‘On the perimeter and fringe of war’:

Norman Nicholson, Rural Modernity and Wartime

In the final pages of *Provincial Pleasures* (1959), a thinly-veiled memoir of his home town of Millom, the Cumbrian author Norman Nicholson suggests that ‘provincial towns have a way of being oblivious to a crisis until the crisis is over’.[[1]](#endnote-1) He continues:

it is the wide view which is the illusion and the narrow one which is nearer the truth. Within the circle of the small town, indeed, we can see the basic structure of human society which is lost sight of in the metropolis. We can see the soil out of which the food comes and the rock out of which the ore comes. We can see how one trade depends on another. We can see how obligations and responsibilities rivet craft to craft, family to family.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Nicholson asserts that the particularities of rural experience reveal underlying social structures against a homogenising, metropolitan modernity. Here, I follow Nicholson’s implicit plea to recognise the importance of rural communities and rural writers in shaping the world. Moving away from conventional understandings of Nicholson only as a nature poet, as beyond the purview of modernist studies, and as an apolitical writer, I reassert the importance of understanding him, particularly in his early work, as a writer of conflict; he is acutely conscious of its presence in rural life, even if his representation of it becomes more frequently latent. Nicholson was shaped by war and its threat, born in January 1914, an adolescent through the European political crises of the 1930s, who achieved literary maturity in the first half of the 1940s. I recover the defining conflict of wartime in Nicholson’s rural poetry, highlighting the inarticulacies, the editorial omissions, the displacements of conflict into dates, places, depictions of the body, and deindustrialisation, outlining finally the implications for theories of wartime.

Norman Nicholson is usually understood as a local poet, writing primarily about his home town of Millom, his home county of Cumberland (today western Cumbria), its flora and fauna, its language, and the relationships between people in rural communities. These are epitomised by the title poem (1953) of his third collection, *The Pot Geranium* (1954), which brings together Cumbrian slate, gardens, weather, religion, brass bands, quarrying, and Nicholson’s necessary (due to illness) rootedness in his home town as he looks out of the window of his attic bedroom: ‘My ways are circumscribed, confined as a limpet / To one small radius of rock’.[[3]](#endnote-3) His consequent detailed attention to his home town, and recognition that its idiosyncrasies were in many ways typical, led him to achieve notice via appearances on BBC radio, well-anthologised poems such as ‘Rising Five’, and he was the subject, in late life, of a *South Bank Show* documentary by his Cumbrian confrere Melvyn Bragg. The few writers about Nicholson, such as Ian Brodie, David Cooper and Andrew Gibson, have tended to work on Nicholson’s spaces, places, and the parsing of them.[[4]](#endnote-4) This work has started to bring Nicholson into the critical conversation; however, we need to recognise the aspects of his writing which are occluded in our criticism. While Nicholson’s nature writing has much to offer fields such as the environmental humanities, other aspects of his poetry also merit reconsideration.

The association of Nicholson with the local and nature means that he tends to be thought of as an apolitical writer. The recessing of Nicholson’s political views has various roots: his religious faith; rural distance; the development of his poetic voice. He feels and articulates the pain of his community but shies away from radical solutions to its problems, apparently in thought and poesis, elegising and hoping rather than acting for change. A late-life comment on the Falklands War (1982) is typically evasive: ‘I am very suspicious and anxious about the British reaction to the Argentine invasion of the Falklands, feeling that it is motivated by hidden atavistic impulses which are not understood by those in power.’[[5]](#endnote-5) He suggests that warmaking is a primitive reaction, failing to read (or not wishing to see) the political agendas underpinning the British response.[[6]](#endnote-6) The suggestion that leaders just cannot help themselves is deferential and without real political conviction. Nicholson’s conservatism was noted by hostile correspondents such as the Oxford academic A. L. Rowse, stung by a poor review, and more friendly ones.[[7]](#endnote-7) The Yorkshire poet Glyn Hughes wrote in an unpublished letter complimenting Nicholson’s autobiography *Wednesday Early Closing* (1975) about his surprise at the lack of analysis, or even mention, of ‘the changing psychological, etc., attitudes of puberty; and, even more so, without analysing your attitude to religion and Christianity – as distinct to your attitudes to churches, which you do so well.’[[8]](#endnote-8) Hughes recognises Nicholson’s strengths in observation but also, typically for British men of his generation, his antipathy to introspection. During the Second World War the rejection of rhetorical illusion often connotes the rejection of propaganda and camouflage, and a caution about demagogic demands for action, as Jonathan Bolton has argued.[[9]](#endnote-9) However, for Nicholson this becomes an ongoing omission.

