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# Rural Modernity, Rural Modernism and Deindustrialisation in Norman Nicholson's Poetry

Andrew Frayn 

School of Arts and Creative Industries, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, UK

## ABSTRACT

This article argues that the Cumbrian poet Norman Nicholson (1914–1987) is an exemplary writer about rural modernity, whose work also enables us to conceptualise a rural modernism. Nicholson lived all his life in his home town of Millom, an industrial town excluded from the Lake District National Park at its creation. The sharp contrast between the idealised beauty of the Lakes and the labour and grime of the town brings into focus the relationships which characterise rural modernity. While Nicholson's poetry is, for the most part, highly specific in its writing of place, and has been disparaged for provincialism, the interpersonal relationships, and the relationships between humans and work, are highly typical. From his earliest publications he is conscious of the impact of deindustrialisation, and this essay brings together for the first time discourses of rural modernity and deindustrialisation, concluding with readings of Nicholson's two poems on the closing and dismantling of Millom's ironworks. Reading Nicholson and Millom as exemplifying rural modernity enables us to discern aspects of form and content which define rural modernism and develop the field. I conclude by reflecting on the enduring impact of rural deindustrialisation in the twentieth century.

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Norman Nicholson (1914–1987) lived all his life in the house in which he was born, in his home town of Millom, in industrial south-west Cumbria. His poetry is rooted in the town, its environs, its people and its history. In its heyday, from approximately 1880–1950, Millom was an exemplary town of rural modernity, developing from the mid-nineteenth century because of a rich seam of iron ore. Following the closing of the ironworks in 1968, today it epitomises the impact of deindustrialisation on rural areas. The town is far from the canonical English countryside, often typified by the Home Counties (a revealing term despite its uncertain etymology), described by Nicholson as “a district which to me, as a Northerner, seems strange and, indeed, romantic.”<sup>1</sup> Conceptually and aesthetically, while less than twenty miles as the crow flies from the top of Scafell Pike, it is also far from the idealised Lake District. In the introduction to their

**CONTACT** Andrew Frayn  [a.frayn@napier.ac.uk](mailto:a.frayn@napier.ac.uk)  @afrayn

<sup>1</sup>Nicholson, *H.G. Wells*, 15.

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interdisciplinary collection *Rural Modernity in Britain*, Kristin Bluemel and Michael McCluskey assert the importance of looking beyond “[t]he modernists’ countryside [... and] assuming that rural regions, communities, classes and figures can originate and sustain histories of and criticism on modernity and the modern.”<sup>2</sup> In this essay I argue that Nicholson is an exemplary writer about rural modernity whose recognition of the importance of labour, the costs of rural deindustrialisation, the precarity of rural violence, and articulation of the clashing aesthetics of rural industry develops existing scholarship. Recognising these tropes allows us to identify further writers of rural modernity and, formally, what I argue we can define as a rural modernism. In late life, unable to travel far, Nicholson asserted Millom’s typicality, finding the minutiae of local life “enriched and [...] made more significant, more comprehensible, by my acquaintance with what I think of as the Greater Millom of the world beyond.”<sup>3</sup> To think in these terms is not bathetic, but is to recognise that the lived reality of rural modernity in Millom was familiar to millions nationally and internationally.

Millom’s distinctive geographical position, a relatively inaccessible town in one of England’s northernmost counties, brings the issues of rural modernity into sharp focus. Nicholson noted in his topographical book *Greater Lakeland* (1969) that “whatever I may say about it, not many people will take the trouble to go there.”<sup>4</sup> Today, even if you were one of the small number of tourists choosing to bypass the central Lake District and visit the west Cumbrian coast, studded with largely former industrial towns from Workington to Ravenglass, you would in all likelihood follow the winding main A595 road which skirts the coast. At the small village of Thwaites you might notice the signs to Millom via the A5093, an approximately seven mile, fifteen minute loop taken primarily by residents, visitors to holiday parks and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds reserve where the Hodbarrow iron mines once reverberated. However, this is not a through route: the A595 continues west, before turning sharply north by Silecroft as the A5093 loop reconnects. Millom is not a place anyone passes through: motoring guides advised avoiding it from as early as 1913, as even Charlie Gere does in his recent exploration of the less-trodden areas of west Cumbria.<sup>5</sup> Nicholson was conscious of the town’s outlier position, writing that in childhood “I thought of myself as a Millom boy, not as a Cumbrian.”<sup>6</sup> His account of Millom and Furness in *Cumberland and Westmorland* (1948) was noted by reviewers for the fact that they were discussed at all.<sup>7</sup> Key to theorising and understanding rural modernity is a focus on the often remote and (deliberately) unseen places to which dirty and dangerous labour and industry are consigned, also sites of spectacular rural beauty. The juxtaposition of the two is an essential part of the literature of rural modernism.

Millom is situated on the boundary of land and sea, the ebb and flow of the tide constantly reshaping the sands and marsh lands of the Duddon estuary.<sup>8</sup> It is coastal, but not

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<sup>2</sup>Bluemel and McCluskey, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>3</sup>Nicholson, “Ten-yard Panorama,” 10.

<sup>4</sup>Nicholson, *Greater Lakeland*, 129.

<sup>5</sup>Abraham, *Motor Ways in Lakeland*; Gere, *I Hate the Lake District*; see also Nicholson, “The Coastline that Progress Forgot”.

<sup>6</sup>Nicholson, *Wednesday Early Closing*, 131.

<sup>7</sup>Jones, *Norman Nicholson*, 119.

<sup>8</sup>For example, Nicholson, “On Duddon Marsh”, *Collected Poems*, 193 (hereafter *CP*); Gibson, “At the Dying Atlantic’s Edge”.

the conventionally aesthetic kind; rural, but not the unspoilt kind.<sup>9</sup> Nicholson on several occasions describes his family's arrival in the incipient Millom of the 1860s "by horse and cart over the Duddon Sands from Furness";<sup>10</sup> he asserts that "throughout the nineteenth century [Millom] had been so isolated from Victorian England as to be to all intents an island."<sup>11</sup> John Brannigan highlights that "islandness" was widely debated in the 1930s, and that west Cumbria was far from inaccessible when ports were buzzing with imperial trade.<sup>12</sup> Nicholson was coming to writerly consciousness at that time, and was acutely conscious of the importance of the sea to the local economy;<sup>13</sup> the sense of coastline and sands as a febrile, shifting, liminal form of land is key to his poetics. Millom is within sight of the area's metropolis, the shipbuilding town of Barrow-in-Furness, a handful of miles coast to coast, but over twenty miles and either a thirty minute train or forty-five minute car journey by land. Nicholson endeavours to see the town as an outsider might, looking back across the Duddon in poems such as "Askam Visited" and in the BBC broadcast "Millom Delivered".<sup>14</sup> Seeing and being seen across the water is key to the town's identity, visible and similar, yet distant and elsewhere.

A more conceptual remoteness is evident in the relationship between industrial south-west Cumbria and the tourist Lake District. In writing about Cumberland, as it then was, Nicholson is necessarily writing against William Gilpin, William Wordsworth, and the other authors who made iconic the Lake District mountains, fells, meres and waters. Nicholson creates a niche for himself, writing about rural industry, to avoid direct comparison with those earlier authors; in doing so he also acknowledges and apostrophises them.<sup>15</sup> David Cooper has situated Nicholson's work against Romantic writers about the Lake District in terms of their different ways of seeing.<sup>16</sup> Here I centre Nicholson's construction of his home town: he focuses on a form of rural modernity which connects rurality with extractive industry: its inevitable decline distinguishes his work. Nicholson responds to the designation of the Lake District National Park in 1951, which pointedly excluded the industrial centres of Millom and the Furness peninsula;<sup>17</sup> the National Parks are themselves a modern construction, responding to the leisure needs of an increasingly urban population. While Nicholson is often considered a writer of place, he is also profoundly a writer of people and politics.

