying to listen to him'.¹⁶

Disability and Poetics in *A Local Habitation*

A series of disruptions in Nicholson's personal life marked this period. 1954, the year of *The Pot Geranium*, also saw the death of his father. Now the household's sole earner, he may have chosen to prioritise lectures, broadcasts, reviewing, and prose publications, including *Portrait of the Lakes* and *Provincial Pleasures*, as more reliable sources of income. A Northern Arts grant in 1969 bought him time to work on the new collection.¹⁷ Marriage to Yvonne in 1956 had given him personal and financial support, but must have entailed considerable adjustments.¹⁸ 1965 brought the anxiety and domestic turmoil of Yvonne's breast cancer treatment. Nicholson's stepmother Rose died in 1969. Millom Ironworks had closed the previous year. Sharing in the town's collective shock and fear for the future may have kindled a deeper fellow-feeling with its ordinary inhabitants and stirred family memories of Uncle Jack, killed in a mining accident.¹⁹

A Local Habitation closes with 'The Cock's Nest' and 'The Seventeenth of the Name' (CP pp. 310-12), inspired by the deaths in 1954 and 1959 of Nicholson's father and last remaining uncle. Both wryly note that the childless poet is the last of his line. In 'The Seventeenth' he reads the gravestones of the Millom Nicholsons as a 'what-are-you-going-to-do-about-it | Memorandum' to himself and ruefully concludes he has done 'Damn all but hem | And haw about them.' That is the collection's parting shot.

Trauma can recur many years after its original source. *A Local Habitation* begins by coupling the narrator's foundation-shaking physical silencing with failure to reach an audience through a poetic 'voice'. It ends by questioning whether his life and work hitherto have produced anything that will live on. It seems at least possible that disruptive mid-life events triggered or aggravated a protracted re-processing of Nicholson's earlier traumatic melange of life-threatening illness, upheaval, physical impairment, and thwarted aspiration. In his oeuvre as a whole we find poems that, from a 'disability' perspective, cast an intriguing light on Nicholson's calling. The illiterate protagonist of 'Caedmon' declares: 'I hack and hammer at the handiwork of verse' (CP p. 137-138). The much later 'Cornthwaite' (CP p. 354) similarly conceives a parallel between physical work and the poet's labour at his craft: his own 'peck of poems', and the meagre harvest of a Viking settler's first agricultural efforts, are both pronounced 'not much of a crop'. But that is not the distant ancestor's only 'crop': his Norse vocabulary ensures an abundant future linguistic harvest he will never witness. 'Cave Drawings' (CP p. 229) asserts: 'It is not the hunters who draw on the walls of caves' but the elderly, the physically impaired – and a young boy who coughs and chokes in the fire-smoke. But the coughing boy makes art that will long outlive the able-bodied providers whose ranks he cannot join.

Ann Thomson June 2022

Notes

1. Mitchell, David, and Snyder, Sharon (eds.) (1997), *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses on Disability* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press), quoted in Joshua, Essaka (2020) *Physical Disability in British Romantic Literature (Cambridge Studies in Romanticism)*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 2. Wheeler, Lesley (2011), 'Illness and Poetic Language', *Literature and Medicine* 29.1, pp. 197-212.
 3. Nicholson, Norman (1955) *The Lakers*, London: Robert Hale & Company, p. 207.
-

by Ann Thomson

4. Nicholson, Norman (1963) *Portrait of the Lakes*, London: Robert Hale Ltd, p. 184.
5. Thomson, StClair (1914) 'Three Years' Sanatorium Experience of Laryngeal Tuberculosis', *The British Medical Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2780, pp. 801-803. (11 April 1914).
6. Barry, Peter (2007) *Literature in Contexts*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 5.
7. Mark 7.31-3279.
8. *Kaleidoscope*, BBC, 11 June 1984 (unavailable), cited in Jones (2013) *Norman Nicholson: The Whispering Poet*, Appleby: The Book Mill, p. 211.
9. Iron ore occurs in 'pockets', not in stratified seams. I am indebted to David Boyd for this technical insight.
10. 'Norman Nicholson', *The South Bank Show*, London Weekend Television, 4 November 1984 (Melvyn Bragg, ed., director Paul Read).
11. Nikolajeva, Maria and Hilton, Mary (eds.) (2012) *Contemporary Adolescent Literature and Culture: The Emergent Adult*, London: Routledge, Chapters 8 and 9.
12. Gardner, Philip (1973) *Norman Nicholson*, New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., p. 95.
13. Boyd, David (2015) *Norman Nicholson: a Literary Life*, Seascale: Seascale Press, p. 111
14. Gardner, Philip (1973) *Norman Nicholson*, New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., p. 101; Jones, op. cit. p. 180; Boyd, op. cit. pp. 111-112.
15. Norman Nicholson Society, Audio Archive. Available at <https://www.normannicholson.org/audio-archive.html>. Last accessed 21.01.22.
16. Boyd, David (2015) *Norman Nicholson: A Literary Life*, Seascale: Seascale Press, pp. 88-89.
17. An acknowledgement of the grant appears in *A Local Habitation* but not in *Collected Poems*.
18. In a short story by Somerset Maugham, *Sanatorium*, two TB patients marry against medical advice (accepted by others as axiomatic) that attempting marriage and 'normal life' will shorten their lives. If that was still the received wisdom in Nicholson's time, it may have permeated his own thinking.
19. 'Hodbarrow Flooded', *Collected Poems* (1994) London: Faber and Faber, p. 279 (originally collected in *A Local Habitation*, 1972); *Wednesday Early Closing* (Faber and Faber 1975), p. 60.



Ann Thomson's article mentions the mining accident that killed Nicholson's Uncle Jack, in 1896, well before Nicholson's birth but a strong family and local memory, nevertheless. The record of the accident is held by the Durham Mining Museum and can be read [online](#).

The image (left) is a detail from the beautiful stained glass Norman Nicholson Memorial Window in St. George's Church, Millom, created by Christine Boyce, and regarded as her masterpiece. Members of the NN Society can order cards of the window, from photographs made by award-winning architectural photographer, [Alastair Carew-Cox](#). Alastair has offered the cards at a discount to our members: the set of six cards (four large and two smaller) at a cost of £15.00, including UK p&p, instead of £21.00, the usual cost. Additionally, Alastair's book about Christine, *Christine Boyce: Artist and Craftswoman*, is offered to members at £20.00, including UK p&p.

Contact me at the **email address** I use for the **Society bulletins** for further details. **Antoinette Fawcett**

MARJORIE SECHER: an addendum to 'M' – A Double Mystery by Mary Robinson

Always cite your sources – yes, I know, but on this occasion I didn't.

'The theme will be Norman Nicholson and Song' wrote Antoinette Fawcett in the November 2021 Society newsletter, looking forward to the Spring edition of *Comet*. I turned to my Nicholson *Collected* and re-read any poems I could find relating to music and singing. Several poems included the word 'song' in the title.

At the same time I came across the on-line obituary of Marjorie Secher from *The Times and Star* 2015¹, with the report of her funeral service on 8 October 2015:

'A poem by Lakes poet Norman Nicholson, who was a good friend of hers, was read at the service.'

My cursory internet search turned up nothing else. I could find no mention of Marjorie Secher in the biographies by Kathleen Jones or David Boyd or in my older study of Norman Nicholson by Philip Gardner.²

I emailed Antoinette Fawcett to ask if she had come across Marjorie Secher – she hadn't but was keen to find out more. The result was her excellent article, 'M – A Double Mystery', in the Spring 2022 edition of *Comet*.

I knew Marjorie Secher (née Metcalfe) in the late 1990s and early 2000s. At that time I ran a literary discussion class for Cocker-mouth Adult Education Centre which Marjorie attended. I remember her as an enthusiastic and well-read participant who enjoyed poetry but had a strong dislike of Shakespeare's plays! She had a delightfully warm personality, exemplified by her wide smile, shown in the photographs illustrating Antoinette's article. At the end of one term Marjorie invited us to her house for a bring-and-share lunch.

Last year as I re-read the song poems I noticed 'Song for M.' At some time I had written a note by the title, but with, alas, no mention of its source nor even a date. I wondered about trying to trace Marjorie's sons for more information but felt that, given the content of the poem, I might be intruding on sensitive material. Fortunately Antoinette had no such (in the event, unfounded) scruples!

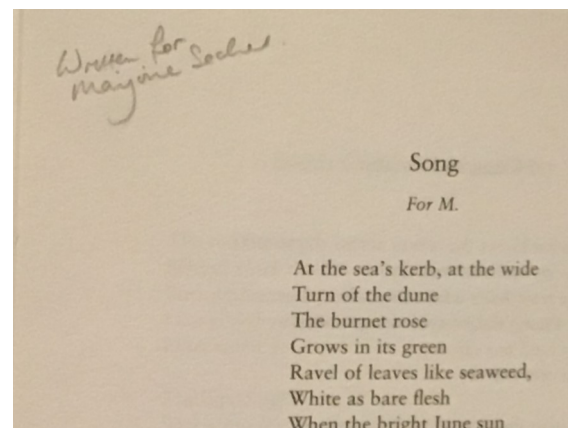
With no mention of the source of my note I have no proof of its accuracy. Was it merely a hunch of my own? A record of second-hand hearsay? Or was it from Marjorie herself? Next to the title 'Song For M.' I had put the words:

'Written for Marjorie Secher'.

Mary Robinson September 2022

Notes

1. *Times and Star* (2015) 'Obituary – Marjorie Secher, of Cocker-mouth' <https://timesandstar.co.uk.news/17029573.obituary-marjorie-secher-of-cockermouth/>
 2. Boyd, D. (2015) *Norman Nicholson: A Literary Life*, Seascale Press: Seascale.
- Jones, K. (2013) *Norman Nicholson: The Whispering Poet*, The Book Mill: Appleby.
- Gardner, P. (1973) *Norman Nicholson*, Twayne Publishers: New York.



The note in Mary's copy of the Collected Poems

LitHouses Conference 2022—Halifax by Antoinette Fawcett

The Norman Nicholson Society was represented at the 19th Annual Conference of the LitHouses group by Antoinette Fawcett and Glenn Lang. The conference was hosted by Calderdale Museums and took place at the Bankfield Museum, Halifax on Friday, 28th October, followed on Saturday by an optional visit to Shibden Hall, made famous by the Anne Lister ('Gentleman Jack') connection.