Nicholson has not typically been understood as a writer of modernist poetry. Despite critical trends towards weakening definitions of modernism temporally, geographically, and formally, Nicholson’s primary subjects made him an outsider – a position which he first resented and then came to embrace. His poetic inspirations were in literary modernism, his inspiration by T. S. Eliot becoming an editorial relationship when Nicholson became a Faber poet. D. H. Lawrence’s early novels and poems were formative, while in later life he appreciated Basil Bunting’s *Briggflatts: An Autobiography* (1966).[[10]](#endnote-10) Both led more cosmopolitan lives, but their most famous works also tied them strongly to their home turf. Nicholson also associated with the artistic modernists of the Cockley Moor set, constellated around Helen Sutherland, and interpellated Ben Nicholson’s painting (no relation).[[11]](#endnote-11) In a late life interview, Nicholson would claim that he ‘was never a modernist’, but he was deeply connected to modernist networks, inspired and influenced by the style.[[12]](#endnote-12) We might understand Nicholson’s poetry as a form of rural modernism, one which is not derivative but remakes the form anew for its own context.[[13]](#endnote-13) The jarring juxtaposition of beauty and ugliness, rural and modern, industrial and pastoral which constitutes rural modernism is accentuated in wartime; war should be understood not as an aberration from a putative peace, but as an extreme symptom of the underlying societal conflicts which modernisms tend to critique. The enduring metropolitan view of rural places as landscapes occludes the political tensions manifested in the often hard lives of people living at the periphery of modern connectivities, but still impacted by modernity. Here, then, I recover the attention to conflict and the political in Nicholson’s early poetry, while asserting his position in the cultural networks and lineage of literary modernism.

One symptomatic example from Nicholson’s early poetry gives this article its title. In his first collection *Five Rivers* (1944), on which I focus, Nicholson repeatedly returns to the relationship between bodies, war, the calendar and the natural world, pointing to the cyclicality of life. His most succinct summation of rural wartime appears in ‘Waiting for Spring 1943’ (1944):

So also we  
On the perimeter and fringe of war,  
Open to the sunlight and the wind from the western sea,  
Wounded by the knife of winter, still  
Feel the bright blood rise[.][[14]](#endnote-14)

Nicholson highlights, via the first person plural, that he is part of his local community, the togetherness heightened by the rhetoric of the war effort. Millom is on the periphery of England, in its northwesternmost county, a border county, distant from local and national seats of government, its coastal location permeable and constantly reshaped by natural forces, as well as the threats from air and sea in the era of total war. Rural wartime is too often unseen; Nicholson reminds the reader that war does not only impact on the city. The ongoing conflict is depicted as a physical wound, and the lines of the poem ebb and flow in length, their uneven rhythms echoing the breathing of a failing body (or body politic), the mutability of the sea, and unpredictably shifting political terrain. In subsequent stanzas Nicholson acknowledges the pain of loss, echoing Eliot: ‘To those defeated by the winter’s cold / Spring is a terrible season’.[[15]](#endnote-15) Spring is usually the marker of rebirth, but here it juxtaposes uneasily with bloody struggle. Taking these lines as diagnostic, I argue that Nicholson is shaped by war, rurality and his border location, and recover the underlying political conflict in Nicholson’s early poetry, registered in dates and other oblique references, the representation of the body, and its relationship to other narratives of loss such as deindustrialisation.