<sup>9</sup>On competing understandings of the coast in poetry see Cutler, "Whitby is a Statement"; Baldacchino, "The Lure of the Island".

<sup>10</sup>Nicholson, *A Portrait of the Lakes*, 21. This volume was later rewritten as *The Lakes* (1977). See also "Crossing the Duddon Sands". Nicholson also begins *Greater Lakeland* with an account of the same journey, and discusses it further in the chapter on Morecambe Bay (107–12). I am indebted to Andrew F. Wilson in identifying Nicholson's magazine contributions. Wilson's *Norman Nicholson Bibliography* is held at the Whitehaven Archive and Local Studies Centre.

<sup>11</sup>Nicholson, *Greater Lakeland*, 23.

<sup>12</sup>Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism*, 147–8, 84.

<sup>13</sup>Nicholson, *Greater Lakeland*, ch. 9.

<sup>14</sup>Nicholson, "Askam Visited", *CP*, 39–40; "Millom Delivered", BBC Third Programme, 16 January 1952, 9.55pm; published as Nicholson, "Millom Delivered". See also Jones, 134.

<sup>15</sup>Cooper, "Poetics of Place and Space". Nicholson reviewed 14 books by or about William Wordsworth, and sundry others on Dorothy Wordsworth, Sara Hutchinson, the Romantic and Lake District Poets; a 1956 review bears the title "Wordsworth again". He also made his own selection, *Wordsworth: An Introduction and Selection*. Neal Alexander and David Cooper situate Nicholson in a tradition of poets defined by their connection to place in "Introduction: Poetry and Geography".

<sup>16</sup>Cooper, "Envisioning 'The Cubist Fells'"; Cooper, "Poetics of Place and Space".

<sup>17</sup>*Report of the National Parks Committee (England and Wales)*, 123. For a pithy account of the development of National Park legislation see Burchardt, *Paradise Lost*, 183–4.

Those fraught relationships and that remoteness also operate at national and systemic levels. Writers based outside of the Home Counties and the south-east of England habitually battle with pejorative and dismissive categorisation as “regional” or “provincial”. Rosemary Shirley, drawing on Raymond Williams’s *The Country and the City*, notes that these are terms “of relative inferiority to an assumed centre”.<sup>18</sup> Neal Alexander and James Moran, in the introduction to their important *Regional Modernisms* collection, begin with the premise, which they question, that “modernism is, by definition, liberated from provincialism and local allegiances, caught up in an ambivalent but creatively productive relationship with the fluctuating currents of modernity and modernisation.”<sup>19</sup> Brannigan points to the problematic of centres of power within the British Isles, while Dave Russell includes Cumbria in his description of the “far North” from London by climate and distance; while it has long been the administrative centre, now that the UK is essentially an administrative power the capital has an ever-greater pull.<sup>20</sup> Bluemel and McCluskey point out that we cannot “talk about rural without alluding to a history of condescending judgements by urban people about their rural neighbours.”<sup>21</sup> On his death in 1987 Nicholson was damned with faint praise in his *Times* obituary as “the most gifted English Christian provincial poet of his century”.<sup>22</sup> That description places Nicholson falsely out of step with modernity, and he regularly asserted the value of rural and “provincial” life. His early stay at Linford Sanatorium in Hampshire, for his tuberculosis, taught him “to be ashamed of his parents and his father’s trade”, but he learned once again to take pride in his roots and rootedness.<sup>23</sup> He embraced this in a BBC broadcast “On Being a Provincial” (1954), and entitled his thinly-fictionalised memoir *Provincial Pleasures* (1959).<sup>24</sup> Friends and critics in his lifetime such as Philip Gardner and Melvyn Bragg situated him in these terms; David Cooper, in a substantial discussion of Nicholson’s desire to “strip the term [...] of its pejorative connotations” upgrades him to “resolutely provincial”.<sup>25</sup> Bragg observes, in an essay for Nicholson’s seventieth-birthday festschrift, that

Norman is not a ‘local’ poet nor has he ever, I think, greatly wanted to be. The fact that he was pinned down in cut-off declining Millom seems to have spurred him on to prove and assert that he could reach out to the centre in his work.<sup>26</sup>

The strained logic of this claim ignores Nicholson’s pride in and intimate, encyclopaedic knowledge of, literally and figuratively, his home turf; he rejects the compulsion to see liveliness and vitality as metropolitan. This attitude characterises rural modernity: the

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<sup>18</sup>Shirley, *Rural Modernity*, 5.

<sup>19</sup>Alexander and Moran, “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>20</sup>Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism*, 5; Russell, *Looking North*, 17. Even Russell’s title points to the otherness of northern England. Mazieska also highlights the disparity in power and wealth between the north and the south-east of England in “Introduction: Imagining the North of England,” 3.

<sup>21</sup>Bluemel and McCluskey, “Introduction,” 4.

<sup>22</sup>See Neil Curry, “Introduction” to *CP*, xv.

<sup>23</sup>Jones, *Norman Nicholson*, 49.

<sup>24</sup>“On Being a Provincial”, BBC Home Service, 8 August 1954, 9.15pm; published as Nicholson, “On Being a Provincial”.

<sup>25</sup>Cooper, “Envisioning ‘The Cubist Fells’,” 148–9. See also Gardner, *Norman Nicholson*, 15–16.

<sup>26</sup>Bragg, “The Laureate of the Lakes”, in *Between Comets*, ed. Scammell, 59; Bragg profiled Nicholson for *The South Bank Show*, ITV, 4 November 1984, 10.45pm. In the same volume Gardner is more optimistic about asserting the value of the regional in the 1970s and 1980s, “A Lifetime’s Effort: for Norman at 70”, *Between Comets*, 61–4. Burchardt points to the canonical “roots of regionalism” in writers such as Walter Scott, the Brontës, George Eliot and R.D. Blackmore in *Paradise Lost*, 68–9.

focus on lives, practices and forms which are to the external observer incongruous with rurality, and the refusal to code rural areas as necessarily idyllic, unsophisticated, or apart from modernity. Drawing out the relationships between people, place, and the processes and systems within which they exist further enhances our understanding of rural modernity.

## Nicholson and Rural Modernity

Looking at poet and place through the lens of rural modernity shifts the debate from an urban-focused understanding to a reinstatement of rural industry and its long, slow decline, issues which still pertain in the lack of understanding of deindustrialised areas, particularly in northern England, exhibited in the current so-called “levelling up” agenda. To write and think about rural modernity is to construct a living scene, to reveal the relationships between location and life and work within it. This practice is evident in Nicholson’s prose and poetry throughout his career. In “Lines Upon the Millom Parish Church” (1936), an unpublished work from his second extant notebook of poem drafts, Nicholson names his home town for the first time, and starts to bring together the interests which characterise his later poetry.<sup>27</sup> However, other authors and critics in his contemporary networks resist the combination of rural and industrial, despite the familiarity of such landscapes for millions of people. Nicholson wrote to his close friend George Every in 1937 that “You can’t call it affectation for me to bring mines and blast furnaces and the like into my landscape for I can see them out of the windows of my home.”<sup>28</sup> For Every, those icons of industry are incongruous in the description of an idealised countryside, perhaps particularly the Lake District of the Romantics. For Nicholson, however, the mines and furnaces are there, and so must be represented: the incongruity of rural modernity is not a failure of the relationship between form and content, but a feature, the development of a distinct form.