LitHouses is chaired by Henry Lytton Cobbold, the current occupant of [Knebworth House](#) and great-great-great grandson of the Victorian novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton. It consists of twenty-nine 'active' members, representing authors whose houses range from the grandeur of Knebworth House and [Penshurst Place](#) (Sir Philip Sidney) to the modest proportions of [Ted Hughes' house](#) in Mytholmroyd and our own (potential) LitHouse, [14 St George's Terrace, Millom](#).

There are many connections between Nicholson and a number of the writers whose literary houses are part of the group, notably with Wordsworth ([Grasmere](#)), William Cowper ([Cowper and Newton Museum](#)), Ted Hughes and the Brontës ([Parsonage Museum](#)). These connections would be easier to explore if Nicholson's lifetime home also became a centre open to the public.

As far as we know there is no connection between Nicholson and Halifax, or between Nicholson and Anne Lister (1791-1840). Her journals, which have given her posthumous fame, depict her daily life in normal alphabetic text, but her life 'as a lover of women' was written in a cypher first broken in the 1890s, yet not used to decode the diaries until Helena Whitbread made a lifetime's study of them (see the BBC webpage '[The Life and Loves of Anne Lister](#)' for more information). Anne Lister's current iconic status and the worldwide popularity of the BBC series *Gentleman Jack* have brought a much-needed cultural and tourism boost to Calderdale and Halifax. We believe that a similar boost could be brought to Millom if our plans for Nicholson's house come to fruition.

The conference itself was held in the beautiful surroundings of [Bankfield Museum, Halifax](#), a mansion once owned by the textile manufacturer Edward Ackroyd and now a museum specializing in textiles, costume, toys and local and military history. Appropriately, the current exhibitions display the costumes from the *Gentleman Jack* series and authentic costumes of the same period ('Fashion in Anne Lister's Time'). Both these exhibitions can be seen until the end of this year.

The theme of the conference was 'Parallel People ~ It's About Everyone Else' and it was wonderful to hear how the various literary houses have found ways to celebrate the often extraordinary lives of sisters, wives, servants and even pets. Writers' lives are rarely, if ever, lived in ivory towers and they and their works intersect with and expose the most burning and important issues of their day, whether they intend this or not. In the case of Nicholson, we know that he could not have been the writer he was without his father's strong support and encouragement and without the help of the many women who cared for him at different stages of his life. Our house has stories to tell too. We're sure that people would love to hear them. **AF**



The LitHouses reps at the end of the day's conference

Photo courtesy of <https://lithouses.org/>

‘A Local Habitation’ Writ Large: Norman Nicholson and Liverpool

In the summer of 1980 Norman Nicholson travelled 120 miles south from Millom to Liverpool. It was a familiar route. He’d been there on several occasions to give readings in the city. But this was different. His host this time was the University of Liverpool, and the beneficiary was to be Norman himself.

It was the afternoon of July 11th 1980 and the setting was Liverpool’s Philharmonic Hall on Hope Street, the street that links the city’s two cathedrals. The occasion was the award of the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters in recognition of Nicholson’s achievements as, to quote the Orator Mr R.T. Davies, ‘a critic, man of letters, topographer, and poet’. It’s worth noting that the university chose to recognise Nicholson’s writing in the round rather than solely his poetry. The Orator praised ‘a life local, rooted and reflective,’ and remarked, ‘Manchester honoured him long since in 1959. Today ours is the same joy.’¹

But not quite the *identical* joy. The Liverpool award was that of an Honorary Doctorate, whereas Nicholson’s award from Manchester University was an Honorary MA. Liverpool saw fit to take it up a notch, the Orator winding up his detailed appreciation with the words, ‘this wise and intelligible poet has made it possible, by his verbal skill, for all of us to see through his eyes’.²

For a poet who always had to fight for prominence outside Cumbria, it’s notable that in Liverpool, and not just at the university, he enjoyed a fair amount of recognition. From the mid 1970s until 1986, the year before his death, he gave more readings in Liverpool than anywhere else. According to Norman’s own notes in the John Rylands archive at the University of Manchester, there were a total of nine readings in Liverpool, plus one ‘over the water’ at West Kirby Girls Grammar School, averaging one reading every year.³ These were not at the University but at St Katharine’s College, at Christ’s College, and at Liverpool Institute of Higher Education, all located in the south of the city and all later to join in the formation of what is now Liverpool Hope University.



*The beautiful main building of Liverpool Hope University—
once St. Katharine’s College.*

Photo courtesy of Liverpool Hope University.

Over the years that I’ve been discovering and enjoying Nicholson’s work, I’ve been struck by the number of people from Liverpool, my own home for 35 years, who actively promote and champion Nicholson and his writing. This has been going on for a very long time.

It makes me think that there must be something about Norman Nicholson and Liverpool.

by Charlie Lambert

Philip Gardner, the first person to write a critical study of Nicholson, comes from Bootle (that's the Merseyside Bootle three miles north of Liverpool's Pier Head, not the Cumbrian one). His book, though published in its final form by Twayne of New York in 1973, began life as a doctoral thesis by Gardner at the University of Liverpool.

Matt Simpson, a fine poet in his own right, who wrote articles about Nicholson in the *London Magazine* among others, came likewise from Bootle. In fact, he was a direct contemporary of Philip Gardner; they were in the same class at Bootle Grammar School. Simpson's was a leading voice among those calling on Faber & Faber to produce a *Collected Poems* after Nicholson's death in 1987, calls that were answered seven years later – not that Simpson was satisfied by that; he wanted a more affordable paperback edition 'that can really reach the constituency of Nicholson readers I know is out there.'⁴

Ron Barnes, a friend and teaching colleague of Simpson, was Head of English at St Katharine's College and instrumental in organising Norman's regular readings there. The two men became friends, and Norman would stay at Ron's house in the city.

More recently, Nicholson's reputation has benefited from consistent advocacy by two more Liverpoolians, Dr David Cooper and Phil Houghton, both well-known to us in the Norman Nicholson Society. David, our former chair, is senior lecturer in English and co-director of the Centre for Place Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University. He has written extensively about Nicholson and more recently starred in a 'Countrystride' podcast exploring Nicholson's Millom.⁵



*Dr. David Cooper, with bespiced Millom behind him.
Countrystride #61 (August 6th 2021).*

Photo courtesy of Countrystride.

Phil Houghton – now embedded in Cumbria but originally from Merseyside – is a prominent member of the Society, a poet in his own right, and also a director of the Norman Nicholson House Community Interest Company, giving his time and expertise to support the campaign to buy and renovate No 14 St George's Terrace. Phil's knowledge of the natural world is constantly being reinforced by Nicholson's own such expertise, something which Phil in turn introduces to a wider audience through his regular column in *Cumbria* magazine and his Twitter feed.

My trajectory has been in the opposite direction from Phil – born and bred in Cumbria but living on Merseyside since 1971 and in Liverpool itself since 1986. Perhaps I'm excessively attuned to picking up local resonances but it does seem to me that Liverpool has been remarkably prominent in appreciating and championing Nicholson, more so than anywhere outside Cumbria. Is this just coincidence? Or is there more to it?

Is there really something about Norman Nicholson and Liverpool?

‘A Local Habitation’ Writ Large: Norman Nicholson and Liverpool

Before I discovered Nicholson I had only visited Millom as a passenger on countless railway journeys up and down the West Cumbrian coast. As soon as I began reading Nicholson, in 1986, I began to recognize this place that I’d never set foot in. It was Liverpool, albeit on a smaller scale. When Nicholson writes about the closure of the Ironworks and observes

What’s the good of knowing
Which way the wind is blowing
When whichever way it blows it’s a cold wind now⁶

he is writing about the Liverpool of the 1970s and 1980s as long-established industries withered – containerization decimated the docks’ workforce, coal exports from the South West Lancashire coalfield dried up, major employers like Dunlops, Tate & Lyle and Standard-Triumph shut down, and thousands of men and women would ‘file by to sign on...

...morning after morning, there
They stand, by the churchyard gate,
Hands in pockets...’

It is part of Nicholson’s triumph that his insights into Millom and its people instantly resonate with readers who may never have heard of Millom. ‘The town,’ he writes in his poem ‘The Register’ from the *Sea to the West* collection, 1981, ‘crumbles dustily around me’.⁶ He might have been watching the demolition of countless streets (and communities) in north Liverpool. The description is perfect, accuracy sharpened by its brevity.

Of course, it isn’t only in Liverpool where recognition grabs the reader by the throat. There are enough towns, villages and cities, heaven knows, who have been through their own versions of post-Ironworks adjustment. The poet Peter Scupham discussed this in *PN Review* in 1999, reproduced in *Literature Online* in 2011, describing how memories of his youth in Lincolnshire would be revived by the work of Nicholson. ‘After reading Nicholson I am again savagely reminded of the obdurate quality of these local worlds.’⁸

Scupham goes on to make the crucial point, expressed in ‘The Pot Geranium’,⁹ that ‘the glimpse of a crimson box-kite and a pot geranium still make his little room an everywhere and a now’⁹. And in that ‘everywhere’, Scupham identifies his grandfather in Nicholson’s father and in Norman Nicholson’s portrayal of Millom is reminded once again of ‘the back-street boys in the back-streets I knew twenty years later’ (i.e., as his essay makes clear, in c. 1939).

Peter Scupham was a poet and teacher who was partly brought up in Lincolnshire and spent most of his working life in Letchworth, Hertfordshire. He died this summer aged 89. But where was he born, in 1933? Bootle, Merseyside. Yes, really.¹⁰

Matt Simpson was three years younger than Scupham and (mostly) stayed put on Merseyside. As I wrote in a previous article for *Comet*,¹¹ he was influenced by, and became a champion of, Norman Nicholson. ‘You’ve always shown me how to recognise,’ Simpson wrote in his poem ‘A Trip to Millom’ for *Between Comets*, the 1984 celebration of Nicholson’s 70th birthday¹². But to recognize what? To recognize places and circumstances he’d never actually seen before, and the universal truths that they embody: ‘From the Pot Geranium onwards Nicholson sees his hometown Millom as a microcosm, the provincial stage on which human truths are

by Charlie Lambert

enacted and given universal significance.’¹³ It isn’t that this ‘recognition’ is unique to people from Liverpool. But the extent to which it *matters* is, I would argue.