Nicholson, War, and the Rural

Nicholson’s life was shaped by war. An adolescent bout of tuberculosis kept him in Millom all his life and left him unfit to labour – or fight. His family connected his illness with the standardised ‘war bread’ during the First World War.[[16]](#endnote-16) Born in January 1914, that conflict felt omnipresent: ‘all these early memories are associated with the War, which, even for a child of five, was the weather in which we all lived.’[[17]](#endnote-17) The environmental metaphor typifies Nicholson’s response and, indeed, his poetics. His earliest memory beyond the home was his conscripted father being injured at the Millom Ironworks in 1918 doing war work, which Joe, a shop owner, described as ‘wasting three days a week to save his country’.[[18]](#endnote-18) Nicholson came to artistic consciousness during the rise of fascism in the 1930s, and his earliest major publications were during the Second World War. His increasing literary success is evidenced by his editing for Penguin *An Anthology of Religious Verse Designed for the Times* (1942); producing a critical book based on lectures delivered to the Workers’ Education Association, *Man and Literature* (1943) and contributing regular reviews to *Time & Tide*; appearing in a three-author *Selected Poems* (1943) alongside Keith Douglas, the preeminent Second World War poet, and J.C. Hall, who would become Douglas’s literary executor; publishing his first novel, *The Fire of the Lord*, and poetry monograph, *Five Rivers* (both 1944). Nicholson also had his first romantic relationships and found his faith.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Nicholson could not participate as a combatant in the major shared experience of the age, although he was highly conscious of the relationship between poetry and war. He asserted in a review of *More Poems from the Forces* the value of non-combatant poetry.[[20]](#endnote-20) The contemporary poet and critic Rachel Galvin asserts the value of non-combatant war poetry in the era of total war, which ‘transformed the bounds of what can be understood as war and who is vulnerable to violence’.[[21]](#endnote-21) Nicholson’s, however, is different from the urban and US-based poets on whom Galvin focuses. Nicholson’s evasions reject the authority of combatant experience and war’s capacity for revelation, theorised notably by James Campbell,[[22]](#endnote-22) but his distancing is not as self-conscious as, for example, W. H. Auden’s, and he does not draw attention to the failure of language as such; he suggests people might understand the human and environmental impact of war by metaphor.[[23]](#endnote-23) A reviewer for *Time & Tide*, Nicholson read numerous collections of war poetry, reflecting in the process on the form. He recognises the hostility of wartime to long-form expression: it is in ‘slighter forms, then, that some of the best imaginative writing of this war is appearing’.[[24]](#endnote-24) Invoking poems, short stories, essays and their anthologies, Nicholson sees literary fragmentation as a problem of radically changed frameworks not yet fully redeveloped.

The relationship of the rural to national priorities is fraught. Edward Bujak, following John Keegan, sees the First World War as a rural conflict, noting both the importance of agriculture and the widely-commentated decline of English landed society.[[25]](#endnote-25) By the Second World War, there was a tension between this, the requirement for rural land to underpin the war effort, and the agendas of protectionist organisations such as the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (founded 1926).[[26]](#endnote-26) Despite this, as late as 1998 Alun Howkins could write that ‘The history of the rural areas during the Second World War is virtually unstudied’.[[27]](#endnote-27) Rural wartime takes place in a landscape whose survival is being fought for, exemplified by the story of Edward Thomas stopping to pick up some earth when asked why he fought, answering ‘literally, for this’.[[28]](#endnote-28) Beryl Pong summarises: ‘The English landscape, in particular, was key in conveying a sense of temporal continuity on the verge of being destroyed.’[[29]](#endnote-29) In rural wartime, depopulation hits strongly, and if the military context registers, it is in the subtle changes to land use and landscape, or the rapid appearance of ‘secret’ monolithic buildings, with attendant transient workforces. The relative distance of conflict and large-scale destruction means that fragmentation cannot be foregrounded in the same way; a distinctive rural form must be developed.

The ‘perimeter and fringe’ also highlights Millom’s position on the coast, a hard border which is always shifting. In ‘Coastal Journey’ (1943):

the train halts where the railway line  
Twists among the misty shifting sand,  
Neither land nor estuary,  
Neither wet nor dry.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Nicholson returns to coastal positionality frequently, and compellingly addresses the same issue in ‘On Duddon Marsh’ (1952), beginning: ‘This is the shore, the line dividing / The dry land from the waters, Europe / From the Atlantic’.[[31]](#endnote-31) This sophisticates the earlier poem, using enjambment across lines and stanzas to illustrate the ebb and flow of the tide and the coast’s shifting sands. John Brannigan identifies the coast in novels published during the Second World War and its aftermath, including Nicholson’s *The Fire of the Lord* (1944) and *The Green Shore* (1947), as a space which has been romanticised, including by ‘those great modernist excavations of possible sources of rejuvenation and originality’.[[32]](#endnote-32) In reality, conditions and lives are hard and unromantic, rooted in the uncertain nature of the boundary. In ‘Coastal Journey’, ‘There is no more here nor there, / No more you nor me.’[[33]](#endnote-33) The breaking down of such certainties makes, *avant la lettre*, Judith Butler’s argument about wartime: ‘Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.’[[34]](#endnote-34) Nicholson’s illness made him all too conscious of bodily vulnerability and dependence. The poem also disrupts temporalities:

There is no more night nor evening;   
No more now nor then.   
There is only us and everywhere and always.[[35]](#endnote-35)

Wartime is insistently contemporary; community is key, but the present is also eternal. Nicholson is conscious of the vulnerability of his home town, and by extension the nation, from land, air, and sea.