Rural modernity is not only about the aesthetics and impact of industry, but about the relationships among people, and of people with place. For Nicholson rural areas must be modern, even modernised: amenities and services are necessary for survival. “What matters,” he states, “is that Millom – and many more such small towns – is a living and organic community.”<sup>29</sup> Millom’s typicality is again asserted alongside his awareness of the need for continuing adaptation. Nicholson is no misty-eyed nostalgic for rural life in the past, writing about the long history of industry in Cumbria which develops alongside the reification of the Lake District as an unspoilt refuge from the modern. The rural can only be idealised when and by those for whom it is not the location for labour and

<sup>27</sup>Norman Nicholson Archive, NCN3/1/2, 39, “Lines upon the Millom Parish Church”. The poem is dated 3 October 1936. For further discussion of Nicholson’s notebooks, see Max Long, “Light, Vision and Observation”.

<sup>28</sup>Letter from Nicholson to George Every, 29 September 1937, quoted by Gardner, 31. Every’s comment which drew this response does not survive. The correspondence between Nicholson and Every was clearly vital to both men, and highly personal. At some point between the writing of Philip Gardner’s thesis in the late 1960s and Nicholson’s death in 1987, Every and Nicholson agreed to destroy large parts of their correspondence (see Jones, 187–8). A private man with the conventional attitudes of his generation, Nicholson’s reticence about expressing his feelings is evidenced in his generally outward-looking and observational poetry. We are left only with the fragments of this correspondence presented in Gardner’s thesis and book.

<sup>29</sup>Nicholson, *Greater Lakeland*, 147.

day-to-day life, experienced as leisure due to an excess of time and/or capital. However, the ambivalence, or perhaps inconsistency, of his view is clearest in *Portrait of the Lakes* (1963). On the one hand, he implores the reader:

Don't complain about quarries; don't protest against mineral workings. Give the dalesman a chance to go on living and making a living, and to stay more or less independent of the tourist[. . .] Don't stifle the life of a dale community for the sake of saving a view.<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, in a chapter entitled "The Last Catastrophe" he criticises "the levelling tidal wave of modern civilisation", and fears that "soon the special character of dale life may be obliterated and half-forgotten".<sup>31</sup> This is the paradox, the bind of rural modernity, particularly in the late twentieth century. Writers such as Nicholson know that new life needs to be breathed into these communities. However, with this comes modernisation's striving for "efficiency", meaning redundancy, for people, places and local cultures. These tensions constitute life in rural modernity, and while Fairbrother charitably suggests that Wordsworth and his circle "as writers [...] could even be said to earn their living as local people by exploiting the natural resources", Nicholson felt an outcast in Millom for not undertaking the physical labour precluded by his tuberculosis but a constant presence around him.<sup>32</sup> A living by the pen was the only one available to him, and his distinctive viewpoint on industrialised and then deindustrialising rural Britain in the twentieth century deserves serious attention.

The countryside is not only an idealised landscape, framed idealistically by visitors and tourists. Life in rural communities also responds to modernity rather than retreats from it, perhaps especially in key industries such as agriculture.<sup>33</sup> Much of the work in this area has been by historians and geographers studying the mid-twentieth century, where its theoretical roots lie. Nan Fairbrother's *New Lives, New Landscapes* is a germinal text for her elucidation of the gap between how our use and valuing of landscapes, while David Matless has been influential in reconceptualising the relationship between space and constructions of national identity.<sup>34</sup> Theorists are clear that rural life does not and cannot insulate its subjects from modernity, and Rosemary Shirley highlights how modernity is registered in everyday phenomena as diverse as litter, motorways, and folk art customs.<sup>35</sup> Recent work on rural modernity rejects a rural/traditional and urban/modern binary. Bluemel and McCluskey highlight that rural places

are, in their everyday aspects, already sources for studies of modernity. Assuming a modern cultural producer is or may be at home in rural places has an impact not only on what artists, writers, cultural objects and institutions scholars look at, but also on how and why we look at them.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>30</sup>Nicholson, *Portrait of the Lakes*, 180. Nicholson continued this motif from his work in *The Lakers* (1955). See Cooper, "The Poetics of Place and Space," 815–16.

<sup>31</sup>Nicholson, *Portrait of the Lakes*, 60.

<sup>32</sup>Fairbrother, *New Lives*, 146.

<sup>33</sup>See, for example, Head, *Modernity and the English Rural Novel*, 1–2.

<sup>34</sup>Fairbrother, *New Lives*, 299; see particularly Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*.

<sup>35</sup>Shirley, *Rural Modernity*, 3, 18–19. Kelly discusses the impact of post-war planning on rural Devon, also picking up on the incursions of everyday structures of modernity such as roads and pylons, in *Quartz and Feldspar*.

<sup>36</sup>Bluemel and McCluskey, "Introduction," 9.



Writing of rural modernity must not be seen as failed versions of urban and metropolitan forms, but must be understood by theorisation of its own concerns and agendas, the vital importance of and attachments to place, and the cultural forms generated.

## Nicholson and Rural Modernism

Going beyond Bluemel and McCluskey's focus on writers about rural modernity, I propose a definition of rural modernism as the linguistic and metaphorical representation of industrial modernity as inherent in the rural, the juxtaposition of rural beauty and rural industry: a conscious act of looking at that which is more frequently placed outside the frame. Rural modernity and rural modernism look not only to the sublime, but also the quotidian. It is now a critical truism that one of literary modernism's significant developments is the collapsing of distinctions between high art and popular media. Nicholson does this structural work of moving between the eternal and the daily, the transcendent and the immanent, the ancient and the modern. Vital to rural life and central to its literary representation is the jarring articulation of both. Nicholson insisted on the typicality of "the sharp juxtaposition of industry and fell",<sup>37</sup> awed by the beauty of flora, fauna and fells, but acutely conscious, as a shopkeeper's son in an iron mining and works town, of the necessity of labour for living:

I think I needed the harshness of Millom – because although I've been talking of Millom as a beautiful place, it's an ugly place too, with this harsh contrast between the ghastly little town which grew in the Industrial Revolution, and the grim lives which people lead – the contrast between that and all this tremendous open country that you see as you come here.<sup>38</sup>

Nicholson makes clear that in writing rural modernity ugliness cannot and should not be avoided. That ugliness is not only aesthetic, not only about the contrast between the pastoral landscape and heavy industry, but also personal, in the form of hard labour, unemployment and poverty. Nicholson's move beyond the Romantic Lakes was helped by his teenage discovery of T.S. Eliot's poetry, a damascene moment "just like a religious conversion. I was converted to modern poetry, just like that."<sup>39</sup> For him it was Eliot "more than anyone else who made us see [our landscape] whole, who made us aware of the meadow beyond the muckheap, who pointed out the significance of the dilapidated school and the empty church on the hill."<sup>40</sup> Nicholson resists unthinkingly mimicking the critique of urban modernity for which Eliot is most famous. He recognises that meadow and muckheap are both integral aspects of rural modernity and its cultural works, along with the decline of communities. The necessity of labour for survival in rural modernity is always a part of its literature, along with an acute consciousness of its painful hardships. Pathos is always present in the knowledge that deindustrialisation is inherent in extractive industries, is recognised as such by people living in rural modernity, and particularly felt by them as rural modern villages and towns have often developed around single resources or industries—and then declined and

<sup>37</sup>Nicholson, *Greater Lakeland*, 26. See also *Wednesday Early Closing*, 21.