Whether it’s ‘five hundred men / at one stroke out of work’ (‘Glen Orchy’),¹⁴ or signing on at the Scouse version of ‘the Brew’, or seeing their childhood ‘shovelled on to a rubbish heap’ (‘On the Dismantling of Millom Ironworks’),¹⁵ Liverpool people can easily ‘recognise’ their own reflections in Norman’s mirror. Since starting to read Nicholson, I’ve always seen Millom as a microcosm of my city with the crucial difference that Liverpool has been better placed to recover from the industrial ‘savagery’ of the late sixties to early eighties. But there’s more to it than a shared economic challenge. Liverpool, like Millom, is out on a limb. Not as far out on that limb as Millom, but everyone from Liverpool will agree that the city is not exactly mainstream. It does things its own way, socially and politically. It prizes the things that make it different. It doesn’t want to conform. And it isn’t Manchester. There’s a strong element of ‘nobody likes us, we don’t care’ about both Liverpool and Millom. That can be a weakness, but it’s also a helluva strength.

David Cooper is based in Lancaster now but hails from Liverpool and his family are still here. He told me in an email exchange as I was assembling my thoughts for this article that one reason he was drawn to Nicholson was that he ‘recorded a place that, over the course of the last century, was in constant flux; a place that was necessarily having to formulate a new identity and reason for being. Having grown up in Liverpool in the 80s and 90s, I got that’.¹⁶

David finds other connections in the role of creativity and culture in the two places (‘but, at the same time, artistic *pretensions* were treated with deep suspicion’) and class identity: ‘I was interested in the greyness of Norman Nicholson’s class identity within a community that, to outsiders at least, is always and unambiguously perceived as working-class’.¹⁷

Class, culture – and, of course, geography. These are two towns with long, historic seaward connections, connections which facilitated incomers – Vikings, Irish, Manx, Welsh. Nicholson delighted in the Nordic placenames of Cumbria and there are many similar antecedents around Merseyside – Aigburth, Thingwall, Formby, Toxteth and Croxteth are all names that evolved from Viking settlements.

Nicholson, as Andrew Gibson has pointed out in his essay ‘At the Dying Atlantic’s Edge: Norman Nicholson and the Cumbrian Coast’,¹⁸ is not a poet of the Lake District. He’s a poet of the Atlantic Edge, and Liverpool would certainly identify with that, and not just through geography. Nicholson sees a separateness between Millom and the West Cumbria coast on the one hand and the picture-postcard Lake District on the other. ‘Hardly surprising,’ writes Gibson, ‘in a poet from a part of the country distant and in some degree alienated from Southern values’. Alienated from Southern values? Yep, that’s Liverpool too!

Yet Nicholson, for all the support that came his way from Liverpool during his lifetime, never wrote about the place – or did he? Gibson points out, ‘there is scarcely a reference to an England south of Widnes’, doubtless thinking of the poem ‘Near Widnes’ in which Nicholson doesn’t exactly find much affinity with his home: ‘All this is foreign as London’.¹⁹ But Nicholson *did* write a poem about Liverpool. In 2019, Ron Barnes’ son Tony very generously donated

Norman Nicholson and Liverpool (continued)



MV Royal Iris at Liverpool Pier Head—1972

Photo © [Alan Murray-Rust](#) (cc-by-sa/2.0)

a number of Nicholson books owned by his late father to the Society. Among the collection was Philip Gardner's *Norman Nicholson*²⁰ which notes the existence of a poem titled 'Ferry on the Mersey' appearing in the magazine *Time and Tide* in 1954.²¹ So far, I haven't been able to locate a copy of the poem, but despite Gardner's comment that this is one of several poems at that time which 'had no strong imaginative pressure behind them' it would be fascinating to see what Nicholson had to say about the then *Royal Iris*.

But then David Cooper put his finger on something: the term 'westwardness'. Yes! This is something which I have always felt was significant without quite being able to define why, or even come up with such a perfect word. Millom and Liverpool unite in their 'westwardness'. Each has 'sea to the west', but it's more than that. It's that awareness of space and time and the procession of the hours towards the slow setting of the sun and fading of the light, which are different here from other parts of the country. David wrote in one of his emails, 'The importance of westwardness was underlined, to me, when I spent some time living and working in York. Clearly, York is a ridiculously beautiful city and, looking back, it was a real privilege living within a stone's throw of the Minster. I really struggled, though, with its land-lockedness; and, although Lancaster is far less picturesque, I felt the pull of Morecambe Bay and, beyond, the Irish Sea. At the risk of sounding melodramatic (there's that Scouse-Millom thing again!), I think that I need to be able to see the sea and for that sea to be to the west. Clearly, then, NN's poetry had the 'right' geographical and imaginative orientation'.²²

I completely 'recognise' that, as Matt Simpson might say. Apart from a few childhood years in Yorkshire, I've always lived on the west side of the country – Cumbria, Chester, Bristol, Merseyside – and it just feels comfortable, correctly oriented, being aware that out there is the west, the direction of the sunset, and the long ending of the day.

David attributes the notion of 'westwardness' to Professor Ralph Pite of Bristol University (and previously of Liverpool University). 'For me,' wrote David, 'westwardness is inextricably linked with a melancholic sense of the end of things – an idea which can be traced in so much writing about Liverpool, I think, as well as Nicholson's work – as well as an awareness of the possible elsewhere beyond the horizon'.²³

The vast majority of people who come from Liverpool will never have heard of Norman Nicholson. But if you *are* from Liverpool and you *have* met Nicholson's work, you are locked into an embrace of understanding which not only, to quote the university Orator, enables us 'to see through his eyes'²⁴ but convinces us that he is also, somehow, seeing through ours.

by Charlie Lambert

It was in Liverpool where Norman, taken for specialist examination, was first diagnosed with his life-dominating illness, tuberculosis, in 1930, and it was, with sad irony, in Liverpool where the sequence of events leading to his death began.

In May 1987 he went to Liverpool again, once more to give his annual lecture. As usual, he stayed with Ron Barnes and his wife Margaret. Kathleen Jones describes the freakish incident,

He sat on the bed to prepare for his reading and accidentally dropped the book on the floor. When he bent down to pick it up there was a piercing pain in his chest. Norman had snapped a rib. The reading was cancelled and he was taken to hospital in Liverpool.²⁵

Transferred to Millom Hospital and then to Whitehaven's West Cumberland Infirmary, Norman died that same month. As Kathleen writes, 'the broken rib appeared to have collapsed his one good lung, and the other was reduced to only a quarter of its capacity by tuberculosis and repeated bouts of bronchitis'.²⁶

That is a connection which we'd prefer not to have. But, good times and bad, there is something about Norman Nicholson and Liverpool. 'This wise and intelligible poet has made it possible, by his verbal skill, for all of us to see through his eyes'.²⁷ Especially those of us who come from Liverpool.

Charlie Lambert August 2022

References

1. By courtesy of the University of Liverpool Library, PUB/3/12/10.
 2. John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, GB 133 NCN10.
 3. Simpson, M. (2003) *Hugging the Shore*, Nottingham: Shoestring Press, p. 157.
 4. <https://www.countrystride.co.uk/single-post/countrystride-61-norman-nicholson>
 5. 'On the Closing of Millom Ironworks' in Nicholson, N. (1994) *Collected Poems*, ed. Neil Curry, London: Faber & Faber, p. 297.
 6. *Collected Poems* p. 373.
 7. *PN Review* 130, vol 26 no 2, Nov - Dec 1999, p. 67.
 8. *Collected Poems* p. 179.
 9. *PN Review* 130, vol 26 no 2, Nov - Dec 1999, p. 68.
 10. Powell, N. (2022) 'Peter Scupham obituary', *The Guardian*, June 19th 2022. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/jun/19/peter-scupham-obituary>.
 11. *Comet*, Vol 14, Issue 2, Spring/Summer 2020, pp. 2-6.
 12. Scammell, W. (ed.) (1984) *Between Comets: For Norman Nicholson at 70*, Durham: Taxvs Press, p. 48.
 13. Simpson M. (2003) *Hugging the Shore*, Nottingham: Shoestring Press, p. 146.
 14. *Collected Poems*, p 358.
 15. *Collected Poems*, p 359.
 16. Cooper, D. (2022) Email to Charlie Lambert, July 27th.
 17. Ibid.
 18. Gibson, A. 2013. 'At the Dying Atlantic's Edge: Norman Nicholson and the Cumbrian Coast' in *The Literature and Cultures of the Irish Sea*. Available at: <https://www.ucd.ie/scholarcast/transcripts/Norman%20Nicholson%20and%20the%20Cumbrian%20Coast.pdf>.
 19. *Collected Poems*, p 189.
 20. Gardner, P. (1973) *Norman Nicholson*, New York: Twayne, pp. 95 & 172.
 21. Nicholson, N. (1954) 'Ferry on the Mersey', *Time and Tide* vol. 35, March 13 1954, p. 334.
 22. Cooper, D. (2022) Email to Charlie Lambert, July 27th.
 23. Ibid.
 24. By courtesy of the University of Liverpool Library, PUB/3/12/10.
 25. Jones, K. (2013) *Norman Nicholson: The Whispering Poet*, Appleby: The Book Mill, p. 226.
 26. Ibid.
 27. By courtesy of the University of Liverpool Library, PUB/3/12/10.
-

GoFundMe Deadline by Charlie Lambert

The clock is ticking towards the deadline for donations to our online fundraiser!

Early this year the Architectural Heritage Fund gave our project to buy and renovate Nicholson's house their backing, in the form of a commitment to match all the donations to a maximum of £20,000. There's a deadline of January 31st 2023, which means that all the money donated as of that date, up to £20k, will be matched by the AHF.

At the time of writing the online campaign, hosted by GoFundMe, is approaching £13,000. For a literary society like ours to raise this amount of money is a great achievement, and it would be wonderful if we could take it a bit closer to the £20,000 mark before the January deadline.

The money in itself is really valuable but what it also shows is tangible support for the NN House project which is what the major funders want to see. This year we have notched up a major achievement in securing the support of the Millom Town Deal which has included our project in its submission to the Government for a total of £20 million in levelling-up investment. We await the Government's response later this year but either way we will be applying to other national and local funders. To be able to show that we have hit our GoFundMe target and thereby secured maximum match funding from the AHF will stand us in very good stead.

Thank you so much to everyone who has contributed so far. And if you are wondering whether to chip in or not – now's the time!

The place to go is www.gofundme.com and type Norman Nicholson in the Search box.

CL



The clock the young Norman gave his stepmother and father as a wedding present

SAD NEWS

We're very sorry to inform our readers about the deaths of two founder members of the Norman Nicholson Society, both of whom knew Norman personally and who have both left their precious memories of their relationship with him as a treasure for the Society and all Nicholson's readers to cherish and enjoy. We expect fuller tributes to both of them to appear in the next issue of *Comet*.