In his topographical writings of the 1960s, Nicholson is conscious of Cumberland’s contested status: he posits that Carlisle, the county town, ‘still seems to be in an uneasy state of Border truce’.[[36]](#endnote-36) He is clear about the violence of territorial wars: ‘Farms and churches were burned, cattle driven off and slaughtered, women raped, children impaled on spikes, abbeys plundered, monks murdered, nuns stripped and violated.’[[37]](#endnote-37) Nicholson’s ability to imagine the pain of human existence informs his poetry. He represents the relationship between humans and the natural world, in a town developed from the 1860s because of the extraction and exploitation of iron ore, and saw as a teenager the impact of the Great Depression. Towns built on extraction, like Millom, are haunted by a sense that they are temporary, which jars against the eternality of land and landscape. Nicholson sees these human imprints in a much longer history, the ebb and flow of the tide or the slow shifts of rock formations often symbolising personal, social and political changes. Wartime brings a focus to these issues. In *Five Rivers* he is already conscious of the waxing and waning of modernity, as in ‘Whitehaven’: ‘Barnacle, cockle, crab and mussel / Suck at the pier’s decaying gristle’.[[38]](#endnote-38) Sea creatures feed on the remnants of the industries which have left the port, further up the Cumbrian coast and once a major trading post, in terminal decline. Nicholson is not misty-eyed about the past or present: across poetry, fiction and topography he sees violence, conflict and exploitation as inherent and cyclical.

Rural areas were highly militarily active. The resonances are very different from the aerial destruction and palimpsestic rebuilding of urban space, with the corresponding chaos of unfamiliar encounters and desperate hedonism.[[39]](#endnote-39) In Blitzed cities, as Leo Mellor argues, the ‘cityscape of fragments produced by bombing had been proleptically foreshadowed in both the laments of high modernism and the *mise en scenes* of surrealism’.[[40]](#endnote-40) However, historian Adam Tooze points out of the Second World War that ‘Many of the parties to the conflict emerged from a rural world. They were motivated by its problems. And their struggle in every arena of the war drew directly on the resources of the countryside, its people and its animals.’[[41]](#endnote-41) Not only did people and resources come from these areas, but the machinery of war was directly sited in rural locations. Nicholson witnessed the development between his town and neighbouring Haverigg of RAF Millom, a practice site for airmen, with attendant practice bombing ranges in the local area and tragic plane test crashes. He was also reading airmen poets, evidenced by his reviews of Alan Rook, John Pudney, and T. R. Hodgson for *Time & Tide* in 1943.[[42]](#endnote-42) Tooze highlights that ‘Airbases were, as far as possible, sited in rural areas. […] The term airfield should be taken literally. It was only from 1939 onwards that most runways were paved.’[[43]](#endnote-43) Hundreds of such sites around the UK meant that in wartime, as in peace, there was little sense of rural idyll. Historian Joanna Bourke addresses the myth both of air warfare’s ‘bloodless’ nature, and of strategic bombing’s precision, while David Pascoe asserts compellingly that ‘the bomber aspired to facelessness’.[[44]](#endnote-44) However, the areas around these facilities felt their impact. Nicholson aligns spring snowfall with parachuting airmen: ‘The fat flakes fall / In parachute invasion from the yellow sky. / The streets are quiet and surprised’.[[45]](#endnote-45) The airmen are an unexpected and unwanted incursion for both parties, the white parachutes an uncanny snowfall, the yellow sky suggesting sunlight on snow, but also a jaundiced, ill world. The presence of the steelworks made Millom a legitimate object for targeting: there were two raids in early 1941, one of which killed several civilians, but neither of which was strategically successful.[[46]](#endnote-46) Rural dwellers such as Nicholson lived with the fear of air war.