<sup>38</sup>Hay and Wynn-Jones, "Interview with Norman Nicholson," 27–8. The interview was conducted in 1973.

<sup>39</sup>Hay and Wynn-Jones, "Interview with Norman Nicholson," 23. Kathleen Jones attributes the introduction to Eliot to Sylvia Lubelsky, who he had met at the sanatorium and whose love he sought. In this quotation he is almost certainly thinking of his schoolfriend John Edward (Ted) Fisher, who as a Mexborough schoolteacher would later mentor Ted Hughes; Nicholson repeats this story in "Words and Imagery," 231.

<sup>40</sup>Nicholson, "Words and Imagery," 234.



disappeared. We might, then, read rural modernism in Nicholson's poetry as a relation of the "green modernism" which Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy identifies, which "include[s] nature while simultaneously resisting the romantic and pastoral models", "explore[s] an alternative English identity", and "foregrounds the material actuality of the natural world".<sup>41</sup> I develop this theorisation, trace the impacts of these issues through Nicholson's poetry, and conclude by contemplating rural modernity in the twenty-first century.

While Nicholson's work does not, for the most part, resonate with the rhythms and references of high modernist poetry, we can and should understand his verse in relation to his antecedents and contemporaries. The imprint of Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) is felt in the four poets Nicholson addresses in his second collection, *Rock Face* (1948): Caedmon, William Cowper, Thomas Gray and Emily Brontë. These are revealing choices, pointing variously to religion, morbidity, the rural, and a northern English identity.<sup>42</sup> Moving into the twentieth century, Eliot would become Nicholson's first editor at Faber & Faber, kindly but trenchantly criticising and rejecting his early fiction, and contributing to the development of his poetic technique; that said, Nicholson's poetry was recommended by Eliot to other journals, but rejected for his own *Criterion*.<sup>43</sup> Their poetry shares a set of broader interests, however. The two shared a commitment to Anglicanism, reflected in Nicholson's poetry in the consistent representation of human momentariness in the face of the enduring processes which shape land and sea. Nicholson was also writing his first collection of poetry as Eliot was writing the *Four Quartets*, and an inspiration (if not necessarily a substantial further indebtedness) can be discerned in the eternality of "Burnt Norton", the impermanence of "East Coker", and the fascination with the coast in "The Dry Salvages", for example. In a short 1945 article on "An Aspect of Modern Poetry" for the Hull poet Howard Sergeant's magazine *Outposts*, Nicholson praises Eliot, quoting "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", and insists on a new poetic language for the age. His analysis calls Imagism to mind: "every word has its precise meaning and is used because no other word will do, and the images exist in their own right, clearly and uniquely seen."<sup>44</sup> Vision and precision are consistently combined as part of Nicholson's poetics.

"An Aspect of Modern Poetry" offers a rare insight into Nicholson's creative practice in which he endeavours to create a distinctive space for himself. His analysis here demonstrates an allegiance and indebtedness to literary modernism which sometimes manifests in his use of free verse, although he retains an interest in rhyme and metre. He tackles the difficulty of modernist writing, recognising that "to a vast number of intelligent readers all verse from Eliot onwards is just 'that modern poetry'".<sup>45</sup> Nicholson concludes the article with a conventional defence of modernist complexity: "the reader who is at first bewildered can be sure that his very bewilderment may help to sharpen his own

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<sup>41</sup>Mathes McCarthy, *Green Modernism*, 18.

<sup>42</sup>Nicholson also wrote a study of *William Cowper*.

<sup>43</sup>See, for example, T.S. Eliot to Norman Nicholson, 8 March 1940: "I am not afraid of discouraging you, because anyone who really has something to say is willing to suffer and labour for years in order to learn the right way of saying it." *Letters of T.S. Eliot*, ed. by Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (London: Faber & Faber, 2021), p. 447. Valerie Eliot first asked Nicholson for his correspondence with T.S. Eliot in a letter of 10 January 1978, Norman Nicholson Archive, NCN 1/1/174. Jones details Nicholson's difficult early attempts at publication, 70.

<sup>44</sup>Nicholson, "An Aspect of Modern Poetry," [p. 16].

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, [p. 15].

awareness not only of the significance of poetry, but of the significance of life.”<sup>46</sup> Where might bewilderment reside in Nicholson’s largely conversational poetry? It is not in the avant-garde environmental forms identified by critics such as Joshua Schuster and Elizabeth Black.<sup>47</sup> Writing about Sylvia Townsend Warner and Storm Jameson, David James argues that “regional writing approaching mid-century is not usually accompanied by a ‘mythology of newness’ of the kind we associate with contemporaneous avant-gardes,” going on to claim that both are audacious in their way.<sup>48</sup> What is seen as bewildering about Nicholson’s work is his focus on Millom, and his use of dialect, colloquialisms, and the language of industry, bringing them together in lines such as “A huddle of iron jammy-cranes / Straddles the skear”.<sup>49</sup> Footnotes helpfully define that these are iron herons looming over rocky outcrops exposed at low tide. This begs a pertinent question about the kinds of linguistic difficulties with which readers and critics are prepared to wrestle. The use of non-standard English forms from within England is disparaged for regionality, despite the structural similarities with more familiar modernist formal and linguistic experimentation. Also in the period, “loam and lovechild” novels such as Mary Webb’s *Precious Bane* (1926) were disparaged for extensive use of (in this case Shropshire) dialect. These issues are registered more overtly in work on Welsh and Scottish poetry, notably in Hugh MacDiarmid’s work in synthetic Scots. The root of Nicholson’s critical lack of favour is that he is still familiar enough to be easily recognisable, leaving merely an uncanny element.<sup>50</sup> This suggests that unfamiliar forms rooted in non-metropolitan Britishness are the subjects of suspicion and deprecation.

Other formal inspirations for Nicholson include writers more commonly associated with traditional forms, such as the Georgian and Dymock poets, but who are now increasingly considered under the expanding umbrella of modernist studies, writers of what, in the context of British poetry, Peter Howarth has called the “age of modernism”.<sup>51</sup> D.H. Lawrence was an unlikely inclusion in Nicholson’s Penguin *Anthology of Religious Verse: Designed for the Times* (1942), but his poems “Shadows”, and the extracts chosen by Nicholson from “The Ship of Death” would undoubtedly have resonated in the heart of the Second World War. The rootedness of Lawrence’s work in the Midlands, even long after leaving, resonates with Nicholson’s meticulous attention to his own locale. Nicholson wrote that Lawrence’s

poems and early novels express much of what I felt – an almost ecstatic joy in the thrust and flux of life, in the renewal of the seasons and the renewal of generations and even in death as part of the cycle of renewal.<sup>52</sup>

Andrew Harrison argues that for Lawrence, “physical displacement, far from resolving tensions in one’s regional identity, simply exposes them in an altered, or even heightened, form.”<sup>53</sup> For Nicholson, though, Lawrence’s exile denied him the pleasures of

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., [p. 16].

<sup>47</sup>Schuster, *Ecology of Modernism*; Black, “Edith Sitwell”.

