

No Man is an Island: *Norman Nicholson's Novels*

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ANYONE reading the poetry of Norman Nicholson, and noting in it a firmly-held Christian faith and a vividly-documented love for Nicholson's native county of Cumberland, would reasonably infer that he was of an optimistic turn of mind. The reader would be wrong, however, to assume that Nicholson had always been so. Not until he was thirty did Nicholson publish his first volume of poems, *Five Rivers* (1944), and for much of the previous fourteen years — ever since his tuberculosis, discovered in 1930, had restricted his future to the seemingly-narrow radius of his home town of Millom — he had been working his way with difficulty towards the attitudes displayed with such conviction in that first volume.

The tensions and trials which Nicholson experienced during the nineteen-thirties (more fully revealed in his letters to friends in that decade) can be partly gauged from his two published novels, now long out of print, *The Fire of the Lord* (1944) and *The Green Shore* (1947).¹ In addition to being an indirect reflection of earlier personal problems, the novels contain motifs and ideas to be found in Nicholson's first and subsequent volumes of poetry, and in some of his verse plays as well. They thus occupy a pivotal position in his literary career and merit at least some brief consideration. This is not to suggest, however, that Nicholson regards himself as a novelist; in fact he once remarked that any criticism of the novels strictly *qua* novels would be 'neither helpful nor relevant'.² They will therefore be considered in this article more for what they show than for what they are; though it is only fair to add that when *The Fire of the Lord* was published

¹ Both published by Nicholson and Watson.

² Nicholson, letter to the present writer, 19 Jan. 1957.

in New York in 1946 the *Saturday Review of Literature* balanced a comment that it was 'overwritten' with the view that 'in the dignity of its conception . . . it belongs with novels of quality and accomplishment'.¹

The two novels are alike in a number of respects. Broadly speaking, both are concerned with sex and religion, and their setting is Nicholson's home town, Millom, only thinly concealed by the fictional name 'Odborough' — a version of Hodbarrow, a part of Millom where old iron mines are situated. In *The Fire of the Lord* the parish church is given a tower instead of its actual spire, and both novels use fictional names for places in the area, but there is no mistaking the locale, the presentation of which is an important element in both books. One of the main characters in each novel is handicapped: Elsie Holliwell in *The Fire of the Lord* is partly deaf, Alice Dale in *The Green Shore* is lame. Both characters are to some extent surrogates for Nicholson himself, as, even more, was Sam, the six-years-bedridden protagonist of an early short story entitled 'Pisgah':² Nicholson himself spent fifteen months confined to bed in a Hampshire sanatorium in 1930-1. Each novel has one character who can be described as a religious eccentric: Benjamin Fell, 'old Benjy', in *The Fire of the Lord*, the hermit Anthony Pengwilly, 'old Pen', in *The Green Shore*. Again, both characters embody, in exaggerated form, an aspect of Nicholson himself: the young writer moving during the nineteen-thirties towards an understanding of himself and of God. Technically, both novels employ an interesting formal structure, which gives to plot and setting a kind of poetic, symbolic underlining.

The Fire of the Lord is essentially a love story, but against this is counterpointed a religious theme mainly centred on 'old Benjy'. The love story, slow to unfold and presented with considerable sensitivity — Nicholson is well able to communicate the mixture of inarticulate tenderness and sensual awareness which characterizes inexperienced youth — concerns Jim Birker and Elsie Holliwell. The growth of their relationship is complicated,

¹ See entry for Norman Nicholson in *Twentieth Century Authors: First Supplement*, ed. Stanley Kunitz, New York, 1955. *The Fire of the Lord* was published in New York by E. P. Dutton and Co.

² 'Pisgah', *New English Weekly*, 15 Sept. 1938, p. 343.

however, by the fact that Jim is already married, to a middle-aged 'widow' called Maggie: she runs a shop selling home-made bread and cakes, and the description of her appearance (pp. 15-16) is done (overdone, rather) in terms of images all connected with baking. She has remarried under the impression that her former husband, Benjamin Fell, much older than herself, is dead. Unfortunately for her he is not, and when after many years he reappears in the town she pretends he is her uncle, a deception he maliciously enjoys but does not demolish. Only when he dies and Maggie's eagerness to get his money — prompted by Jim's lack of interest in her — leads her to acknowledge the truth, are Jim and Elsie left free to marry. Elsie herself is a devout Anglican, and her growing love for Jim involves her in a long and difficult struggle of conscience with her moral and religious principles.