Despite this, the area was marked safe enough to take in evacuees from blitzed cities, pointing to the liminal nature of rural wartime; ‘Carol for Holy Innocents’ Day’ (1939) parallels the Holocaust with the evacuation from UK cities of ‘children from a german [sic] Herod, / […] westward across the Pennines / To where the sea like a squadron moves.’[[47]](#endnote-47) Nicholson rarely comments directly on war and politics; when he does so, it tends to be via fleeting metaphors and similes rather than the regimenting of the usually untameable ocean. The poem was first published in the journal *Kingdom Come* in December 1939, clearly an immediate, visceral response to the outbreak of war, shaped by Nicholson’s recent finding of his faith; it would be collected in his first shared volume with Douglas and Hall, but not in *Five Rivers*. He returns to the theme in that volume’s ‘The Evacuees’. Unfamiliar women and children signify the uncanniness of the everyday in wartime. ‘Four years ago / They came to this little town’, Nicholson now begins, the focus shifting from identifying the ill to lamenting the human impact. The threat remains, but becomes distant: ‘Winter came / And the wind did not rise; the sky / withheld its threat of thunderbolt or bomb.’[[48]](#endnote-48) The critique becomes only implicit; the religious analogy is almost wholly effaced. Nicholson’s preeminent early critic Philip Gardner suggests in his reading of the poem that ‘acclimatization to a new environment would be an unlikely solution.’[[49]](#endnote-49) This is odd given the final lines, quoted by Gardner: ‘Grant that in the future they may find / A rock on which to build a house for heart and mind.’[[50]](#endnote-50) Gardner foregrounds the conditional of the penultimate line by assuming that the finding must be done elsewhere; his views are perhaps rooted in the stereotype-based ‘evacuee myths’ which Howkins analyses.[[51]](#endnote-51) By contrast, I read ‘Grant that’ as an appeal to Nicholson’s Christian God and the provisional certainty of faith.[[52]](#endnote-52) Nicholson does not adjudicate on the merits of staying or returning, but the plurality is the point. While Nicholson was profoundly wedded to his family and home town, he also relished the enlivening of his environment by unfamiliarity, and his understanding of Millom’s typicality, highlighted at the top of this article, meant that he saw and appreciated the necessity of connections to the world beyond. Evacuation is a salutary indication of the condition of wartime rurality: changed by war, marked as (relatively) safe, but haunted by conflict.

Rural War and Displacement

The shift in Nicholson’s treatment of evacuation points to the longstanding debate about inarticulacy in wartime, encapsulating repression, censorship, circumscription and trauma. In critical theory, perhaps the most famous statement is Walter Benjamin’s: ‘at the end of the [First World] war […] men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience’.[[53]](#endnote-53) For Galvin the same phenomenon is ‘*adynaton*, a trope that indicates the failure of language’; Butler highlights that during times of war and crisis the limits of the sayable are more constrained.[[54]](#endnote-54) For combatants this is about the aporia between the visceral, affective experience of conflict, suffused with sensations that are (rightly, mostly) beyond the purview of civilian life, and the ability to and desirability of communicating those experiences. For civilians, the climate of constant fear is equally stultifying, in the Second World War threatened from the skies and anticipating news which might come of friends, family, lovers and others.[[55]](#endnote-55) Dudziak points also to prominent restrictions on freedom of speech and expression.[[56]](#endnote-56) In rural locations, even outside of wartime this is often socially policed, and Helena Duncan has argued for the watchfulness of rural modern communities.[[57]](#endnote-57)

The anthologisation patterns of Nicholson’s poetry suggest that the recessing of war and political content in his poetry was a conscious decision; we have already seen one example of this above in his poems on evacuation. His early draft and published poems more frequently attempt to address contemporary political issues, including war and conflict. This is unsurprising. Critics such as Paul K. Saint-Amour have argued that the years 1918-1939 were experienced as an interwar period: ‘the memory of one world war was already joined to the specter of a second, future one, framing the period in real time as an *interwar* era’.[[58]](#endnote-58) This reading seems unavoidably teleological; Lyndsey Stonebridge’s and Steve Ellis’s discussions of anxiety in the period seem more to the point.[[59]](#endnote-59) This manifests in several of Nicholson’s earliest published poems, including two published in 1938 in the literary little magazine *Bolero*. ‘Poem Beside a War Memorial’ is suffused in ‘khaki light’, a recurrent image; in ‘Behead a God’ Nicholson muses on evil in people and animals, concluding that: ‘At the centre of good is always evil. / And evil is larger than good’.[[60]](#endnote-60) He returns to the theme in ‘Song for St Gregory of Nyssa’ (1943), addressing the theologian noted for his belief in universal salvation and God’s infinity.[[61]](#endnote-61) None of these poems was collected, either by Nicholson in his lifetime, or in the posthumous *Collected Poems* (1993). War manifests obliquely in Nicholson’s poetry, but his earlier uncollected works address conflict and politics more directly.