<sup>48</sup>James, “Capturing the Scale of Fiction at Mid-Century,” 120.

<sup>49</sup>Nicholson, “The Borehole”, in *CP*, 266.

<sup>50</sup>See the essays in Alexander and Moran’s volume by Milne, “Hugh MacDiarmid’s Modernisms”, John Goodby and Wigginton, “Welsh Modernist Poetry”.

<sup>51</sup>Howarth, *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism*.

<sup>52</sup>Nicholson, in *They Became Christians*, ed. Dewi Morgan (1966), qtd. by Jones, 48.

<sup>53</sup>Harrison, “The Regional Modernism of D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce,” 57.

the rural and provincial: "All the time he longed for the rough, warm friendliness he had known as a boy with the miners at the pits and the farmers in the fields."<sup>54</sup> Nicholson imagines himself among the Dymock poets in "Do You Remember Adlestrop?", from his final collection *Sea to the West* (1981). Seeking late-life poetic inspiration he imagines a coterie life, an in-person, communal development of poetry inaccessible to him by location, also perhaps seeing himself as out of keeping with contemporary poetic trends. He asks: "Is there no question / to fork air into my long-dormant root-stock?"<sup>55</sup> The poem also looks back beyond the Beeching cuts to railway services which in the 1960s made access to rural areas more difficult; the line from Barrow-in-Furness to Whitehaven, passing through Millom, was also threatened by Beeching, but reprieved.<sup>56</sup> The spectre of redundancy and deindustrialisation looms large.

We might also understand Nicholson among other late modernists from and writing about an England beyond London and the south-east. Alexander and Moran argue that "regional affiliations are apparent in the work of many high modernists but are perhaps particularly pronounced in that of 'late' modernists writing during and after the 1930s."<sup>57</sup> For example, Nicholson shared his Anglicanism with Geoffrey Hill, and also corresponded with other northern poets such as Glyn Hughes, Ted Hughes, and Matt Simpson. An important influence on Nicholson's late work, as Jones argues, was Basil Bunting, an associate of first-generation modernists such as Ezra Pound and Ford Madox Ford in 1920s Paris, but an obscure writer living an adventurous life until late in it. The title of Bunting's verse autobiography *Briggflatts* (1966) places him in the conflicted borderlands of Yorkshire and Cumbria; the poem exhibits an acute sense of place, use of dialect, and insistence on the sonorous nature of poetry.<sup>58</sup> Nicholson's northern England is a less complex one in formal terms, but the kinship is clear. For Alexander and Moran, "modernism simultaneously vaults beyond the bounds of national affiliation and attests to the local differences which threaten to undermine any cultural image of national integrity."<sup>59</sup> Following Alexandra Harris and Jed Esty, they point to: "an array of late-modernist texts [which] are absorbed less with the elaboration of an international aesthetic than with English landscapes, customs, and the possibilities of reinvigorating local cultures", noting also that Eliot "extols the value of regions and regional variety in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948)."<sup>60</sup> However, Nicholson is acutely conscious that Millom's geographical isolation does not insulate it from the movements of global capital (although he would not express it in those terms), and that the local is a manifestation of ideas, organisations and processes beyond.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>54</sup>Nicholson, "On Being a Provincial," 248. On Lawrence and the rural, see Mathes McCarthy, *Green Modernism*, ch. 4.

<sup>55</sup>Nicholson, "Do You Remember Adlestrop?", *CP*, 369. For an ecocritical reading of Thomas, see Black, *Nature of Modernism*.

<sup>56</sup>Hansard, HC Deb 8 May 1963, vol. 677, col. 55.

<sup>57</sup>Alexander and Moran, "Introduction," 3.

<sup>58</sup>Jones, *Norman Nicholson*, 178–9.

<sup>59</sup>Alexander and Moran, "Introduction," 4.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 5, 10.

<sup>61</sup>Coincidentally, a key theorist of place and politics who argues along these lines is John A. Agnew, himself born in Millom, notable for *Place and Politics*.

## Rural Modernity, Rural Modernism and Deindustrialisation

From his earliest published poetry Nicholson observes the waxing and waning of icons of industrial modernity. Some seams of iron ore, such as the one at Cleator Moor, near Whitehaven in central west Cumbria (approximately thirty miles north of Millom after you rejoin the main A595 road and continue to head north), were almost worked out by the early years of the twentieth century.<sup>62</sup> “Mining is really a rural industry”, Nicholson wrote in a late-life essay, “the harvesting of a crop which, unfortunately does not renew itself.”<sup>63</sup> The eight stanzas of Nicholson’s poem about that town represent formally the boom and bust. In the third stanza development occurs apace:

Pylons sprouted on the fells,  
Stakes were driven in like nails,  
And the ploughed fields of Devonshire  
Were sliced with the steel of Cleator Moor.<sup>64</sup>

Nicholson’s rural modernism connects industrial growth and development with processes of growth in the natural world. The tension between the two is echoed in the uneasy half-rhymes that conclude these lines of iambic tetrameter, the metre for Wordsworth’s most famous poems. While the nature of the slicing of the fields is not certain—it might be the expansion of the rail network mentioned in the previous stanza, the improvement of the road network by metalling, or the ploughing itself—it is clear that this is a quintessential image of rural modernity. Following this narrative of development there is a one-stanza boom, as “The land waxed fat and greedy”, before a volta at the mid-point of the poem:

The pylons rusted on the fells,  
The gutters leaked beside the walls,  
And women searched the ebb-tide tracks  
For knobs of coal or broken sticks.<sup>65</sup>

The failure of rural industry to sustain its communities is symbolised by the inexorable overwhelming of man-made amenities; the ebbing ocean echoes on a global scale the localised representation of privation and poverty. When an olive branch is proffered, however, it comes with a quandary: “In Cleator Moor they dig for death.” Wartime is for the most part a looming, obliquely registered presence in Nicholson’s first collection *Five Rivers* (1944), but in the penultimate stanza the message is clear: “Every knuckle of soft ore / A bullet in a soldier’s ear.”<sup>66</sup> These lines jarringly adjust the rhythm, the seven-syllable line beginning by stressing that there is no good use for this material in wartime, and concluding with a spondee that contrasts the softness of the ore across the enjambling line break with its hard processed form as materiel. Whether the “in” is stressed or not, the effect is the same: life for the workers in the form of employment is death for the soldiers who wield the products. There is none of the “exuberance” at energy development

<sup>62</sup>For Nicholson’s brief description of Cleator Moor, see *Greater Lakeland*, 176–8. On the development of the town see Marshall, “Cleator & Cleator Moor”. In Cumbria, towns such as Harrington slowly declined, or were forced into decline. Newman, “Harrington: Cumberland’s Lost Town”.

<sup>63</sup>Nicholson, “Ten-yard Panorama,” 6.

<sup>64</sup>Nicholson, “Cleator Moor”, *CP*, 16.

<sup>65</sup>Nicholson, “Cleator Moor”, 16.

<sup>66</sup>*ibid.*, 16, 17.

and fossil fuel use in modernist literature which Michael Rubenstein and Justin Neuman trace, following Frederick Buell.<sup>67</sup> Rural modernity is haunted by the knowledge of the precariousness of what makes and supports it.