Dorothy Richardson was a long-term NN Society committee member, serving as our Treasurer for many years and giving her enthusiastic and wise support to all our activities. She passed away on the 4th September 2022, at the age of 90, after some time in hospital. Like Nicholson, she was born and bred in Millom and contributed to all the activities of the town for many years. She was a much-loved member of the Society and of the wider community and will be sorely missed.

The Rev Canon **David Scott** (1947-2022) was an Anglican priest and poet whose work was praised by Norman Nicholson and who played an important part in the later years of Norman's life. He passed away on 21st October this year. He was a founder member of the Society, together with his wife Miggy, and supported many of our events. There is a beautiful tribute to David on the Bloodaxe Books website ([here](#)), who published many of his poetry collections, including *Beyond the Drift: New and Selected Poems* (2014).

Our loving condolences and deepest sympathy have been conveyed to both families.

A Summer in the North Country by Jack Threlfall Hartley

2022 was the year of the 19th Viking Congress, an interdisciplinary Viking-studies conference that took place across the north-west of England and northern Wales. It began life as the ‘Scoto-Scandinavian Conference’, with its first iteration in Lerwick in 1950. The name was changed to the Viking Congress at the suggestion of Welsh-born Scottish-Orkadian novelist Eric Linklater and since 1950, the congress has occurred every four years in one of the Nordic countries or in the British and Irish Isles.

The congress owes its vitality to its interdisciplinarity and it has always brought together the leading researchers in archaeology, history, numismatics (study of coins), philology, name-studies and runology, sharing a dedication to combining their expertise to increase our knowledge of the Viking Age and the Norse diaspora.

It is my belief that crucial to our understanding of the Viking and Norse world is to acknowledge and foreground the ways it has been and continues to be interpreted. In other words, it is important to ask what our later interpretations of this period of history say about us, our relationship with the source material as well as the people, places and currents who shine through them.

Members might be familiar with my work in this area connected to Cumbria and Norman Nicholson, in particular the presentation I gave at our festival in June last year entitled ‘Norman Nicholson and the Vikings: Memory and Identity in Greater Lakeland’. At the Viking Congress, I presented a poster on a similar theme and was more explicit about Nicholson’s role in the construction of cultural memory (Society members can access this via our Members’ Area).

Norse Cultural Memory in 20th-Century Lakeland: Norman Nicholson's Language of Place

Cultural memory
In the construction of Lakeland's cultural memory, the region's language—as preserved in dialect terms and place-names—was simultaneously appropriated, preserved and transformed in the work of the poet and topographical writer Norman Nicholson, Lakeland's most important literary figure of the 20th century.

'Norseness'
A defining feature of this cultural memory is its 'Norseness'—the influence of Old Norse language, literature and culture. Nicholson perceived the region's Old Norse inflected toponymy and dialect as the foundation of its contemporary identity, allowing him to forge connections across time and space—into the region's past but also to other places underpinned by Norse cultural memory.

Diaspora
The best way of envisaging this connection is as a part of a diaspora, characterised by continuing association with the (Scandinavian) homelands as well as a broader network of emigrated populations. An analytic approach which foregrounds this process thus emphasises contact and continuity, but also allows for regional variation, dictated by the 'new' settlement contexts, such as other populations, languages, and political frameworks, as well as topography and natural resources.

Marginalisation
In 20th-century Lakeland, this context is much concerned with regional marginalisation and the dominating influence of London. Nicholson's construction of cultural memory is thus founded on the premise that Lakeland is not understood on its own terms but merely as a provincial periphery to the perceived centre. Asserting the region's place in a long and wide diasporic process, therefore, re-orient the map, emphasising Lakeland's position in a sphere of influence that is not dictated by the contemporary power of England's south but instead by historic sea-oriented connections. On this map, Lakeland sits on one edge of the Irish Sea and is situated in a different cultural and geographical milieu long-dictated by trade, raiding and settlement across the North Atlantic.

The Millom Memory Stone
Nicholson's work plays with the metaphor of inscribing words on rock and evokes the materiality of the region's culture and heritage. The Millom Memory Stone (pictured) was erected in July 2019, showing the ongoing significance of Nicholson's perspective, carving the Old Norse word meaning 'memory' in rock, along with Nicholson's words.

Example: Prophecy to the Wind (1949)
The play *Prophecy to the Wind* generates an archipelagic, Norse diasporic connection between Cumbria and other 'colonies' across the North Atlantic.
"We said, in this one dale no fruds, no foragings;
No lagging heralds to breed
A line of skulls and jackdaws. From the bare rock
Man grows like a tree. Slate and shell
Give grit to his bones and shape the skull and teeth,
And the way the eyes are plugged in the brow. Man
Is a rock made mortal, and within the rock
He finds his immortality, I ask of honour
Not that the skulls shall sing in diminishing echoes;
But that the knee of rock on which we stand
Shall for a while be known as Hallbjörn's Hill." (32)
"Very few descendants of the people of our time still remain on the continents, but in the islands and archipelagos on the fringe of the Arctic Sea, in Iceland and the Faroes, there survives a Northern race who escaped the catastrophe which destroyed the rest of the world."

Conclusions
How is Nicholson's work different from earlier regional Norse medievalism?
An archipelagic connection; a political identity that relied on a distinct linguistic and cultural character, passionately asserting its right to exist; an adoption for the whole region—seaboard, (post-) industrial towns and all.
Lakeland's regional language is memorialised and commemorated in these texts, and the region's cultural memory is thus constructed. The perspective of diaspora is as much about emphasising and asserting cultural and historical connection as it is about any continuity of culture that might occur organically. In this way, other (potential) constituents of Lakeland's cultural memory, such as that indicated by place-names of Celtic origin, are sidelined. So, in the service of regional identity, Old Norse language is politically activated, pushing back against a narrative of neglect and marginalisation.



Jack's poster from the Viking Congress

Jack with Icelandic academic Gísli Sigurðsson by the Gosforth Cross on the Viking Congress Study Tour

It was an excellent congress and though the main part was hosted by Liverpool University,

A Summer in the North Country

we enjoyed field trips to look at the Anglo-Scandinavian hogback sculptures on the Wirral and in north Wales, and finally a two-day study tour in Cumbria, visiting Whitehaven, St Bees, Gosforth, Penrith and Carlisle. In Carlisle, we enjoyed the proximity of Nicholson's bust (pictured) to the cathedral's Scandinavian Runic inscription, before attending a lecture at Tullie House by NN Society member Matthew Townend, Professor in the Department of English and Related Literature at the University of York, on the role of 19th-century dialect studies and dialect recording in our understanding of Cumbria's Viking Past.

Myself and several other early career researchers were fortunate enough to receive Clare Fell bursaries from CWAAS to attend the congress study tour. I am extremely grateful for this support, without which I would not have been able to take part in such an integral part of the congress proceedings.

After the congress I immediately embarked on a week's sailing aboard the beautiful 41-foot Sigma yacht *Merlin* with an organization called *Sail Britain*, 'a think tank for the oceans', exploring the



*Jack with 'Nic' in Carlisle Cathedral
(Bust of Norman Nicholson by Joan Palmer)*



*Barbecue off the coast of Mull with friends from Knockvologan
(The Dutch artist Miek Zwamborn is holding a copy of Sea to the West)*

seas around the inner Hebrides.

We sailed from Oban along the Ross of Mull, stopping in beautiful Loch Buie and then in the waters around Knockvologan, giving us an understanding of Mull's diverse geological and landscape contexts, moving from volcanic mountains and dramatic cliffs to granite islets and golden machair sands with turquoise water glinting between.

Knockvologan on Mull is host to a

by Jack Threlfall Hartley

residency and study hub for art, literature, field research and nature preservation run by Dutch artists Miek Zwamborn and Rutger Emmelkamp. We shared a barbecue with them on one of the granite islets above the tidal sands in the lee of the island of Erraid, using limpet shells as spoons for lentil dal and eating delicious fresh salad from their garden—spicy rocket, St John’s Wort, lemon balm, mint, marshmallow plant, strawberry leaves, borage, nasturtium leaves and flowers. I donated a copy of Nicholson’s *Sea to the West* to their residency library and we left feeling full of the potential for creativity and collaboration in and between island communities.

We sailed through the Sound of Iona, viewing its famous abbey from the sea. The abbey sits on the site of an earlier Columban monastic community which was raided by Vikings an astounding four times in the thirty-year period between 795-825. Sailing these waters gave me, for the first time, a sense of the interconnectedness of the North Atlantic’s island and coastal communities—a sense of the distances, times and experiences involved. Central to the ideas of my PhD thesis is the historical and ongoing significance of the sea as a force for connection, travel and contact rather than separation and division. Gaining this real practical experience has aided my thinking in numerous ways.

The rest of the trip was not without beauty and adventure as we sailed past Ardnamurchan, the westernmost point of mainland Britain, and between the Small Isles, navigating between Eigg and Rùm before eventually finding safe haven in Kinloch bay. Rùm’s landscape is breath-taking, its pyramidal volcanic mountains rising from sea level to 800 metres or 2,600 feet. Nowhere in the British Isles reminds me more of Iceland, at least topographically, than this largest of the Small Isles.

While sailing I was thinking of several of Nicholson’s poems, not least ‘Landing on Staffa or REGULARITY’ from *Sea to the West* (1981), 355-357 in *CP*. We sailed past the hexagonal-basalt island of Staffa and saw ‘wave-shape and cave-shape’ like ‘a grooved chip-/potato cutter’ or ‘rolled corduroy’ (*CP*, 355), as the islands slid backward past us, Mull and Ulva and the Dutchman’s Hat, all listed in Nicholson’s poem.



