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`At the Dying Atlantic's Edge': Norman Nicholson and the Cumbrian Coast

This paper is about Norman Nicholson, born 1914, died 1987. In his time he was widely regarded as, to quote the *Times* obituary, `the most gifted English Christian provincial poet of the century' (`Introduction', CP, p. xv), and was a noteworthy figure on T.S. Eliot's poetry list at Faber, which set so much of the tune from 1945 onwards. Nicholson's poetry suffered something of an eclipse in the seventies and after: the times were not on its side, and its concerns were apparently not theirs. But there are now at least some signs of a serious Nicholson revival, notably in David Boyd's forthcoming (and extremely well-informed) biography and the scholarly work of David Cooper. Nicholson came from west Cumberland, where he spent almost the whole of his life. He might be defined as in effect the only major west Cumbrian poet, and therefore, since R.S. Thomas was of course Welsh, perhaps the only major modern writer of the English Atlantic edge, particularly in that he was singularly committed to his liminal space, what the poem called `On Duddon Marsh' calls `the line dividing.../Europe from the Atlantic' (CP, p. 193), spending his whole life in the small, backward, forgotten industrial town of Millom, at the very south-western coastal tip of his county. From this, I think, something rather special springs.

National mythology, literature, criticism and tourism have long coincided in presenting Cumbria (until 1974, Cumberland) as in effect an inland space or territory, `the Lake District'. This imaginary construction serves as both a national heartland, analogous to Surrey, `Garden of England', and privileged repository of the national soul, cherished in its beauty by poets and solicitously tended by its wardens. It functions in effect as what Cooper, quoting cultural geographer David Matless, evokes as a `social-spiritual space...a topography in which the mystical rubs shoulders with the legislative' (LE, p. 84; PP, p. 815). As such, however, it excludes another Cumbria. This Cumbria is the coastal area that begins with the western fells and ends further west at the Irish Sea, running from the Solway Firth in the north to the Duddon estuary in the south. The `grey unphotographed waste acres of West Cumberland', as Nicholson describes them, border on the Atlantic CP, p. 356). On its eastern side, it includes some of the county's most beautiful if remote and empty lakes and valleys, and its highest mountains. But, as Cooper remarks of Nicholson's Millom, though Wordsworth for example engages on occasions with a westerly Cumbria, the features of the western region that I have just stressed in fact remain marginal to the normative mythology, to the Romantic and post-Romantic Lake District and the tourist trail. The western fells cannot be construed as integral to a heartland. On the western fells, the sense of the coast looms large. On the western peaks, from Scafell to Coniston Old Man to Black Combe, one is vividly aware of how far Cumbria is a culture of the Atlantic

edge, that it ends at the sea. This Atlantic edge is invisible or ignorable from within the heartland, at least, if we think of the heartland as represented above all by, say, Ambleside, Hawkshead or Wordsworth's Grasmere. Here, one might think, the myth of the inward and self-enfolded spirit of the island race runs out into the silts and shallows of the Duddon estuary. At the same time, the coast not only has its often bleak and austere beaches, but is strewn as, here and there, are the western fells, with the marks of an invasive modernity from which the heartland has been carefully protected (though it has actually assumed its own forms of modernity, too; there is some point to saying, as did W.H. Auden, that the Lake District was `another bourgeois invention, like the piano', quoted Cooper, PP, p. 815): long-gone mines, mineral railways and blast furnaces, the coastal railway, the nuclear plant at Sellafield (or Windscale), the MOD's so-called `equipment-proving', big gun-firing range at Eskmeals, the landscapes intermittently, casually contaminated with industrial (and, increasingly radioactive) waste and ruination.