We might understand Nicholson's poetry as a form of theorising to which critical and theoretical work is only now catching up. Deindustrialisation is a corollary of rural modernity: the reliance on extraction comes with the knowledge that such resources are finite. Jasper Bernes compellingly makes the case that "history in capitalism is always, to some extent, the history of work, and the violent transformations of the last few centuries are intimately entangled with an equally violent refashioning of labour," and argues that deindustrialisation rather than postindustrialization "gives us the sense of a negation that has not itself been negated".<sup>68</sup> The knowledge that, even in the UK, deindustrialisation is not completed is essential to understanding rural modernity. Jay Emery critiques Alice Mah's term "industrial ruination" while recognising its use "in conceptualizing the multitude of personal and collective material, social, and cultural traumas inflicted through deindustrialization".<sup>69</sup> Rebecca Wheeler, writing about Askam-in-Furness, across the Duddon from Nicholson's Millom and apostrophised by him in "Askam Unvisited" and "Askam Visited", notes the apparent incongruity of industrial ruins in rural locations.<sup>70</sup> These ruins, of course, are only as incongruous as the works themselves were as they grew. Bernes sees the aesthetic of deindustrialisation among his case studies of primarily metropolitan poets in the USA in the 1960s and 1970s as countercultural, reacting against bureaucracy regardless of whether writers themselves worked.<sup>71</sup> Nicholson, however, is not interested in the overthrow of capitalism, but in how one might continue to survive in a town that owes its existence to the extracted minerals and their processing, and the corresponding extraction of capital.

Recent writing on deindustrialisation has followed Marion Shoard's influential description of "edgelands", thinking about such sites as liminal, interstitial spaces, cusp sites receptive to repurposing and rewilding.<sup>72</sup> This can be traced back to early responses to deindustrialisation in the 1960s and 1970s such as Richard Mabey's *The Unofficial Countryside* (1973), which points to the beauty of abandoned industrial sites as they are reclaimed by an abundance of wildlife. For Mabey the primary wonder in such spaces is that the viewer might be elsewhere.<sup>73</sup> His focus is on the ability of nature to survive human incursions; there is little sense of the value of work, only in its displacement that allows the natural world to regain a toehold.<sup>74</sup> These works either implicitly or explicitly conceptualise

<sup>67</sup>Rubenstein and Neuman, *Modernism and Its Environments*, 28.

<sup>68</sup>Bernes, *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*, 2, 3. Strangleman and Rhodes review writing on the subject, acknowledging its development over several decades, in "The 'New' Sociology of Deindustrialisation?" Tregonna surveys the subject from an economist's point of view in "A new theoretical analysis of deindustrialisation". Wiener ruminates on the relative value of the terms "postindustrialism or de-industrialism" without coming to a clear conclusion in *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit*, 159–62. Burchardt offers a trenchant critique of Wiener in *Paradise Lost*, 94–5.

<sup>69</sup>Emery, "Geographies of Deindustrialization," 4. Emery also offers a useful overview of available literature, noting the shift "from the so-called 'body count' studies [...] to the multiple social and cultural dynamics of industrial decline" (4). See Mah, *Industrial Ruination*.

<sup>70</sup>Wheeler, "Mining Memories in a Rural Community". Nettleingham, in his work in "Beyond the Heartlands" on the Kent shipyards offers an alternative perspective.

<sup>71</sup>Bernes, *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*, 8–9.

<sup>72</sup>Shoard, "Edgelands". Shoard draws upon Garreau, *Edge City*.

<sup>73</sup>Mabey, *Unofficial Countryside*, 9–14. Mabey is not unconscious that there is working countryside, but makes it clear that this is not his focus (73).

<sup>74</sup>Mabey, *Unofficial Countryside*, 35.

such spaces as on the edge of major urban areas. Fairbrother puts it succinctly and boldly: “P E R I P H E R A L L A N D I S U R B A N L A N D”.<sup>75</sup> The focus is on regeneration, supposing that edgelands will be passed through because they are convenient and proximate for many; the accrual of opportunity necessarily links to the relative economic value of the space. However, returning to your travels and turning left off the A5093 loop into the town of Millom, keeping straight on takes you towards the east of the peninsula; just before you reach the end of the road you would in early 1968 have seen looming buildings above you amid a clamour of noise. Now you see an expanse of former industrial land, the Millom Ironworks Local Nature Reserve. The poets Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts explicitly invoke Nicholson in their elegant *Edgelands*, seeing him as a poet of the modern industrial west coast of Cumbria, rather than the Romantic and romanticised Lake District.<sup>76</sup> However, the danger of the edgelands, and of conceptualising rural modernity more generally, is that it is a different type of romanticisation, trading on the pleasure of seeing rewilding happen and nostalgia for better times in deindustrialised communities.<sup>77</sup> Nicholson is acutely conscious that, for working people distant from centres of population and power, hardship is an ongoing condition—particularly when possibilities for work are diminished.

### Millom and the Ironworks

Nicholson’s last two major collections, *A Local Habitation* (1972) and *Sea to the West* (1981) register powerfully the impact of deindustrialisation on Millom. The title for the former invokes, characteristically unobtrusively, Theseus’s speech at the beginning of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*:

The poet’s eye, in fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
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.<sup>78</sup>

The moment of comedic resolution following Puck’s tricks is transposed into Nicholson’s deindustrialising “local habitation” in which the “forms of things unknown” portend a future uncertain and harder still, and the fear that his town will itself become an ‘airy nothing’. In his final collection, Nicholson recalls the jolt of reading the news while on holiday in 1968: “like a snapped spring, a familiar name / Headlines clean at me: ‘Millom Ironworks / To Close in Four Weeks Time’.”<sup>79</sup> The medial caesurae of the first two lines here evoke the shock of recognition, while the closure is highlighted by the beginning of a new line. The snapped spring neatly encapsulates the fate of the town: its ability to store energy abruptly curtailed, broken, condemned to the fate of scrap metal, that metal itself potentially derived from the town’s natural resources, extraction and processing. Nicholson observed bitterly that:

<sup>75</sup>Fairbrother, *New Lives*, 190.

<sup>76</sup>Farley and Symmons Roberts, *Edgelands*, 178–9.

<sup>77</sup>Bonnett, “Dilemmas of Radical Nostalgia”.

<sup>78</sup>Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 5.1.12–17.

<sup>79</sup>Nicholson, “Glen Orchy”, *CP*, 358.



Reporters, television cameramen and others flocked to the town, like sightseers at an accident, and the picture they gave to the public was one of a dying town in the edge of nowhere, full of disconsolate people trudging along streets of decaying terraced houses.<sup>80</sup>

The town is seen only when what Rob Nixon describes as “slow violence”, the pernicious impact of structural inequities and iniquities, turns into the enactment of the coup de grâce.<sup>81</sup> Rural modernity, then, is largely unseen by design, becoming visible only in existential crisis; this also accounts in part for its relative invisibility in modernist studies, too.