Staffa

Photo by writer and photographer Hannah Close

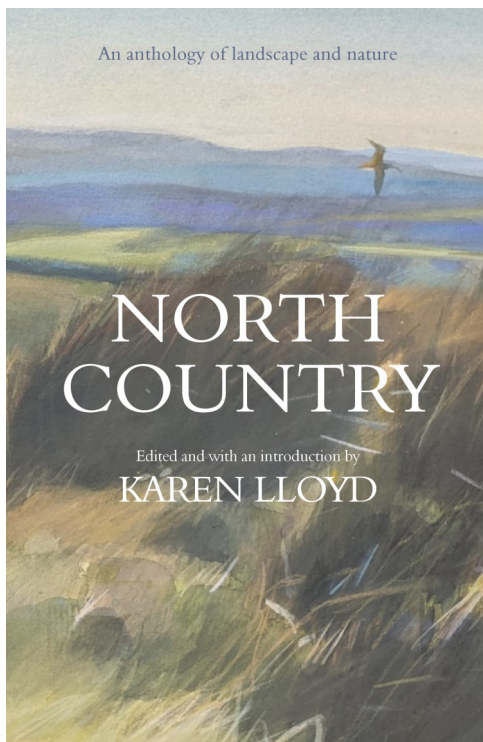
A Summer in the North Country (continued) by Jack Threlfall Hartley

In 'Landing on Staffa', Nicholson addresses what it means to write poetry in and about a place already saturated with literary association. Staffa was visited and written about by Scott, Keats, Wordsworth and was eventually the inspiration for Mendelssohn's beautiful Hebrides Overture (Fingal's Cave), Op. 26, to which we duly listened as we dawdled within sight of the cave. This theme of literary association has clear resonance with Cumbria and the Lake District, and especially with Nicholson's relationship with Wordsworth, whom David Cooper, citing Nicholson himself, termed 'the great big Old Man on [his] back' who had 'documented every rock, stone and tree [reference—Peggy's report in *Comet*, Vol. 2 Issue 2, p. 6]. Incidentally, I came upon this reference to Wordsworth by searching in *Comet Online*, hosted by Lancaster University (<https://wp.lancs.ac.uk/nns/>), which is really an excellent and intuitive resource for anyone interested in researching Nicholson. There is also, for example, Philip Houghton's wonderfully poetic evocation of 'the Cumbrian Poet's dilemma' in *Comet* Vol. 3, Issue 1, p. 6, dwelling on the role of the colour yellow in Nicholson's 'To the River Duddon'. Nicholson recorded 'Tutson, the St. John's-wort with a single yellow bead, / Marsh marigold, creeping jenny' and so added his own colour to the now established association between Wordsworth, daffodils and the Lake District.

After the residency aboard Merlin I spent a month each in Orkney and in Shetland, doing research for my PhD thesis and presenting on George Mackay Brown at a conference on the Orcadian 12th-century jarl, Rögnvaldr Kali Kolsson. This summer spent in islands—Scottish? British? Viking?—has turned my understanding of the geography of our part of the northern hemisphere on its head. Unst in Shetland is far far closer to Bergen in Norway or Torshavn in the Faroes than it is to London, the British capital; it is closer to these modern-day Scandinavian cities than it is to Edinburgh, the Scottish capital. Unst is even closer to Faroe and Norway than it is to Aberdeen, the ferry gateway to the Northern Isles.

There are no land roads south from Shetland and as the crow flies or the boat sails, the ocean *is* the road. All that needs to be decided is which direction to take.

Jack Threlfall Hartley November 2022



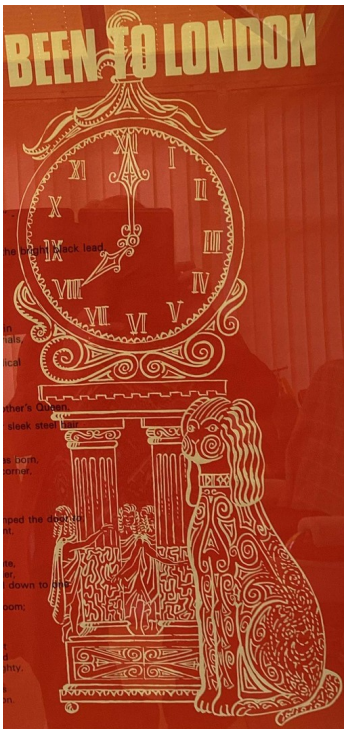
Postscript

I've long been fascinated by place-names and the stories they can tell us and in June I wrote a short essay on this subject which will be appearing in a new 'anthology of landscape and nature' published by Saraband and edited by Karen Lloyd. The anthology is called *North Country* and is due to be published on November 10th. There is a book launch at The Storey in Lancaster on Thursday **November 24th 5.30-7pm**, where myself and other contributors will be giving short readings. There will also possibly be a series of other connected events within Cumbria, to be announced at a later date.

The title of the essay is 'Place-Names and Poets—the Makings of a Cultural Landscape' and I discuss Nicholson's 'Scarf Gap, Buttermere' (*CP*, 199-200) from *The Pot Geranium* (1954) as well as briefly both 'For the Grieg Centenary' (*CP*, 36) from *Five Rivers* (1944) and 'Cornthwaite' (*CP*, 354) from *Sea to the West* (1981).

Beyond the Local

How Poetry Posters Brought Nicholson's Poems to the World by Antoinette Fawcett



A snippet view of Mid-NAG Poetry Poster No.1 (Nicholson's 'Have You Been to London?').

I had seen some copies of Norman Nicholson Poetry Posters before—the striking imagery of Ron Brown's graphic illustration of 'Have You Been to London?' and the delicate scrawl of Birtley Aris's larger-than-life leaves and flowers that form the background to 'Weeds'—but I was completely unaware of their history and importance until a chance discovery on the internet this summer. That sent me on a four-month quest that has highlighted their significance and uncovered at least some of their history.

Follow me as I retrace parts of my journey and I think you will agree that this apparently humble form of publication really does have a resonance well beyond the local. These posters carried the works of many important poets out into the world, and they still do. And Nicholson's poems were among them.

The story starts with my investigations into *A Local Habitation*, whose 50th anniversary we are celebrating this year. Searching for evidence on the internet of the poems that make up that collection, I stumbled across information about the Mildura Arts Centre in Australia, which in July 2020 had held an exhibition of MidNAG Poetry Posters, including one by Norman Nicholson.

I recognized the acronym: MidNAG is short for the Mid-Northumberland Arts Group, which had published Nicholson's important pamphlet *The Shadow of Black Combe* (1978), as well as no less than four Poetry Posters: 'Have You Been to London?' (No. 1); 'The Dumb Spirit' (No. 5); 'Road Up' (No. 6); and 'Weeds' (No. 28). More digging into the surrounding context of these posters showed that the most prominent poets of the time contributed to the series, including Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Charles Causley, David Wright, Fleur Adcock and Charles Tomlinson.

From what I can gather, these posters were a tremendous success and were widely admired for the quality of both the poems and the artwork. They were published between circa 1968 and 1982, with the publishing heyday being in the 1970s. In all, there were about 59 posters published in the main Poetry Poster Series.¹

Norman Nicholson's 'Have You Been to London?' (1968) was the first MidNAG Poetry Poster and its success paved the way for publication in this format for many other poets,² including for Nicholson's friend and fellow poet Irvine Hunt. Nevertheless, Nicholson was the **only** poet in this Poetry Poster series who had four posters to his name.³

Posters of any kind are usually perceived as ephemera, but these particular posters were highly regarded and were collected both by individuals and by institutions. Michael Schmidt, the former editor of *PN Review*, tells us that 'Have You Been to London?' sold for 7s 6d⁴ (this was pre-decimal currency), which is more than many Penguin paperbacks of the period.⁵ They were 'handsome posters', whose object 'was to make poetry visible, and "poetry" was taken to include English and foreign writing of the present and past'. Schmidt also tells us that he has personally seen the MidNAG posters 'in classrooms, offices, bed-sitters and living-rooms'.⁶ In other words, they really did have wide appeal and impact.

The Mid-Northumberland Arts Group was based in Ashington, Northumberland, and was the brainchild of the librarian George Stephenson (1927-2010)⁷ who wanted to combat

Beyond the Local...

economic depression in this mining town through arts and leisure activities for all. He founded MidNAG in the early 1960s, first as a group of enthusiastic volunteers, but gradually professionalizing its work, until in 1974 he was made Deputy Chief Leisure and Publicity Officer for the new District Council of Wansbeck and was able to devote all his time and attention to MidNAG.⁸ MidNAG itself then gained status as an Area Arts Association, giving it a bigger budget and the ability to promote the work of really big names in the arts.⁹

The range of activities was wide and included sports and gymnastics for all, folk dance and ballet, opera and puppet theatre, literary tea parties for toddlers, literary readings and exhibitions, folk and pop concerts, and much more. Stephenson, in his role of Director of MidNAG, founded the famous Ashington Festival and promoted the work of the Ashington Pitmen Painters, whose paintings had mainly been produced in the 1930s and 1940s, but had continued well after the 2nd World War.¹⁰ He also built up a very special relationship with a wide range of Northern writers and artists, including Norman Nicholson. Stephenson, like Nicholson, valued the local, regional, national and the international. Indeed, he deliberately built links with Copeland, sharing a number of the productions he had booked with the district and with other similar areas.¹¹

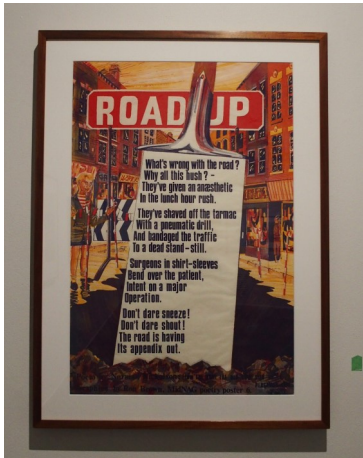
My research at the Northumberland Archives, this summer confirmed that Nicholson's work was associated with MidNAG's success from the very start. He gave several readings in Morpeth and Ashington and in the surrounding villages.¹² An exhibition was organized by MidNAG to honour his writings,¹³ and Nicholson was encouraged by George Stephenson to work towards collecting poems for the pamphlet that became *The Shadow of Black Combe* (1978).¹⁴ But it was that first publication of Nicholson's 'Have You Been to London?' that laid the foundations for the later publishing success of MidNAG,¹⁵ and it is arguably the poetry posters that have continued to create an impact, beyond the usual poetry constituency.

MidNAG believed that good art and good literature should be available to all and they created posters that would bring poetry into classrooms, bookshops, craft shops, libraries and other public spaces. They provided an inspiration to students at teacher training colleges¹⁶ and encouraged many children and adults to think about and respond to poetry. MidNAG's poetry poster competitions even encouraged young people to design their own posters.¹⁷ Nowadays, they are regarded as fine examples of UK graphic art, are offered [for sale online](#) at high prices, and are collected by [art galleries](#) and national libraries.¹⁸

Particularly surprising is the fact that the Mildura Arts Centre in North-west Victoria, Australia has a collection 'in excess of 40' of the MidNAG posters, which represents a large proportion of the posters that MidNAG published. They hold three of the Nicholson posters, but not 'Have You Been to London?', the poster that launched the collection and MidNAG's publishing success. The 2020 summer exhibition of the Mildura Arts Centre MidNAG Poetry Posters Collection was described in an article in a local paper as 'a wonderland for fans of art and literature'¹⁹ and although only one of the three Nicholson posters, 'Road Up', was displayed in that exhibition, it was prominently used in the publicity for the event.²⁰ When the pandemic forced the Arts Centre to close its doors in summer 2020, the organizers decided to continue the exhibition online, via digital content.