More interesting than its plot is the novel's atmosphere, which is one of darkness and claustrophobia.¹ The events take place in wartime, and the novel begins on a Guy Fawkes's Night in the blackout. Only at the end does the story emerge into the light. The difficulties of Jim and Elsie occur in late Autumn and Winter, and are reinforced by the picture of nature struggling forward to Spring — the resolution of the love-theme, when Benjy's eventual death makes this possible, is a kind of resurrection. The secular plot is given seasonal and religious overtones by the structure of the novel, which is divided not into chapters but into sections of the ecclesiastical year. The significance of these divisions often seems arbitrary, but it is obvious enough in a number of instances: old Benjy dies on Good Friday, and the novel ends, with Jim and Elsie looking forward to their future together, on Easter Sunday. Nicholson's tendency here to see human life in terms of a larger cyclical pattern is typical of the way in which, in his later poetry, he draws together regional and religious material.

The dominant presence in the novel is the slagbank, that man-made mountain of waste matter found in iron-smelting towns like Millom. Here old Benjy is first discovered, and here he finally dies, burnt to death under a tipped pile of molten slag.

¹ Cf. *The Fire of the Lord*, p. 113. The description here of the town cut off by snow from the outside world is based on fact (see Nicholson, 'On Being A Provincial', *The Listener*, 12 Aug. 1954, p. 248).

In narrative terms his death is accidental, but it has a symbolic inevitability. Throughout the novel old Benjy, a fanatical prophet-like figure, has harped on the need for some kind of burnt-offering, some sort of recognition by man that he is connected to God and must make Him some return for the fruits of the earth, even though those fruits, in the modern industrial world, are not farm-crops but iron:

'So we used to light a bonfire to praise the Lord', he said. 'We got together all the old rubbish, the wicks and the dead wood and the dirty straw and we piled them up and we burned them. We knew it was good for the crops. It cleaned the land and made it fresh and sweet ready for spring. We gave back to the earth what the earth had brought forth and we made it a burnt offering to the Lord . . . Well, what's the difference? . . . You get iron out of the land, don't you? You dig for the ore like taties, and you thrash it in the furnaces like corn, and you stack up the pigs like mangles. If you want a good crop of iron you must treat it same as a crop of anything else. (pp. 38-9)

The 'fire' of the novel's title is partly the fire of Pentecost, seen as a force which consumes trash and dross 'so that the new stuff can grow'.¹ Benjy's own death by fire is therefore the necessary act without which the love of Elsie and Jim cannot bear fruit. But 'the fire of the Lord' (I Kings xviii, 38) is also a reference to Elijah's sacrifice of the bullock on Mount Carmel, and Benjy can be considered the prototype of Elijah in Nicholson's first play *The Old Man of the Mountains* (1946), particularly as there occurs in the novel a theme very important in that play — the theme of the proper use of the land:

I find that the people who are here now don't know the land, and don't know what the land needs. They try to get everything out of the land without asking themselves what they owe it. I find that they don't know the Lord, and don't know what the Lord wants. They try to get everything out of the Lord and they never stop to ask what they owe him. There was one thing I learned when I was working on the farm, and that was that if you give nowt to the land you'll get nowt out of it. (p. 92)

A final aspect of the novel, only just touched on at the end, is the idea of remaining in one's home town. Jim suggests to Elsie

¹ Op. cit., p. 93. This theme had already figured in an unpublished poem by Nicholson, 'Poem before Pentecost' (May 1938).

that, now their problems have been solved, they might still find it easier to 'go somewhere where nobody knows us'. Elsie's answer seems to flower smoothly from her contemplation of the peaceful scene around them — a scene described in a way typical of the novel's placing of its incidents in a context of life, natural and human, quietly going on whatever dramatic events may occupy the protagonists:

A pair of starlings flew past the window and across the allotments, their shadows speckling the brown earth like a thrush's breast. Purple broccoli thrust up its stems, ready to flower in a week or two, and in some of the gardens potatoes were already rigged up and set. On the grass paths men stood and talked, and others fed the hens. From beyond the roofs came the sound of the Salvation Army Band playing 'Christ the Lord is risen today'.

'No', she said, 'there's no need for us to go away. We'll stay here'.
(pp. 221-2)

The calm of the novel's close is like a cadence which resolves itself on a final, quietly-sustained chord. It carries a significance which extends beyond the novel itself: out of such an acceptance of his own environment, and out of such details, simple yet universal, as this final paragraph is composed of, has come Nicholson's most characteristic poetry — a poetry of belonging, of being, as a reviewer of *The Pot Geranium* (1954) put it, 'at home in the world in which he finds himself'.¹

The Green Shore is in many ways a complement to *The Fire of the Lord*, as if Nicholson were not only repeating motifs from the earlier novel but had also decided to present aspects of Millom and its life which had there been ignored. *The Green Shore* takes place in summer and begins, not with a semi-comic night-blind policeman feeling his way in the blackout, but with a group of teenagers sauntering down to a rocky shore and gawkily flirting. *The Fire of the Lord* confines its action almost entirely to the centre of Millom and to the slagbank — when Jim, Maggie and Elsie visit 'Furness' (Barrow) the reader is conscious only of the darkness of the cinema and the darkness and cold of the railway station. *The Green Shore* makes him aware of the sea, of Hodbarrow Point south of Millom, and of places up the coast like 'Burnet Scales' (the West Cumberland resort of Seascale) and 'Blackport'

¹ *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 Nov. 1954, p. 702.