The key poems in which Nicholson charts the impact of deindustrialisation on life in rural modernity are “On the Closing of Millom Ironworks”, in *A Local Habitation*, and “On the Dismantling of Millom Ironworks”, in *Sea to the West*. These poems exemplify the rural modernity and modernism already outlined, connecting rurality and industry, drawing attention to the juxtaposition in its moment of disappearance. The closure in the first poem literally disorients Nicholson, who looks to the “Weathercock of the furnace chimneys. / But no grey smoke-tail / Pointers the mood of the wind.”<sup>82</sup> Cleaner air and surroundings hardly compensate for the loss of the ironworks, registered by its fleeting traces and lingering absences. In the later poem the disorientation becomes more acute:

Look left along the line where gantry and crane and coke-bank  
Ten years ago blocked all the view – and now you’re staring  
Bang at Black Combe. The wind resumes its Right of Way<sup>83</sup>

The shock of seeing Black Combe again—a hill which looms over the town, dominating its skyline, its highest point over 600 metres above sea level<sup>84</sup>—is emphasised trebly, firstly by the caesura which highlights that it arrests the gaze, secondly by the brief pause at the enjambment (followed by the “Bang”), the uninterrupted line echoing the uninterrupted gaze, and finally by the stuttering trochee and spondee that conclude the sentence and begin that next line. However, returning to the earlier poem, the human impact is all too clear as the poem turns:

But, morning after morning, there  
They stand, by the churchyard gate,  
Hands in pockets, shoulders to the slag,  
The men whose fathers stood there back in ‘28,  
When their sons were at school with me.<sup>85</sup>

Nicholson’s regular use of the volta attests to the unresolvable dialectic of rural and modern. If rural modernism is characterised by the syntactic connection between those characteristics, then the volta is one of the poetic techniques which keeps them in tension. The disorientation of the poem’s speaker, unable to calibrate his engagement with the natural world, is solidified by the displacement of the men who made their living

<sup>80</sup>Nicholson, *Greater Lakeland*, 146.

<sup>81</sup>Nixon, *Slow Violence*.

<sup>82</sup>Norman Nicholson, “On the Closing of Millom Ironworks”, *CP*, 297–8: 297.

<sup>83</sup>Nicholson, “On the Dismantling of Millom Ironworks”, *CP*, 360.

<sup>84</sup>Nicholson broadcast on the BBC about it: “Norman Nicholson talks about Black Combe, the hump-backed mountain in Cumberland”, BBC Home Service North, 8 April 1952, 19:30. Nicholson published a pamphlet of poems that would all later be included in *Sea to the West* as *The Shadow of Black Combe*. See Cooper, “Envisioning ‘The Cubist Fells’”, 157–9 on Nicholson’s Black Combe poems.

<sup>85</sup>Nicholson, “On the Closing of Millom Ironworks”, *CP*, 297.



at the ironworks, a second generation's employment attenuated by the vagaries of industry and capital. Andrew Kalaidjian, indeed, links fears of resource exhaustion with bodily inertia.<sup>86</sup> The image subtly and densely indicates the omnipresence of the ironworks, presumably the origin of the churchyard gate which also symbolises the death of these men's livelihood. The consigning of the men's hands to their pockets registers the lack of work, while they are aligned with the waste product of their work, now themselves left over from the ironworks' processes. There is none of the 'toxic refreshment' that Schuster identifies in 'urban grime, smokestacks, and industrial waste, far from being debilitating' in the US.<sup>87</sup> That those men are there each morning points to a bleak future, and in the final lines of the poem Nicholson asks: "what's the good of knowing / Which way the wind is blowing", concluding that "whichever way it blows it's a cold wind now".<sup>88</sup> A teenager during the industrial slump of the late 1920s, these sights were formative for Nicholson; writers of rural modernity are not naïve to the ebbs and flows of fortune, in the sense both of luck and finance.

"On the Dismantling of Millom Ironworks" sees Nicholson reckoning with mortality in his final major, and for many finest, collection. In *Sea to the West* the sense of an ending takes in his wife Yvonne's cancer, his own aging, and the struggles of Millom's people to make a living in south-west Cumbria. In deindustrialising Millom, Nicholson ironically uses Wordsworth's lines from the second sonnet of the River Duddon sequence as his epigraph: "Child of the clouds! remote from every taint / Of sordid industry thy lot is cast." The opening lines make clear a younger Nicholson's jocular contempt for Wordsworth's nostalgia, noting that "Even in Wordsworth's day" there had been primitive ironworks.<sup>89</sup> Here, however, the wheel has come full circle as the town becomes increasingly remote from industry and, perhaps consequently, in its social and cultural links to areas beyond. Wordsworth's words take on new meaning and Nicholson allows himself moments of nostalgia, charting the history of the ironworks through the work of generations of his and other families. However, the dismantling of the ironworks is made material and bodily:

They cut up the carcass of the old ironworks

Like a fat beast in a slaughter-house: they shovelled my childhood

On to a rubbish heap.<sup>90</sup>

Nicholson reminds us that memory is highly material and fades rapidly when stimulated neither by person nor place; Gardner sees the poem as "Packed, muscular, burning with a subdued anger of remembered factual detail".<sup>91</sup> Man's domination of the natural world is present in the metaphor, and the parallel is drawn with the dead animal: living animals can continue to produce food for sustenance (such as milk, honey, eggs), but once slaughtered and reduced to flesh, those resources cannot be reproduced. Some workers carried a coffin through the town from the ironworks to register its closure symbolically;

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<sup>86</sup>Kalaidjian, *Exhausted Ecologies*, ch. 1.

<sup>87</sup>Schuster, *Ecology of Modernism*, 2.

<sup>88</sup>Nicholson, "On the Closing of Millom Ironworks", *CP*, 298.

<sup>89</sup>Both quotations Nicholson, "On the Dismantling of Millom Ironworks", *CP*, 359. See Wordsworth, "River Duddon," 57.

<sup>90</sup>Nicholson, "On the Dismantling of Millom Ironworks", *CP*, 359.

<sup>91</sup>Gardner, "A Lifetime's Effort," 63.

Nicholson concludes *Greater Lakeland* by asserting that to forget the coexistence of countryside, rurality and industry will turn Lakeland “moribund, dying slowly from the edges inwards, to become in the end little more than a beautiful, embalmed corpse in a rotting coffin.”<sup>92</sup> The metaphor of sustenance is continued: “here five generations / Toasted the bread they earned at a thousand degrees Fahrenheit / And the town thrived on its iron diet.”<sup>93</sup> Warmth and food, the necessities for human life, are provided and enhanced by the iron—also vital for human nutrition—on which the town lives. The five generations are merely a flicker in history, but a substantial amount of time in terms of human life and Nicholson’s memories. Rural modernity is highly conscious of its indebtedness to work, and that deindustrialisation is a matter of life and death for people and town. Writers such as Nicholson recognise the hardships of physical labour, but are alert to the importance of its lack, a paradox characteristic of rural modernity.

Changes in the landscape arising from the closure of the ironworks are registered powerfully throughout the poem as humans work to efface the traces of rural industry and the powerful forces of the natural world assert themselves. The poem charts the history of industry at the Duddon estuary in a time-lapse image almost cinematic in scope and development:

Bled white of every stain of ore, the Duddon rediscovers  
 Its former channel almost unencumbered – mines  
 Drowned under stagnant waters, chimneys felled and uprooted,  
 Slagbanks ploughed down to half their height, all cragginess,  
 Scrag-end and scree ironed out, and re-soiled and greened over<sup>94</sup>

The deindustrialised landscape contrasts with the serendipity of the river’s rediscovery of its former path among the perpetually shifting sands of the estuary. He is conscious long before the closure of the works of the impermanence of the slagbanks despite their scale, comparing their drift to snow in “Winter by the Ironworks”.<sup>95</sup> “Draped, unshaped, the slagbanks lie – / A dross of smelting, dead and dry”, Nicholson wrote in the following poem in the collection, “Reclining Figure”, which again connects man, land and industry.<sup>96</sup> Here, despite the conspicuous passive voice, men are employed to remove and reduce the traces of the industries that brought them there and in which, perhaps, they previously participated. With this comes a flattening, a removal of the jagged edges and harshnesses which constitute a dynamic, active life in rural modernity. The image of drowning recurs elsewhere, as the Hodbarrow mines were flooded by stop-ping pumping water from the excavated area, what had once given life to the town now “long pipes and throttles of unflowing water, / Stifled cavities, / Lungs of a drowned man.”<sup>97</sup> The drowned man is the town itself, and the lack of movement in the water,

<sup>92</sup>Jones, *Norman Nicholson*, 182; Nicholson, *Greater Lakeland*, 230. In an article for *Cumbria* magazine in May 1968, published after the closure of the mines in March that year and just four months before the closure of the works, he reflected that “the Depression of the ‘Twenties bled the life out of the old veins.” Nicholson, “Floodtime at Hodbarrow,” 81–2. The article appears in the contents list as “Hodbarrow”.