The Mildura collection owes its origins to Tom McCullough, a previous director of the Arts Centre, who had come across the posters during a British Council sponsored visit to Northumberland in 1970, when he visited the Ashington Festival and other northern English cultural events. He said of the posters: 'The British Council often circulated exhibitions of UK graphic art overseas, but I'd never seen anything so original from a group of combined artists and poets before then.' He made the decision to subscribe directly to buying the posters

by Antoinette Fawcett



annually rather than negotiating for an exhibition to be sent and toured overseas. McCullough was attracted to the idea of combining different art forms and felt that the MidNAG Poetry Posters would be a good model for 'possible emulation around north-west Victoria in the 1970s'.²¹

Not only were the MidNAG Poetry Posters being displayed in Australia in 2020, they also made an appearance in Canada, via the magic of the internet. When carrying out my research this summer, I was amazed to find evidence of 'Road Up' being featured in a digital event for the Canada Culture Days 2020.²² I contacted Russ Disotell, the organizer of the Culture Days in Brockville, Ontario, to ask him about the event. He told me that although Mildura's MidNAG Poetry Poster collection didn't make

its way to Canada physically, it was digitally available and accessible countrywide through the Canada Culture Days platform. Russ said: 'While not here physically that particular post/event garnered a lot of interest not only in Brockville, but throughout the country.' At least 600 communities took part in the 2020 Canada Culture Days, so potentially that was a huge new audience for the Poetry Posters.²³

But why did Mildura in Australia share its digital content with Brockville in Canada? The answer lies in the enterprise of two Victorian-era brothers, George (1848-1932) and William Chaffey (1856-1926), who were born in Brockville, Ontario. They were the 'preeminent irrigation engineers' in the world and 'were largely responsible for the infrastructure that supported the growth of Los Angeles'. This resulted in them being invited to Australia by the government, where they founded Mildura, on the Murray River.²⁴ That is, of course, another story, but what is relevant to this particular narrative is the fact that the Rio Vista historic house, the family home of William Chaffey, is part of the [Mildura Arts Centre](#).

The circles of connection, across time and space, are dizzying and astonishing, but one thing is clear. Poetry posters, it turns out, are far from ephemeral and they can connect people to art and literature in fresh and immediate ways. You may not wish to borrow a poetry book from a library, nor buy one for yourself. But if the poem is displayed in a public place, in an attractive, or even alluring form, then you will probably read and absorb it.

In Nicholson's own lifetime his poetry was widely read in English-speaking nations abroad, including the US, Canada and South Africa,²⁵ and its translation brought his work to many different countries, Italy, the Netherlands, Russia, Denmark and Sweden amongst them.²⁶ But the humble poetry poster really does fulfil the mission that George Stephenson, Director of MidNAG, had in mind for it: 'The origin of the idea came in response to an attempt to further enhance people's enjoyment of poetry...In content the aim has been to reach as broad an audience as possible...'.²⁷

Yet Nicholson – and perhaps even the far-sighted George Stephenson – would surely have been astonished to know that the Poetry Poster No. 6 – 'Road Up', a poem written for children – and many other MidNAG posters, would be exhibited in Australia almost fifty years later and be enjoyed digitally by people all over Canada, as a response to the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic. That forced people to think imaginatively about how to continue cultural activities in a world in which millions of people were obliged to stay at home. But staying at home and being limited to one specific locality does not, as Nicholson knew, stop us from interacting with the world. The local really can become the global.

Antoinette Fawcett November 2022

References can be found on p. 26 and p. 29

National Heritage Week—Pop-up Exhibition at 14, St George’s Terrace



A bronze bust by Josefina de Vasconcellos of a young, whiskerless Norman, greeted visitors to the exhibition



‘We did it!’ Charlie Lambert, Sue Dawson, Glenn Lang and Antoinette Fawcett—just before the opening of the pop-up exhibition

Norman Nicholson’s house was open for a one-day pop-up exhibition on 17th September, 2022. We were able to display many interesting artefacts to the public, and had wonderful feedback from our visitors about their impact. The exhibits included Norman’s typewriter (an Imperial Good Companion model, made in the 1950s); his tweed stalker hat, walking stick and whisky flask; and the original deeds to the house, with his father Joseph’s signature clearly visible. Norman’s literary side was represented by a number of posters of his poems, including three of the four posters of his work published by the Mid Northumberland Arts Group (MidNAG) and a striking poster published by Cumbrians Opposed to a Radioactive Environment (CORE) with an image of [a painting](#) by Julian Cooper (‘Towards the Sea, Scafell’) coupled with Nicholson’s poem ‘Windscale’. The use of both the image and the poem were granted to CORE free of charge, by the artist and the poet, although Nicholson died before the poster was published. Our copy was signed by the artist. Other important exhibits included first editions of Nicholson’s work and much evidence of the academic and other honours granted to Norman in recognition of his achievements as a poet and writer. Josefina de Vasconcellos’ bust of the younger Norman greeted visitors in the front room, while the back room (still with its original fireplace and mantelpiece) housed the clay maquette created by Joan D. Palmer for her bust of a much older, decidedly whiskered Norman. The exhibition clearly demonstrated that the house has many stories to tell about Norman and his family and that it could be a successful and sustainable museum and centre for creative, literary and community activities.

AF

UPDATE FROM LAURA DAY

Laura’s doctoral thesis on Norman Nicholson’s poetry and landscape is entering its final phase. We’re very much looking forward to its completion. Meanwhile she has presented many talks and papers on her work, including at the Sheffield Hallam / University of Huddersfield joint symposium on ‘Apocalypse I: Visionary Modernist and Expressionist Poetry of the 1930s and 1940s’ in March this year. Laura’s paper was entitled: ‘Man, Landscape and the Anthropocene: Norman Nicholson’s *Rock Face*’. Exciting times for Nicholson Studies!

Maurice George Payn—1929-2022

The Society was very sorry to receive the recent news of the death of Maurice Payn, one of the founder members of the Norman Nicholson Society, and a great supporter of Nicholson and his work. Maurice died at his home in Carlisle on 28th May, 2022 at the age of 92, after a short illness.

Maurice Payn knew Nicholson personally and often recalled his connection with him, in particular the time when he drove Norman 'one wintery day from Millom to a meeting in the north of the county.' Indeed, readers of *Comet* may recall that Maurice shared his memories of Norman with us in *Comet* 5: 3 (pp. 1-3). In later years, Maurice was unable to attend our events and meetings, but he certainly enjoyed receiving *Comet* and keeping up to date with the Society's work.

Maurice was born in Canterbury in 1929 and was the son of a carpenter and joiner. He was educated at the Simon Langton Grammar School for Boys in the same city and went up to Keble College, Oxford in 1949 after completing his National Service in the British Army. At Oxford he read English Language and Literature, graduating in 1952 and staying on for the Diploma in Education (1953).

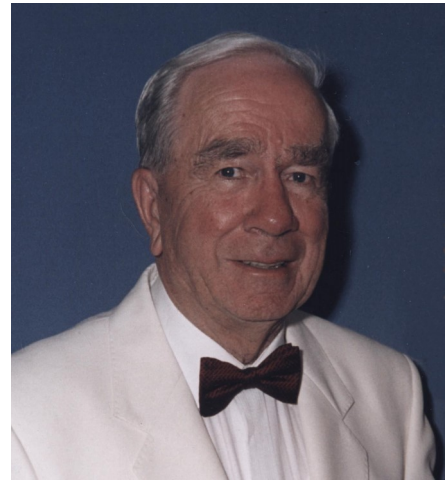
He was appointed Senior English Master at Brigg Grammar School, Lincolnshire, in 1954, eventually moving to King Edward VII School, Lytham St Annes, before being appointed in 1964 as the first ever Education Adviser for the teaching of English in the County of Cumberland. When Cumberland was absorbed into the new county of Cumbria in 1974, Maurice was appointed as its Chief Education Adviser and Inspector of Schools.

His work involved him in many important areas of development, including a programme of in-service training for teachers and establishing the County's first residential educational centre at Higham Hall, near Bassenthwaite Lake. His connections with English continued as he organized events for teachers and pupils, bringing them in contact with writers such as Norman Nicholson, Seamus Heaney and Kathleen Raine, among others. His work involved much motoring around the county and he took great delight in the landscape, specifically the fells of the Northern Lake District: Ullswater, Loweswater and Buttermere were favourite places.

In retirement in 1990 he had an active role with the Lake District National Park as a Volunteer Warden and with the Lakeland Horticultural Society. Books were his constant companions: his interest in English Literature continued through his involvement with the Norman Nicholson Society and the Penrith Branch of the U3A Literature Group.

His family life included two happy marriages. His first wife, Barbara, predeceased him, as did his second wife Heather. He is survived by his children Timothy, Rebecca and Elisabeth and his three granddaughters, Katie, Alice and Helen.

The Norman Nicholson Society will remember Maurice with great affection as a good and kindly man who loved and admired Nicholson's work and who had a positive relationship with Norman, the person. Every writer needs and benefits from that kind of support.



Maurice Payn c. 2014 - the year the NN Society celebrated Nicholson's centenary

Recording a Cancer Journey, in Nicholson's Footsteps



The cover of *Visible Music*, Martyn Halsall's new poetry collection (Caldew Press 2022)

Conversations about Norman Nicholson formed part of cancer treatment for Society member Martyn Halsall, who recently launched his poetry collection *Visible Music* charting his own experience.

Questions to a consultant about the potential effects of starting chemo-therapy, on the eve of addressing the Society in Millom, revealed a medical expert with an interest in poetry, but no knowledge of Nicholson. A 'mini-seminar' followed, Martyn said, followed up with a request for more reading during his next hospital visit.

'Now, I've read *Wednesday Early Closing*; where should I go next?' the consultant asked. 'That developing poetic friendship became part of the treatment process,' Martyn said.

Visible Music unites his two life-long passions, for poetry and journalism, combining 'reporting' on the five-year cancer process with its expression through 75 poems. They also echo the 'lament and consolation in one song' of the curlews that appear in several of the poems.