(presumably Whitehaven). Although old Benjy has 'the confidence of the practised lay preacher',¹ the religious ambience of *The Fire of the Lord* is not Methodist but Anglican. *The Green Shore* is entirely Nonconformist in flavour: one character is choirmaster of the Bible Christian Chapel, and Anthony Pengwilly, the male protagonist, experiences conversion by a travelling Methodist missionary. This division of sectarian loyalties between the two novels stems from Nicholson's own circumstances in youth: the son of an Anglican, he was baptised in the local parish church, but was sent to the Wesleyan Sunday School by his Methodist step-mother, returning to Anglicanism, by way of confirmation, in 1929.

The theme of *The Green Shore* — the tension between aloofness from society and a wish to belong — is embodied in the novel's two main characters. One is Anthony Pengwilly, who after his conversion has elected to lead the life of a hermit on the shoreward outskirts of 'Odborough'; the other is Alice Dale, the daughter of a woman Anthony once courted, whom Anthony one day helps and who strikes up a friendship with him. The affinity of the two, though it has sexual undertones recognizable by the reader, is essentially based on a common religious awareness. But the relationship Anthony has with God, in his self-chosen exile, leads him gradually to realize that isolation is not the answer, and his friendship with Alice serves to draw him back to society. Ironically, Alice is affected by the friendship in quite the opposite way. She sees in Anthony's hermit existence the solution to her difficulty (caused by her lameness) of feeling at one with healthy people of her own age. She also seems to be trying to escape the sexual challenge of growing-up; she wavers between a liking for Alan Grisebeck, a young man who is fond of her, and revulsion from his awkward physical advances. Yet her very admiration for the solitariness and self-denial exemplified by Anthony is accompanied, unknown to her, by a sexual element which he recognizes and denounces with medieval harshness, a harshness springing from his own consciousness of the forces of 'temptation'. Alice's confused feelings are indicated by the quotation from William Morris's 'A Garden by the Sea' which is the novel's epigraph:

¹ *The Fire of the Lord*, p. 35.

Dark shore no ship has ever seen,
 Tormented by the billows green
 Whose murmur comes unceasingly
 Unto the place for which I cry.
 For which I cry both day and night,
 For which I let slip all delight,
 That maketh me both deaf and blind,
 Careless to win, unskilled to find
 And quick to loose what all men seek.

Considered in relation to Alice, the novel is a study of the problems of adjustment experienced by the adolescent: the sharp but indefinable longings for spiritual purity which eventually turn into an acceptance of the fact of being human, of being a part of society.¹ When Anthony himself experiences the need to belong and decides to leave Odborough, his disappearance at first disappoints Alice, but in time his absence helps her to accept her environment. The close of the novel, describing Alice and Alan, is very similar, in texture and feeling, to that of *The Fire of the Lord*:

They walked on again. The lamps were lit at the pitheads, and a glow came from an engine as it pulled up the incline dragging a chain of trucks which clanked in the darkness. Sparks flew from the funnel, dropping like little fireworks among the willows and brambles. The smoke waved against the green sky.

'Warm now?', he asked.

'Yes', she said.

They walked on towards the town. (p.189)

The Green Shore was once described by Nicholson as '... an attempt to write a story of one of the Desert Fathers, adapted from the Desert of third- or fourth-century Egypt to that of twentieth-century industrialism'.² Anthony himself is modelled very closely on the hermits described in the *Lausiac History* of Palladius, the material of which Nicholson had come across in Helen Waddell's *The Desert Fathers*, and the name Anthony is obviously designed to recall St Anthony, whose life occupies such a large part of Palladius's collection of biographies. It would be tedious to illustrate the many characteristics which Anthony Pengwilly shares with the monkish hermits of Upper Egypt, but

¹ Nicholson originally intended to call the novel *No Man is an Island*, but someone else used this title first.