<sup>93</sup>Nicholson, “On the Dismantling of Millom Ironworks”, *CP*, 359.

<sup>94</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup>Nicholson, “Winter by the Ironworks”, *CP*, 191.

<sup>96</sup>Nicholson, “Reclining Figure”, *CP*, 192.

<sup>97</sup>Nicholson, “Hodbarrow Flooded”, *CP*, 279. Bearing in mind Nicholson’s admiration for T.S. Eliot, there may also be an echo here of section IV of *The Waste Land*, “Death by Water”.

usually lifegiving, suggests that it in turn is stagnant, decaying, unable to sustain the life that depends on it as “The town shrinks and dwindles”.<sup>98</sup>

The final lines of “On the Dismantling of Millom Ironworks” make the point abundantly clear, as Nicholson returns to his epigraph and connects Cumbrian literary history with the history of the town:

And maybe the ghost of Wordsworth, seeing further than I can,  
Will stare from Duddon Bridge, along miles of sand and mud-flats  
To a peninsula bare as it used to be, and, beyond, to a river  
Flowing, untainted now, to a bleak, depopulated shore.<sup>99</sup>

Nicholson alludes to the benefit of hindsight in parsing complex and difficult periods of history. The flow of these lines speaks to the long processes of history: the enjambment of the last three lines echoes the continuities represented by the natural world. However, the enjambment does not flow, the word “flowing” itself ironically isolated at the beginning of the final line. The section is also punctuated by jarring medial caesuras: the parenthesised one, two and three word clauses in the final line and a half point haltingly to an uncertain future, culminating in the depopulated shore that returns us to the ghost of Wordsworth while also implying Nicholson’s and the ghosts of the now-vanished town’s former inhabitants.<sup>100</sup> Here, the Romantic lingers, but there is no romance in the disappearance of industry and the supposed return to nature: the presence of human settlement is registered even in the pain of its absence.

Reading these poems allows us to think about the specificity of life in rural locations. While the focus here is on the UK, and specifically the north of England, there are undoubtedly commonalities with global experiences of modernity which can and should be drawn out in future scholarship. The idea of a rural modernism, which I begin to articulate here in focusing on the tensions between rurality and modernity, particularly as characterised by its labour and industry, also deserves further development. Recognising the necessary presences of deindustrialisation in rural modernity will also help our comprehension of these lives and their corresponding cultural forms.

## Epilogue: Millom in the Twenty-first century

“I come now to the problem which faces anyone who tries to write about present-day Cumberland”, Nicholson wrote to open the chapter of *Greater Lakeland* on the Solway Coast, “should I include the west coast or just ignore it?”<sup>101</sup> He writes this in the context of Lake District tourism, now the primary industry in the area. It is for him, however, the terrain that unifies the two, as he noted in a 1964 broadcast:

<sup>98</sup>Nicholson, “On the Dismantling of Millom Ironworks”, *CP*, 360.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup>Amy Cutler discusses Michael Bracewell’s characterisation of visitors to the coast as “partly in search of ghosts”, “Whitby is a Statement”, 123. See Bracewell, “Morecambe: The Sunset Coast,” 35–44.

<sup>101</sup>Nicholson, *Greater Lakeland*, 166.

People who live in towns and see old buildings pulled down and new ones pushed up every other week must surely feel that here is one part of the world that doesn't seem to change: these are the everlasting hills.<sup>102</sup>

Nicholson's faith in the interconnectedness of humans and the world sustained him, along with his Christian belief in eternity: faith is for him profoundly linked with the long sweep of human history. Despite this, however, he struggled to imagine a future for Millom. In the Norman Nicholson Archive at the John Rylands Library, Manchester, there are a number of lists of provisional and planned poems for *Sea to the West*. Notable among these is "Millom in the Twentyfirst Century", which exists only as a fragment of three lines: it is published here for the first time. Nicholson's handwriting is notoriously difficult to decipher, but it appears to read:

If men are alive at all [?],  
A hundred years from now,  
They'll be living here – though how<sup>103</sup>

The fragment ends abruptly there; the remainder of a foolscap piece of paper sits blankly below. It is striking that Nicholson was unable to imagine a future for Millom beyond the tenacity of continued local habitation, through habit as much as anything.

The town is still there, begging the question of what rural modernity looks like in the twenty-first century, particularly in deindustrialised spaces. Formerly highly industrialised areas that are the furthest from the metropolis and least prone to passing traffic, however, continue to have the highest rates of permanent sickness and unemployment.<sup>104</sup> If Millom is an edgeland in terms of the interdependence of industry and the rural, both the former Hodbarrow mines and Millom Ironworks sites given over to an RSPB site and a nature reserve respectively, it does not receive the benefit of passing traffic. Even in advocating a move away from core/margin structures, Brannigan cannot muster much optimistic force—"We may be no closer now, as I write, to an archipelagic conception of relations and identities on these islands than at any time examined in the book"—although Alex Niven's recent polemic musters more energy, culminating in its provocative suggestion that Carlisle be designated the new capital.<sup>105</sup> The poet John Greening asked in 2011 "Why did we stop listening to Millom?", in an assessment that also questions whether 'a voice like Norman Nicholson's can be properly appreciated today or has anything much to say to twenty-first-century readers'.<sup>106</sup> Nicholson's work makes it clear that it has always been difficult to be heard from Millom, patronised for regionalism and writing about the rural against political and literary structures in which metropolitan centres and their networks continue to dominate. Writers outside of the metropolitan avant-garde are inevitably marked by difference, with the representation of unfamiliar lives and landscapes often serving to obscure commonalities of experience in modernity. Recognising

<sup>102</sup>Nicholson, *Enjoying It All*, 5. This talk, the first of a series of six by Nicholson under this title, was first broadcast as part of the long-running series of short talks by religious or faithful figures "Lift Up Your Hearts", BBC Home Service Basic, 27 July 1964, 7:50am. The series continues today on BBC Radio 4 as "Thought for the Day".

<sup>103</sup>Norman Nicholson Archive, NCN3/1/6/3. This fragment is on the reverse of draft material for his anthology *The Lakes*.

<sup>104</sup>MacKay and Davies, "Collective Learning," 862.

<sup>105</sup>Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism*, 17; Niven, *New Model Island*, 129–30.

<sup>106</sup>Greening, "Nicholson, Suddenly," 9, 10.

Nicholson's representation of rural modernity, in a form of rural modernism, allows similar writers to be identified; it is only in reading rural modernists as distinctive and valuable that a wider shift in viewpoint can come about. Next time you should take that turning.

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## ORCID

Andrew Frayn  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6253-1454>

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