It is salutary to examine the publication history of Nicholson’s contributions to two 1942 collections of war(time) poetry.[[62]](#endnote-62) Nicholson’s two submissions to *Poems of this War* were ‘Cleator Moor’ and ‘Song for Pelagius’. The collection’s title suggests poems of the moment, rather than necessarily about the conflict as such; ‘Cleator Moor’ is rooted in that Cumbrian industrial town, addressing the tension between the harms done by both interwar deindustrialisation and the reinvigoration brought by the production of wartime *materiel*, while ‘Song for Pelagius’ takes the early theologian notable for his insistence on the freedom of human will to symbolise the need for radical change. Both survive into *Five Rivers*. Nicholson contributed five poems to *Poetry in Wartime*, whose title suggests more of a focus on conflict. Of these poems, only ‘Rockferns’ (1941) and ‘The Blackberry’ (1940) were collected in *Five Rivers*; these two and ‘Carol for Holy Innocents’ Day’ were included in the *Selected Poems* alongside Douglas and Hall. ‘Sonnet for Good Friday’ was later included by Curry in *Collected Poems* but not otherwise collected during Nicholson’s lifetime; both the preceding poems were included in the *Anthology of Religious Verse*. ‘Inscription for a Calendar’ (1941) remains uncollected. Along with other uncollected poems I have already highlighted, this signals Nicholson’s recessing of politics. The two poems collected in *Five Rivers* overlay the violence of war on the daily violence done to land and nature. ‘Sonnet for Good Friday’ aligns the crucifixion of Christ with the war; multiple publications may also have contributed to their omission. However, the wholly omitted ‘Inscription for a Calendar’, to which we will return, highlights both the stasis of wartime and the bodily impact of the conflict, with Nicholson moving between allusions to Wilfred Owen in the assertion of inarticulate pity, the uncomfortable immediacy and proximity of the graveyard, and the rural modernist clash between pastoral and industrial.[[63]](#endnote-63)

This is not to say that Nicholson makes no direct comment on the war. His correspondents recognise the hardships of war, with surrealist poet David Gascoyne musing on the conflict’s impact on creativity, and poet and Faber editor Anne Ridler outlining the wartime bureaucracy surrounding the birth of her daughter.[[64]](#endnote-64) Current events are also, on occasion, brought into view in his poetry. ‘Corregidor’, again included in the *Selected Poems* but not in *Five Rivers*, addresses the siege of that Philippine island in early 1942. ‘Over this island breaks the war’, begins the poem, implicitly paralleling the UK. The flora and fauna are unusual for Nicholson’s poetry: jellyfish, octopus, eagle, squid and stingray. However, the final stanza returns us to British shores:

He stares across the ocean, listens to the drone

Of the spinning world where the crying islands shine:

Guam, Hawaii, Midway, Solomon.[[65]](#endnote-65)

The contemplative image suggests a British coastal version of Caspar David Friedrich’s iconic painting *The Wanderer above a Sea of Fog* (1818), while the spinning world connects the figure to these distant islands. The drone also alludes to aircraft noise, invoking the attacks on those islands, the Blitz, and RAF Millom. The only poem in *Five Rivers* which is titled for an event in the conflict is ‘Stalingrad: 1942’.[[66]](#endnote-66) However, the horrors and privations of the siege are recessed in favour of a focus on forbearance and perseverance rooted in natural strength. The poem turns at the mid-point of its four quatrains:

Stalingrad now has stood the flood of fire,  
Three moons of tide, for more than eighty days;  
And this for more than eighty hundred year  
Has borne the barrage of the western seas.[[67]](#endnote-67)

The ‘now’ points to the volta, a device frequently used by Nicholson to imply critique, rather than stating it more directly. Nicholson invokes the earliest evidence of human civilisation along the river Volga. The wartime context brings urgency to his beliefs about the relationship between the permanence of the natural world and the fleeting but tenacious imprints of humans. The name may change, the buildings may disappear, but the earth remains: ‘the city will not change, though blood / Settle like ore in the red veins of rock.’[[68]](#endnote-68) Murdered people become part of the rock’s permanence, the literalising of red veins becoming the seams of iron ore, connecting us back to Millom’s lifeblood as Nicholson hopes for the similar endurance of his own town.