Norman Nicholson is the poet *par excellence* of Cumbria's Atlantic edge, in geographical and geological terms, the Cumbrian coastal plain. Both his books on Lakeland and his scattered poems on the Lake District show him defining his poetic identity in contradistinction to the Lake poets. Cooper sees the coastal area of Cumbria as `geographically and imaginatively distant from the Wordsworthian centre', like the spoke of a wheel to its nave (PP, p. 815); distant, that is, but nonetheless connected to it. Nicholson's endeavour is therefore to reconfigure the space of the region, collapsing a `post-Romantic hierarchization of regional space' (PP, p. 816). But that is not a vision of it, I think, that Nicholson's *poetry* exactly promotes; and we should remember that Nicholson's reputation prior to his death was chiefly as a poet, and is likely to continue to be so. `I thought of myself as a Millom boy', writes Nicholson, `not as a Cumbrian' (WEC, p. 131). True, as Cooper emphasizes, he, Nicholson, explicitly raises the question of Wordsworth's vision of the area in his `To the River Duddon'. But that (as Cooper knows) is because of Wordsworth's distinguished Duddon river sonnet sequence: Nicholson is squabbling with Wordsworth over border territory. Otherwise, Cooper's argument is above all sustainable in the terms in which he chiefly makes it, on the basis of Nicholson's prose works — it is notably confirmed by *Greater Lakeland* — which were produced with a more commercial end in mind and certainly partly address a rather different readership.

Nicholson's poetry, then, I would suggest, is scarcely a poetry of the Lake District as such at all. It is a poetry of the Atlantic edge. This is arguably most obviously the case with the first two volumes, `Five Rivers' and `Rock Face', and the late volume `Sea to the West'. But I would also claim that it determines the content of all the other volumes, with the possible exception of `A Local Habitation', that the themes of the poet of the Atlantic edge continue, if sometimes also in rather different versions and guises, in the other volumes. In other words, the space of the Atlantic edge fairly comprehensively determines the character of Nicholson's vision and the substance of what he has to say. I'll give a brief account of five crucial features of this vision.

Firstly, as I have already indicated, Nicholson's is a landscape largely bounded in the east by the Western fells. He only very seldom makes reference to the northern, central or eastern Fells. Even a poem like `Skiddaw Slate' turns out to be about, not Skiddaw, a Northern peak, but Black Combe, a south-western one, because Black Combe is composed of the slate in question. Yet, at the same time, what is striking is that Nicholson almost never looks out on the Atlantic or even the Irish Sea in itself. The `maiden' in one of his `Songs of the Island' feels `the tug in the blood' at the shingle's edge (CP, p. 35); but this is very rare. In Nicholson, prospects seldom beckon, vistas almost never spread wide. Nicholson had Irish blood in him, and Boyd points out to me

that there was a substantial Irish immigrant presence amongst the early Millom workers. But save for the occasional reference to winds blowing in from Ulster or, perhaps more interestingly, Sligo, Nicholson the poet has little or no interest in Ireland, or indeed the Isle of Man, which is clearly visible from his Atlantic edge, and seemingly none in the history of their relations with England. Unlike so many comparable Irish writers, he also has little or no interest in the American horizon, a distant America and the freedom of its open spaces. Indeed, he very explicitly turns away from the American will o' the wisp, in what the title of one poem calls `the affirming blasphemy' (CP, p. 411):

> That to which we cannot return is not to be found before us:
> There is no other garden beyond the bright sea. (CP, p. 91)

This has three effects, all relevant to my argument. Geographically speaking, Nicholson's theme is a stretch of land separated from the north and south by estuaries, and from the east by mountains. Imaginatively, he operates within a narrow coastal strip — with its single coastal road, `gashed' like `a long wound' (CP, p. 85) — and this sense of spatial constraint has major consequences for the poetry. It is further enhanced by the poet's indifference to looking outward. On Nicholson's coast, the Atlantic comes in to `die', to peter out into estuarial mud, silt, sands, stonescapes and marshlands, to lose itself in obscure miscellanea and debris, `wrack and rubble' (CP, p. 18, 77). Yet Nicholson's imagination is also repeatedly haunted by the notion that the sea may violently rise up, overwhelm and devour the land, the moment when `the tall waves/Bound over the mountain tops', as he puts it, in `The Bow in the Cloud' (CP, p. 110). At all events, again and again, the land-sea vector points inwards not outwards.