'The poems also reflect, hopefully, the incredible medical and pastoral care I received from so many caring NHS professionals, and from family and friends, during that long cancer journey,' Martyn said. 'Also important was the healing potential of "place", so many are set in West Cumbria—places Nicholson may well have known—and the Scottish islands.'

Reviewing the collection in the *Church Times*, Mark Oakley, the Dean of St John's College, Cambridge, wrote: 'His imagery stays with you... his hospital visits are part of a scrutinising spiritual laboratory.'

Martyn said: 'Like Norman Nicholson, I write in the Christian tradition. My hope is that this collection will encourage, as its dedication says: "All who experience cancer."'

Visible Music (978-1-916388-11-6) is published by Caldew Press, Carlisle (see: <https://caldewpress.com/publications.html>).

Notes for 'Beyond the Local' by Antoinette Fawcett (pp. 21-23)

1. The catalogue of the Northumberland Archives lists the posters held at Woodhorn in the MidNAG collection. See [Home Page \(northumberland.gov.uk\)](http://Home Page (northumberland.gov.uk)) and use the Advanced Search link, then type in the reference NRO 04231/11*. This should bring up all the posters in the collection. The Poetry Posters start at NRO 04231/11/203 and continue through to NRO 04231/11/244. The final poster listed is Poetry Poster No. 59, a poem by Ivor Gurney, published in 1982. According to [a note on the Tate website](#), however, the number of poetry posters in this series was sixty-one.
2. The MidNAG collection at the Northumberland Archives, Woodhorn, contains many references to Norman Nicholson which make it apparent that MidNAG's publishing success was indeed founded on Poetry Poster No. 1, Nicholson's 'Have You Been to London?'. The 1980 spiral-bound typed report *MidNAG: Alive and Well: 1963-1979* (NRO 5138/B/2) says quite clearly that its publishing arm was 'run on a break-even basis, with the proceeds from past publications financing the production of future publications' (p. 10).
3. See Note 1, above.
4. The Tyneside poet James Kirkup (1918-2009) had a separate MidNAG Poetry Poster series (six posters), of poems he wrote in response to woodcut images by the Northumbrian wood engraver Thomas Bewick (1753-1825) (NRO5138/B/2; p. 9).
5. Schmidt, M. (1982) 'MidNAG', *PN Review* 26 (Vol. 6, No. 6), p. 7.
6. See this list: <https://isfdb.org/cgi-bin/publisheryear.cgi?88+1968>
7. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2011/feb/01/george-stephenson-obituary> and <https://ivorgurney.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/newsOct2011.pdf> (pp. 12-13).
8. Ibid. Note that George Stephenson later became *Chief* Leisure and Publicity Officer for Wansbeck District Council.
9. MidNAG achieved Area Arts Association status circa 1974. The 'big names' included Ted Hughes, C. Day Lewis, W.H. Auden and David Kossoff (*MidNAG: Alive and Well: 1963-1979*, p. 9; NRO 5138/B/2).

[Continues on page 29]

Poem by Martyn Halsall

Visible Music

Each footstep takes us further into deep past,
leaving the tarmac road for the farming gravel
till it runs to grass, well-trodden to prehistory
where some might shed their shoes, sense holy ground.

Moor drafts succeeding language, gathered wildness,
world rimmed by lope of ridges, glimpse of ocean.
In circles, shafts of stone, monolith signposts
predict cathedral cities' spires and cloisters.

Prophecy, then, that three tall stones should shadow
five thousand years as mother, son and spirit;
or tomb, globed like the world, should hold a body
coiled in a slabbed womb like a question-mark?

Rumours and over-hearings: visible music
is scored through harp-stringed sedge or noted down
where sea-wind song-lines through a boulder wall.
Quick crochet notes re-phrase starched cotton grass.

Curlew's concerto grants a gift of tongues,
its notes quick-quick before its rubbled stream
reveals low profile, fleet, as summoning rain.
Now, like those earlier people with their settling ards,
some time to stand, and some to move away.

Martyn Halsall

Member News

- **Mary Robinson's** poem 'R S at the writers' workshop' was highly commended in the R. S. Thomas 2022 poetry competition.
 - **Neil Curry's** most recent critical book is *Samuel Johnson: Writer*. It was published in May 2022 by Greenwich Exchange and can be bought directly from the publisher at www.greenex.co.uk, for a price of £13.99 including UK postage and packing.
 - Norman Nicholson Society member **Carole Thirlaway** recently completed her MA in Literature, Romanticism and the English Lake District. Her dissertation was entirely focused on Norman Nicholson and had the title 'Early Traumas and Their Effect Upon the Life and Work of Norman Nicholson, Leading to his Marginalization as a Poet'. We look forward to hearing more about her study in a future issue of *Comet*.
 - **Kerry Darbishire** and **Kelly Davis** have collaborated on a joint poetry pamphlet, *Glory Days*, published by Hen Run (2021). You can order it from the [publisher](#) for only £4.00
 - For something completely different, *Never Work With Your Idols: 35 Commandments for the Music Industry* is **Antoinette Fawcett's** translation of a book by the Dutch music industry manager and promoter, **Gideon Karting**. It would be a great Christmas present for the music industry wannabe in your lives! More details on [Amazon](#). It is amusing and full of useful advice.
-

At the Rock Face

in memory of Norman Nicholson

*I actually think what we do is harder
than what Shelley and Byron and those people
had to do – wrapped in the thick dressing gown
I had lent you against the cold of my cottage
on Anglesey, half-turned away so that you were
looking into the blank of the television screen
as if it were the silence you had to quarry
on half a lung...*

And then to see you
'Landing on Staffa', driving a new form like a coach-and-six,
flexing the long lines against the short,
"the describers" all at work, Scott, Keats, Wordsworth,
("each the other's blight,
hurried and hurrying") before you scurried south,
"down the ragged rip
of the tartan, to grey unphotographed
waste acres of West
Cumberland. There, in dark claustrophobic
winter, to retrace
lonnings once known to the feet of childhood".

I was to discover just how fertile those winters were
when you sent 'The Bloody Cranesbill', a recovery
of the weekly walk with your father and your Uncle Jim
across the ruddled rocks of the mine's long dying
to the cockle-shell dip in the limestone where you found
a flower "fragile as Venetian glass, pencilled with metal-
thread
Haematite-purple veins. The frail cups lay so gently
On their small glazed saucer-bracts that a whisper would have
tipped them over
Like emptying tea leaves out."

How delicate it is,
that first glimpse beyond us, just as you were learning
to read the town back to the iron ore it made its living from.
And it's an awareness you never lost. Alive to all the detail
as "the earth scratches itself awake" and "codlins-and-cream
and comfrey crane up from hairy necks through collars
of bicycle wheels and broken pots", you'd pick your way
through scrap to the whitlow-grass, reclaiming its place
on the foreshore "with a flower no bigger than a
whitebait's eye."

Roger Garfitt

Biography—Roger Garfitt

A freelance writer ever since he won the Gregory Award in 1974, **Roger Garfitt** has been Poetry Critic of *London Magazine*, Editor of *Poetry Review*, Writing Fellow at the University of East Anglia, and Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Swansea University. His books include a memoir, *The Horseman's Word* (Jonathan Cape, 2011), which was shortlisted for the PEN/Ackerley prize. His most recent collection of poetry is *The Action* (Carcenet, 2019). His *Selected Poems* (2000) and *Given Ground* (1989) were also published by Carcanet Press. More information [here](#).

More Member News

Dr. Andrew Frayn (Edinburgh Napier University) is continuing his work on Norman Nicholson and Rural Modernity as an aspect of his interest in Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture. He presented a paper on 'Norman Nicholson, Raymond Williams, and Rural Modernity' in April 2022, at a Centenary Conference in Manchester commemorating the work of the academic, writer and critic Raymond Williams, best known for his work in literary and cultural studies.

Andrew also presented a paper on Nicholson at the symposium 'Gardens in the Gorse: Rural Britain's Modernist Cultures', at Newcastle University on the 15th October, 2022. The symposium treated 'rural areas and people as sources of fresh ideas about art and culture' as it examined 'how this rural modernity impacted national institutions, systems, and values'. Andrew's paper was entitled: 'ON THE PERIMETER AND FRINGE OF WAR': NORMAN NICHOLSON, RURAL MODERNITY AND WARTIME'.

We look forward to reading a published version of Andrew's research in due course.



*Dr. Andrew Frayn at the NN Festival, June 2019.
Photo by Charlie Lambert.*

Notes for 'Beyond the Local' (continued) (pp. 21-23)

10. See: [George Stephenson obituary | Culture | The Guardian](#) and *MidNAG: Alive and Well: 1963 -1979* (NRO5138/B/2).
11. *MidNAG: Alive and Well: 1963 -1979*, p. 16 (NRO5138/B/2).
12. *MidNAG: Alive and Well: 1963 -1979*, p. 9, p. 34, p. 37, p. 52 (NRO5138/B/2).
13. *MidNAG: Alive and Well: 1963 -1979*, p. 24, p. 52 (NRO5138/B/2).
14. *The Shadow of Black Combe* was published in 1978. GS's notebook for 1976 (pages unnumbered) notes that the project was 'suggested to NN 14/8/76', but that GS will wait for the 'seed to germinate' (NRO 5138/C/2).
15. See note 2 above.
16. The MidNAG Poetry Posters went on tour in 1973/74 (*MidNAG: Alive and Well : 1963 -1979*, p. 11, p. 46; NRO5138/B/2). In 1975 the MidNAG Poetry Posters were toured to Renaissance, Ulverston, Cumbria. In 1977 they were exhibited at Charlotte Mason College, Ambleside, at the University of Newcastle Chaplaincy, and at several schools, libraries and Sixth Form colleges (NRO 5138/C/2) (pages unnumbered).
17. *MidNAG: Alive and Well : 1963 -1979*, p. 24 (NRO5138/B/2).
18. There are holdings of the MidNAG Poetry Posters in the National Poetry Library, the National Library of Scotland, the British Library and many other locations. For further holdings, search [WorldCat](#).
19. *Sunraysia Daily*, 17.07.2020. Courtesy of Mildura Arts Centre.
20. *Sunraysia Daily*, 18.07.2020. Courtesy of Mildura Arts Centre.
21. 'MidNAG Poetry Posters. Mildura Arts Centre Collection' [Exhibition Wall Statement]. Courtesy of Mildura Arts Centre.
22. See: [Mid-Northumberland Arts Group Poetry Posters | Culture Days](#)
23. Disotell, R. (2022) Email to Antoinette Fawcett, July 4th.
24. Ibid.
25. For details see Wilson, A.F. (1992) *Norman Nicholson Bibliography*, available at the John Rylands Library, Manchester and the Whitehaven Cumbria Archive Centre.
26. See my articles in *Comet* Vol. 10:2, pp. 12-15 and Vol 13: 2, p. 9.
27. *MidNAG 25 Years On: 1963-1988* (spiral-bound typed report), p. 11 (NRO 4231/F21).