More commonly, however, the conflict is registered in traces. For Favret, ‘What is evident of distant massacres appears second-hand or as intimation, a fleeting apparition, a *sense*.’[[69]](#endnote-69) Nicholson often links conflict with the seasons; the use of pastoral as a wartime form is a longstanding trope, the land standing in for the nation under threat.[[70]](#endnote-70) As in ‘Stalingrad: 1942’, many poems in *Five Rivers* include dates in their titles, alluding to the presence of the conflict for a first readership who would need no reminder.[[71]](#endnote-71) The dates do not allude to particular wartime events, but fleeting local moments, and the turning of the seasons. Dates consciously mark history, but the poems register the distance of the conflict and the difficulty of narrating ongoing issues. We might read this in terms of Pong’s discussion of ‘stopped clocks’, although Nicholson registers the quotidian impacts of the war rather than the literal debris of the blitz.[[72]](#endnote-72) The poems in this paragraph, all first published in *Five Rivers*, displace war into simile and metaphor. The winter weather in ‘Shortest Day, 1942’ (1944) ‘flings down sleet from the frozen fells of war’, as ‘the wind blows holes in the sky; the rain / Shines on the road like tin’.[[73]](#endnote-73) The violence of the natural world is aligned with the distant artillery, the image perhaps also suggesting the noise of the aeroplanes ascending and descending from RAF Millom. The snow endures into ‘South Cumberland, 10 May 1943’, as we have already seen; that poem also illustrates the tension between endurance and exhaustion, the ‘hawthorn [… / … which] greens out a dogged spray’ among the snow exemplifying the position declared at the start of the final stanza: ‘This job is mine / And everyone’s: to force our blood into the bitter day.’[[74]](#endnote-74) The hawthorn symbolises sexuality, fertility, the coming of spring, but also connotes death. The sense of shared duty is apparent, but also the oppressive nature of the enduring situation, the stuckness both in place and time. A companion poem, ‘South Cumberland, 16 May 1943’ (1944), looks back from a sunny day, again aligning birds with their metal counterparts: ‘the starlings on the chimney pots / Shook the falling flakes off their tin feathers’.[[75]](#endnote-75) Icons of the natural world and industrial warfare are placed in clear parallel.

An uncollected poem which epitomises Nicholson’s response to war is ‘No Man’s Land’ (1940), also known (with minor revisions) as ‘The Tarn’ (1942).[[76]](#endnote-76) The title, at least in the first version, points directly to the war, but its purpose is to highlight what is only one of the poem’s strands. The second highlights the other, notably pushing the war into the background as it becomes ubiquitous. Gardner asserts that the poem was written in 1938, seeing it as influenced by Kafka, and Auden’s ‘Missing’ (1929); the dating seems questionable, although events such as the Munich Crisis may have returned Nicholson to the First World War.[[77]](#endnote-77) It is suffused by the threat of wartime from the outset: ‘I have heard crack the warning / Ice, alone’. The first line’s misdirection towards war is undercut by the enjambment into the second, which takes us into a very different kind of natural danger: frozenness, and the fear of going under in isolation clearly speak to the position of the UK in 1940, life in rural wartime, and particularly Nicholson’s feeling of isolation.[[78]](#endnote-78) The poem describes the speaker’s ‘uncertain track’, picking a way among ‘The snaring bog, / The threat of nightfall’, and the force (waterfall)’s ‘bombarding’.[[79]](#endnote-79) Hidden natural perils parallel the constant unseen threat of wartime. Wartime paranoia is registered by taking bearings and seeking cover while returning down into the town from a night walk.[[80]](#endnote-80) The speaker is determined that wartime will not prevent him returning, however:

I shall break this truce,  
And one day again  
I shall go back to the tarn,  
Black with rain.[[81]](#endnote-81)

The poem epitomises wartime narratives, looking forwards by looking backwards, a quality Dudziak highlights.[[82]](#endnote-82) While Nicholson is writing from within a bounded wartime, its references and resonances necessarily stretch both backwards and forwards beyond its duration.