Secondly: Nicholson is abundantly aware of the history of the coast: incursions of `the galleys that came to Ravenglass' (CP, p. 12), the Romans, the Vikings, the Scots and Picts `forag[ing] down from Solway Moss', CP, p. 14), the English from further south, the Industrial Revolution and the discovery of haematite ore, the rise, brisk decline and eclipse of mines, iron and steel works, the arrival of evacuees during the second World War (the `children hurried from a German Herod', CP, p. 4), the transfer of art from the Tate Gallery to Cumbria at the same time, and so on. But his grasp and presentation of this history is as an episodic one. He deliberately refuses to grace it with any larger meaning or coherence. His poetry does not reflect or countenance any larger historical narrative of the coast; say, a quasi-colonial one (the word is nonetheless not idle: Nicholson himself writes of `colonizing voices', CP, p. 39). Nor does it struggle to produce such a narrative. His project is not in that sense integrative. This is even more strikingly the case in that, thirdly, though his poetry ranges from Maryport to Whitehaven, St. Bees, Cleator Moor, Egremont, Ravensglass, Silecroft, above all, Millom, and indeed Walney Island, at least in his poetry, Nicholson has no concept of or interest in a culture or cultures. If he does claim in *Greater Lakeland* to have `a sense of belonging' (GL, p. 22), this makes little appearance in the poetry. Indeed, as a poet, he is more likely to treat such a concept ironically (as in the poem `Nicholson, Suddenly'). This is notable, in that Nicholson was in large part writing in an era that granted a specific prestige to the concept of the `organic community' as promoted, for example, by Raymond Williams. For in western Cumbria there is no `organic community'. The Millom Nicholson knows is in fact `a decaying Victorian settlement' that began in the mid-nineteenth century as `a miserable encampment of huts and sheds' struggling up out of `a waste of dune, salt-marsh and swampy fields', as he tells us in *Greater Lakeland* (GL, p. 15, 17, 20). He is acutely aware that it was only two generations previously that, in 1867, his grandmother arrived from across the Duddon estuary in a cart, still possessed of memories of farmland. So, too, he is keenly aware, for instance, of how far the mining communities of the west — Wales, Scotland, Cornwall, Cumbria — were not in fact deeply and stably rooted in their

worlds, that they had frequently been in large measure made up of incomers who remained itinerant and transient, moving (or being moved) where the work moved. He is equally aware of just how fast and how drastically macro-economic change afflicts such a precarious world (see for instance `Hodbarrow Flooded', `The Riddle', `On the Closing of Millom Ironworks'). In effect, for Nicholson, there is no coastal culture. In this respect, he separates himself, not only from the Lake poets, but from the whole tradition of English `provincial' poetry (Crabbe, Clare, Hardy, early Lawrence) to which his work has more often been linked. Historically, then, too, this is a land of detritus, the incoherent offscourings of history.

The sense of spatial constraint in Nicholson's poetry pushes him in two directions. Fourthly, if in his poetry he cannot see and largely refuses to imagine eastward beyond the western fells, and turns away from the oceanic perspective westwards, nor can he look to the south. There is scarcely a reference to an England south of Widnes. This is hardly surprising, in a poet from a part of the country distant and in some degree alienated from Southern values (see for example `Bond Street'). If Nicholson's imagination does expand, it is rather northwards, in small part to Scotland, but above all to Scandinavia and the Arctic. `Turn, then', says `Frost Flowers', `the face to the cold north...../To where beneath the North Star roll/The Arctic Circles of the soul' (CP, 127). The only foreign country with which any of the poems are concerned is Norway; the only foreign country, apparently, that he ever visited. Boyd tells me that the British Council wanted him to go further afield, but he refused, on health and domestic grounds. In Nicholson's poetry, thus, the relevant Atlantic edge runs from the Irish Sea to the Skaggerak and the Norwegian Sea as far as the Barents Sea. The north is where vast cold and chilling winds come from. It splits Cumbria off from the England to the south. The north claims Cumbria for its own. To think Cumbria and the north together is also to think England disintegratively, to think the Atlantic edge as where Anglo-Saxondom fades and starts to perish and that other great founding British people after the Roman Empire, the Norsemen, assert their cultural sway. Indeed, insofar as Nicholson was interested in the Irish strain in the population of Millom and Cumbria generally, it seems in large measure to have been because he was, in turn, particularly interested in the Viking strain in the Irish, and therefore how far, in a sense, the Irish might be claimed for the North. Nicholson is acutely aware of and knowledgeable about the historical Viking presence in Cumbria, as *Greater Lakeland* again makes clear. His poem `For the Grieg Centenary' even suggests that his feeling of true artistic kinship might be with the great Norwegian composer as much as the provincial English poets, not least because, as is evident in various of his writings, he is so aware of Norse thickening the English he speaks and writes.