A Friendship Across the Generations

When *A Local Habitation* was published in 1972, I was the Poetry Critic of *London Magazine* and gave it the fine review it deserved – so much so, Norman later told me, that Charles Monteith, his Editor at Faber, said, "Did you see that lovely review in the *London Magazine*?"

In 1976 I was Arts Council Creative Writing Fellow at the University College of North Wales, Bangor, as it was then, and invited Norman to give a workshop and a reading. Norman and his wife Yvonne would come down the coast by train and stay a couple of nights in the cottage on Anglesey I had rented for the duration of the Fellowship. As it happened, that week my old Morris Traveller failed its MOT and I had to drive it down to my other home, a cottage in North Devon where a Hillman Minx a friend had sold me was stored in the garage. It was a fraught journey because the brakes had failed on the Traveller and I had to drive the length of the country relying on engine braking and the handbrake. Then it turned out that the brakes on the Minx had seized and were smoking as the mechanic in North Devon towed it uphill to his garage. It was late in the evening before the Minx was ready and I had to drive overnight to meet Norman and Yvonne from the train. I hadn't slept for two nights and was clearly manic when I took them for a meal that night with the poet Tony Conran and his wife, Lesley, and Ian Hughes, a mature student whose poems I would later publish in a pamphlet. Ian promptly took out his tobacco pouch and gave me a roll-up to calm me down. "It's *Old Holborn*, he said, knowing it had been my standby in the Sixties. But Norman showed great understanding. "Tomorrow," he said, "we'll see what you're like after three nights without sleep."

The conversation I am remembering in the poem (see pp. 28-9, this issue) took place early the next morning. "You don't know what it means to me to hear you say that!" I told Norman, "after a hard day at the rock face." "Well," he replied, "that's just your age."

There were some lively exchanges in the workshop. As we looked at the first lines of 'On the Closing of Millom Ironworks',

Wandering by the heave of the town park, wondering
Which way the day will drift,
On the spur of a habit I turn to the feathered
Weathercock of the furnace chimneys.

But no grey-smoke tail

Pointers the mood of the wind.

I suggested there might be a subtle pattern in the imagery. A pointer is a gundog that shows where the game is hiding and "pointers the mood of the wind" would be doing just that, showing "the feathered / Weathercock of the furnace chimneys."

"Now I'm having that!" Norman exclaimed, "That's a lovely explanation."

"We'll sell the dog tomorrow, Norman, for a high price!"

Norman had to rest in the afternoon and Yvonne gave me a shopping list for his tea. I enlisted one of my students to help. "Shopping for Mother," she said, as we made our way to the butcher's.

For the evening reading we had taken over an old pub and it was packed out, everyone charging their glasses before Norman stood to read, a commanding figure with his Edwardian sideburns, his voice resonant with its Cumberland burr.

In 1978 I was in the running to become Editor of *Poetry Review* and asked to put together a sample issue. I wrote to Norman and was delighted to receive 'Landing on Staffa'. Innovative

by Roger Garfitt

and striking, I made it the opening poem for my first issue. Norman clearly felt we were on the same wavelength and in 1980 he sent five poems from his next collection, a group that opened with 'The Bloody Cranesbill' and culminated in 'Fjord', prompting a memorable cover illustration by Priscilla Eckhard.

That autumn I was Writer in Durham County Library and Norman and I read together in Crook and Consett. As we drove through a small town on the way, I remember Yvonne saying, "I suppose Norman Tebbit would be telling the people who live here to get on their bike!"

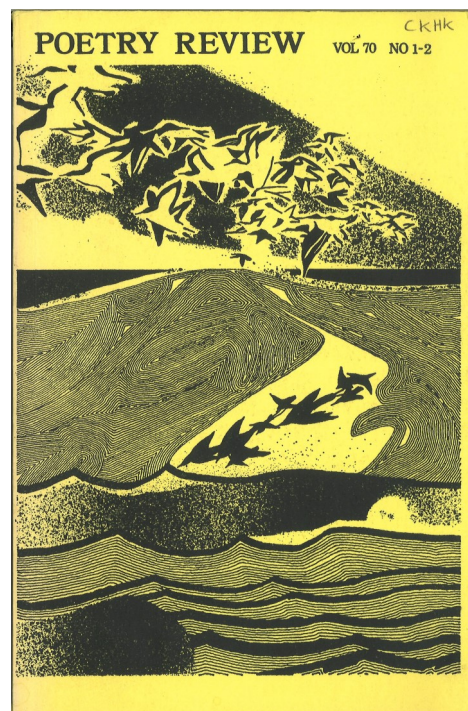
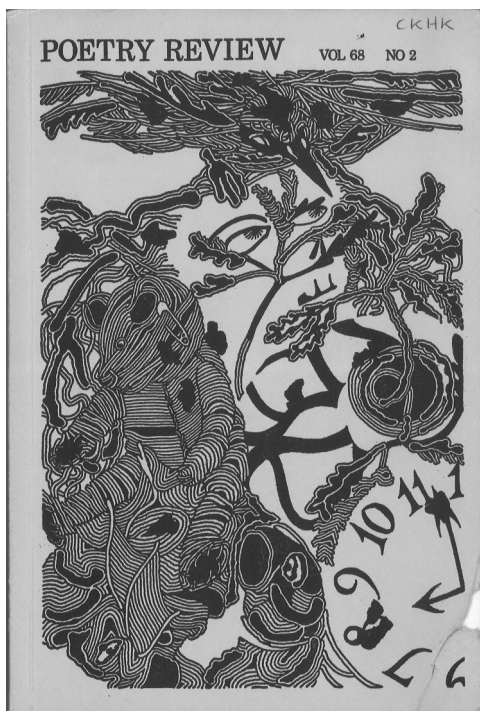
Norman and Yvonne made a great partnership and it was a severe blow to Norman when Yvonne died. "It's not even a half-life I live now," he said when I next visited, "it's only a quarter-life!" But the town he had chronicled from its first beginnings looked after him and our lunch was handed in over the half-door from the street.

"Are you still writing?" I asked. "Oh, I don't know that I would have the energy now. Even when I was younger, I would do anything rather than write a poem!" But as he observed in 'Pearlwort', poets persist and Norman lived to mark the return of Halley's Comet with a poem that presents a series of incisive images all the way back to Giotto's Star of Bethlehem and asks what the comet will look down on when it next returns:

A wiser world, or one unpeopled,
Dead as the asteroidal dust
It hoovers, on its orbit, through?

— a question that has only increased in urgency over the decades since.

Roger Garfitt August 2022

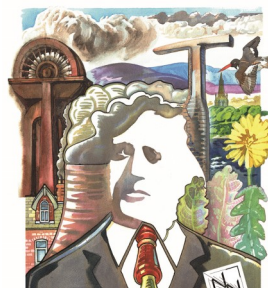


The two striking covers of Poetry Review, artwork by Priscilla Eckhard.

*Vol 68 No. 2 includes 'Landing on Staffa'. Vol 70 No. 1-2 was inspired by Nicholson's 'Fjord'.
Images supplied by the National Poetry Library, with permissions also from the Poetry Society.*

FUTURE EVENTS

- **Online Event** to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of *A Local Habitation* **SATURDAY 26th November, 2022**. See the Society website and e-bulletin for details.
- **Christmas Lunch** at the Netherwood Hotel, Grange-over-Sands, **SATURDAY 17th December 2022 @ 1.00 pm**. Deadline for booking with the Society is **noon on December 8th**. Please see the website and e-bulletin for full details and instructions. Email normannicholsonssociety@gmail.com to book your place.
- The **Christmas Tree Festival**, St. George's Church, Millom will take place from **Friday 9th December 2022 to Thursday 5th January, 2023**. The theme is 'It's Christmas'. The Society will display a tree beside the magnificent Norman Nicholson Memorial Window, created by Christine Boyce. This community event provides a great opportunity to view it. Opening times are Wed. to Sun., 11.00-5.00. Closed on Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year's Day.
- **January 8th, 2023**—Norman Nicholson's **109th birthday**. We expect to hold an event on **Saturday, 7th January**. Details to be confirmed.



WELCOME TO ALL OUR NEW MEMBERS

A list of new members will be published in the next issue of *Comet*. We hope to meet you online or in-person at our forthcoming events. Thank you for joining the Society.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- **MidNAG-related research**: I would like to thank the staff at the Northumberland Archives for their kind and generous assistance during the research trip made by myself, Antoinette Fawcett, and Glenn Lang in August 2022. Thanks also to Jillian Peterson, Registrar and Collections Officer, Mildura Arts Centre, Victoria, Australia; to Russ Disotell, 'man of a thousand hats', Brockville, Canada; to Will Renee, Assistant Librarian, The National Poetry Library, London; and to the spirit of George Stephenson, Director of MidNAG and supreme encourager!
- **Images**: the detail on p. 7 from Christine Boyce's masterpiece, the Norman Nicholson Memorial Window, is by Alastair Carew-Cox. Members of the NN Society can order cards of the window by Alastair at a generous discount (see information on p. 7); the [photo of the MV Royal Iris](#) on p. 14 is by Alan Murray-Rust and is shared on the Geograph website under a Creative Commons licence. Uncredited photos in 'A Summer in the North Country' are by Árni Einarsson (p. 17), Gísli Sigurðsson (top of p. 18) and by Jack Threlfall Hartley; the snippet view of MidNAG Poetry Poster No. 1 is courtesy of Doreen Cornthwaite; the 'thumbnail' of 'Road Up' is courtesy of the Mildura Arts Centre; the photos on pp. 24 and 29 are by Charlie Lambert; the photo of Maurice Payn was provided by his daughter, Rebecca Payn. Many thanks to all!
- The **bibliographical details** of the article in the *London Magazine* mentioned in the editorial are as follows: Nicholson, N. (1976) 'Living in the Country—II', *London Magazine*, June 1, 1976, Vol. 16, 2, pp. 54-63.
- Information in the obituary of Maurice Payn was provided by Rebecca Payn.

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, as always, to all contributors. The deadline for the Spring 2023 *Comet* is **Friday, February 3rd 2023**. Contact me to discuss potential submissions.

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.