² Nicholson, letter to the present writer, 19 Jan. 1957.

one passage will provide an example of the rules he imposes on himself:

The man filled the mug at the tap and stood with it in his hand. He was panting like a dog with thirst. Alice felt her own mouth go dry with nervousness. He raised the mug to within an inch or two of his mouth, and then he stretched out his arm and slowly poured the water on to the ground. Alice felt suddenly and inexplicably afraid. Although she was heavy and moist with heat, she shivered. Pen stood there as still as an old tree watching the water dribble out of the mug and make a little pool in the dry soil through which it quickly drained away. His mouth was hard and his cheeks were drawn in as if he had had all his teeth extracted. He hung up the mug on its nail again, moving slowly and with self-satisfaction. He was breathing more steadily now, and before he turned away he bent and dipped his hands in the trough and splashed the water over his face and arms. It dripped from his face on to his shoulders and vest and for a moment he seemed cooled and calm, and then his face suddenly opened in a grin as if it had been slit. He stepped across to the privet hedge and tore up a handful of nettles which grew there on the waste soil, and began to wipe his face and arms with them, using them like a towel. (p. 28)

Anthony also fasts, washes in ice-cold water, goes for a run along the sea-wall before breakfast, never speaks to women (except, at last, to Alice), and never sings, even to himself. His rule is the Negative Way. Eventually he comes to realize that, even if this is not exactly wrong, it is not the only way to 'praise the Lord':

'But now I'm beginning to see that it was all a waste and all what the Bible calls vanity, because you can't praise the Lord by yourself. Oh, I know in one way you've got to praise the Lord by yourself — nobody else can do it for you. But not by yourself, that is, separate, alone, holding yourself off from your fellow men. Not like that'.
(pp. 177-8)

Whatever restraints Nicholson himself had to practice in order to preserve his health during the nineteen-thirties, and whatever his own experience of living apart from others, it is the Affirmative Way that he has always been inclined to celebrate. It is therefore significant that Anthony arrives at this way of thinking, just as, to give a later example, Elisha in Nicholson's play *Birth by Drowning* (1960) is instructed not to 'climb to the high crags' or 'converse with the echoes' but to go 'back to general practice'.¹

¹ *Birth by Drowning*, 1960, p. 63.

The technical scheme of the novel emphasizes the real presence of Millom in it. It is divided into four parts: The Rocks; The Town; The Lighthouse; The Sea. The first section describes the accidental first meeting of Anthony and Alice, and causes speculation about the life of this strange hermit-like figure. The second section answers the questions raised by the first, by describing Anthony's early life in Edwardian Millom until his conversion and by showing how that conversion altered him. In placing the second section in the past and thus giving the novel an extra dimension Nicholson may have been superficially influenced by William Faulkner, his favourite novelist during the nineteen-thirties, and particularly by *The Sound and the Fury*. There is little doubt, however, that Nicholson is also writing out of a strong personal nostalgia. The last two sections show the effect on Anthony and Alice of their friendship, and move forward in the present to the novel's resolution in favour of integration rather than aloofness.

In all the sections the reader is made aware of the physical and social environment in which the main characters exist. Other people are also very real, as are events in the calendar of the town — great stress is placed on the activities of the Bible Christian Chapel choir and its participation in the 'Blackport' Musical Festival.¹ The choir's conductor, Christopher Champion, and one of its members, Ethel Riggs, turn up with names only slightly altered twelve years later in Nicholson's thinly-fictionalized account of Millom life, *Provincial Pleasures* (1959). The novel's documentary element is particularly strong in Section Two, which shows Christopher and Anthony and their girlfriends when young. Their behaviour parallels that of the teenagers presented at the beginning of the book, and the reader receives an impression of the interpenetration of past and present, and of the recurrence of the same patterns in different generations, all of them existing in a continuum which is the town itself.

Many of the details in Section Two, though their use often involves transposition, derive from the life of Nicholson's own family. Thus, Anthony Pengwilly's parents resemble the forebears

¹ Nicholson himself was closely involved with Millom's own annual Musical Festival, at which the young Kathleen Ferrier won a number of Gold Medals in the nineteen-thirties.

of Nicholson's step-mother in being tin-miners who migrated to Millom, though from Cornwall rather than Devon, in the later nineteenth century. Mrs Pengwilly's horrified first reaction to the town is identical with that of Nicholson's paternal grandmother who, on seeing its furnace and shacks across the sands of the the River Duddon, ordered the cart-driver to 'turn the horse back!'.¹ Like Nicholson's father, Anthony is apprenticed for seven years to a tailor, and when Mrs Pengwilly dies it is, like Nicholson's mother, as a result of the world-wide 'Spanish' influenza epidemic of 1919. For a reader acquainted with Nicholson's poetry, much of the pleasure to be gained from reading *The Green Shore* comes from recognizing that the town described is the same real town as figures in so many of the poems, and the main characters are finally interesting less in themselves than because they act out in their fictional lives the tensions experienced by Nicholson himself as a young man adjusting gradually to a limited environment and struggling towards the firm and balanced faith apparent in most of his work. Together with the characters of *The Fire of the Lord* they recapitulate Nicholson's own evolution from a consciousness of the isolated self to an awareness of the larger social and religious framework in which, for him, the self is most positively defined.

¹ Nicholson, 'The Seventeenth of the Name', *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 Sept. 1965, p. 772.