But the narrowness of Nicholson's world as he defines it also has another spatial consequence: if the Atlantic edge for him is only ever a thin strip, whether it runs from the Duddon estuary to the Solway Firth or the Duddon estuary to Tromso, Hammerfest and beyond, the narrowness also encourages the mind to follow the perpendiculars of the Western mountain ranges, to raise his eyes towards what (in `The Elvers') he calls `my parochial complement of sky' (CP, p. 275). The paradox is that, for Nicholson, to think the Atlantic edge is also to think the vertical. Nicholson's imagination is constantly drawn upwards. No doubt this reflects a religious drive; yet the vertical dimension in Nicholson's poetry is not principally, I think, the dimension of transcendence. `[T]he bell again will swing', he writes, in `The Bow in the Cloud', admittedly a wartime poem, `And the iron crack in in the wind and the boulders ring like steel....And the dumb sea shout with the voice that once was shamed by man' (CP, p. 104). This hardly seems to betoken any meditative release. The vertical dimension is rather, as Cooper has it, eschatological or, better, I think, messianic. See for instance the evocation of dawn over west Cumbria which opens `The Holy Mountain' (CP, p. 92). Let me put the point this way: Nicholson's coastal strip is, categorically, an unredeemed land, one that has never tasted even the possibility of historical salvation, that lies comprehensively beyond the bromides of

progressives. Historically, one might suggest, it has never really come into existence at all. There is nothing to be hoped for from west, east or south. If Cumbria and its history belong anywhere, it is with the north. But, like the Scots and Picts, `the Norsemen foraged down the dales' (CP, p. 36); the axis to the north, like the axis to the south with the Romans and English, is also an axis of violence. So, I quote, `there is no rest, no refuge, there is no *predicted* hope' (CP, p. 100; I emphasize, `predicted'). There is God, then, or there is nothing; or rather, there is the event of God. Boyd tells me that Nicholson's letters to Sylvia Lubelsky in the Rylands Library show that, after the period of his tuberculosis and his transferral to a sanatorium in Hampshire, he went through a spell of agnosticism, blaming religion for the world's ills. If, in some degree, in passages of his life, he balanced on a knife-edge of faith and faithlessness, this seems to me to be consistent with his poetic vision. Nicholson's God does not exist; he happens, as he must happen if he is to have meaning, as justice. In a whole series of poems in `The Pot Geranium', taking a more scientific turn than he had in previous volumes, Nicholson addresses the theme of the rare, even almost inexistent reversal of self-evidence, `the pull beyond the pattern', `The unknown../Shown only by a bend in the known', as `The Undiscovered Planet' puts it (CP, 211). `But from the angels in the sky/No trees [can] shutter [men] away' (CP, p. 94). God turns upon the Atlantic edge in judgment of all who have oppressed, failed and betrayed it over `[c]enturies of feudal weight' (CP, p. 15); landowners, that is and as Boyd suggests to me, as well as industrialists, entrepreneurs and indeed governments. The very image of betrayal, in `Windscale', Nicholson's fine poem about it, is the demonism of the nuclear installation at Sellafield. Indeed, in some of the poems, God sends the Atlantic spilling over its edge into the wasteland, not only or even chiefly destructively or in wrath, but as a messianic image of radical justice. Nicholson's conception of the Atlantic edge is as an absolute boundary which forces the mind to think the impossible, vertical transaction, of which the idea of justice is a principal manifestation.

Finally: Nicholson's biographical account of his early years, *Wednesday Early Closing*, suggests four key moments, at least, in his youthful development towards a career as a poet. I'll list them in the order which I take to have a certain bearing on his poetry, rather than their chronological order. Firstly, there is the introduction, via the Anglican church, in which, for pragmatic reasons, he was confirmed — he did it in order to get to college, he tells us (WEC, p. 165) — to a superlative religious language (interestingly, he specifies Thomas Cranmer). Secondly, self-evidently, there is his discovery of poetry, poetry and locale together: `I fell in love; I discovered poetry, I discovered Cumberland' (WEC, p. 165). Thirdly, there is the great moment, inspired by reading George Bernard Shaw, when he turns his habitual view of Millom inside out, converting it into a vision, a vision of devastation: `the land, almost everywhere, collapsing like a punctured tyre', devastated, abandoned, stagnant, forgotten, a land of rot, decay, rust, weeds, `a smother of hopelessness'. Suddenly, this explodes into emotions of, quote, `anger, resentment, compassion and a paradoxically exhilarating feeling of disgust' (WEC, p. 176). He became acutely alive to what, in an earlier passage, he describes as `the scandal, the injustice, the waste, the muddle' of Millom history (WEC, p. 151). This made him for a while, he says, a socialist `in the Trevelyan-Macaulayan tradition' (though he also convicts himself of `pure adolescent romanticism', WEC, p. 176). But what most crucially matters is the moment of radical estrangement from an unreflective relation to a familiar context. This estrangement would later be confirmed by the period of Nicholson's tuberculosis and his transferral to a sanatorium in Hampshire, which effects a kind of double displacement. Perhaps most significantly of all, however, reeling back earlier in the life, there is a time when, attending the local Methodist church before the necessary move to Anglicanism, he is transfixed by a thought of the Holy Land. `The landscape of the Bible', he writes, `was far more familiar to us than the geography of England' (WEP, p. 94). Nicholson re-imagines his Atlantic edge in Biblical terms, bearing in mind that the Biblical landscape is also a seaboard landscape. Boyd points to the same conflation, of Palestine and Cumbria, in the play *The Old Man of the Mountains* and the radio broadcast `Millom Delivered'.

Nicholson rethinks his territory in and through his vision of devastation, but also as a landscape that requires the impossible redemption. This, together with the boy's love of poetry and his seduction by the beauty of a religious language, establishes the core of his poetry as messianic. Nicholson's poetic thought as a whole and the rest of the poetry are substantially organized around this core.

Norman Nicholson (1914-1987): Selected Reading

Poetry

Collected Poems, ed. with an introd. Neil Curry (London: Faber and Faber, 2008); cited in the text as CP.

Individual Volumes

Five Rivers (1944)
Rock Face (1948)
The Pot Geranium (1954)
No Star on the Way Back (1967)
A Local Habitation (1972)
Sea to the West (1981)
The Candy-Floss Tree (1984)

Selected Prose

Man and Literature (1943; London: S.C.M. Press)
Cumberland and Westmoreland (London: Robert Hale, 1949)
`Introduction', *William Wordsworth: A Selection* (London: Phoenix House, 1949)
The Lakers: The Adventures of the First Tourists (1955; Milnthorpe: Cicerone, 1995)
Provincial Pleasures (1959; Carlisle: Bookcase, 1993)
William Cowper (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1960)
The Lakes (1963; London: Robert Hale, 1977)
Greater Lakeland (London: Robert Hale, 1969); cited in the text as GL.
Wednesday Early Closing (London: Faber and Faber, 1975 [autobiography]); cited in the text as WEC.

Criticism

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-----, '"Matter Matters": Topographical and Theological Space in the Poetry of Norman Nicholson',
Yearbook of English Studies, 39 (2009), pp. 169-85
-----, 'Envisioning "the Cubist Fells": Ways of Seeing in the Poetry of Norman Nicholson', in *Poetry & Geography: Space & Place in Post-war Poetry,* ed. by Neal Alexander and David Cooper (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013)

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Philip Gardner, *Norman Nicholson* (New York: Twayne, 1973)
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Poems Cited (in order of citation):

`On Duddon Marsh'
`Landing on Staffa'
To the River Duddon'
`Skiddaw Slate'
` Songs of the Island'
`The Affirming Blasphemy'
`The Garden of the Innocent'
`Whitehaven'
`The Bow in the Cloud'
`Five Rivers'
`Egremont'
`Carol for Holy Innocents' Day'
`Askam Visited'
`Nicholson, Suddenly'
`Hodbarrow Flooded'
`The Riddle'
`On the Closing of Millom Ironworks'
`Bond Street'
`Frost Flowers'
`The Elvers'
`For St James, 1943'
`The Holy Mountain'
`The Undiscovered Planet'
`Windscale'