In ‘Bombing Practice’ (1942) the title event is overtly represented in only one of its four stanzas, highlighting the presence of conflict only to largely undercut it by displacing its violence into the natural world. The first two of four sestets describe the tranquil estuary on a hazy summer’s day punctuated only by birds flying and calling. The final couplet of the second stanza shifts the subject to the mechanical birds by a jarring half-rhyme, another technique often used by Nicholson to draw attention to significant juxtapositions: ‘A curlew flies crying along the gullies; / A faint rainbow of oil is clogged in the thin rushes.’[[83]](#endnote-83) The particularities, however, are only in the naming of the machine:

The swinging aeroplane drops seed through the air  
Plumb into the water, where slowly it grows  
Boles [trunks] of smoke and trees  
Of swelling and ballooning leafage.[[84]](#endnote-84)

Violence is represented only metaphorically, its manifestation ephemeral, in the smoke, and presumably ballooning leafage of water or disrupted aquatic plant life. Bombs are ironically aligned with the life-giving properties of seed, which here is spread along with life-giving water. There were two bombing practice areas for RAF Millom, one of which was in the Duddon estuary.[[85]](#endnote-85) In wartime the construction of rural modernity is less in equilibrium than in Nicholson’s later work, as the wartime evasions and omissions help lead him to find his mature, public voice.

War and Bodies

The impact of Nicholson’s tuberculosis made bodily metaphors appealing to talk about world and war. An early unpublished poem ‘After the War’s Desperate Operation’ depicts the impact of conflict on the body.[[86]](#endnote-86) The bodily metaphor is repeated more prominently in ‘For St James, 1943’ (1943), presumably set on his feast day, 25 July. [[87]](#endnote-87) Even at the height of summer, markers of war suffuse the town:

Girls stand in the street in the brown dusk  
Talking to soldiers, and the swifts still  
Wire their screaming spirals round the market clock.’[[88]](#endnote-88)

The dusk echoes the khaki uniforms of the soldiers, and the drab stasis of wartime (and the ‘khaki light’ of the earlier uncollected poem); the soldiers are a reminder of local military activity, itself implied by the circling swifts whose movements echo the aircraft of RAF Millom. Nicholson wonders about ‘Those whose desperate muscles thrust along / A tight clot of faith in the thin dry vein?’[[89]](#endnote-89) This bad faith, perhaps both religious and secular, waits to be cleared from the unhealthy vein, the instinctive nature of the body’s muscles seeking to make the blood flow. The image recalls D. H. Lawrence’s image making the impact of the First World War literal in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, in which ‘It would take many years for the living blood of the generations to dissolve the vast black clot of bruised blood’.[[90]](#endnote-90) Nicholson was familiar with the novel.[[91]](#endnote-91) He contrasts the first person plural of the preceding stanza, which endorses calmness: ‘We drink in grace and feel the spirit near.’[[92]](#endnote-92) This conflict encapsulates wartime in rural modernity, both tranquil and active.

The jarring representation of beauty and ugliness is accentuated by wartime. In the uncollected ‘Inscription for a Calendar’ (1941), again highlighting cyclicality, Nicholson displaces bodily representation into the mythical. The current poison of the world is alluded to by the first line’s reference to ‘the world’s Medusa-skull’, the Gorgon’s severed head which turns those who see it to stone.[[93]](#endnote-93) The changed times are registered:

And words which once my tongue could speak  
Grow like lichen on my cheek.   
But still some pity trickles through.[[94]](#endnote-94)

The speaker, it seems, has been frozen by the appearance of the work, rendered statuesque. The seeming inadequacy of words to address horrors is highlighted. The second stanza talks about the relationship between dead and living in wartime:

Behind my spine I know that time  
Like sexton prises up the tomb,  
On a sarcophagus of frost  
He jigsaws with the bony past,  
Puts shoulder against rib again  
And builds tomorrow’s skeleton.[[95]](#endnote-95)

Again, the future is imagined by looking to the past, combining a desire for poetic novelty and war’s cessation. The iambic tetrameter, Wordsworth’s line, is remade for the present times by the insistently jarring half-rhymes, rejecting the perfection of the couplet. But bodies are not reborn conventionally; this eerie rebirth has sexton as midwife, cold ground as generative, life not from flesh but from the relative permanence of bone. The Medusa figure is unable to ‘check / The blood that gushes through the veins / Like acid’, the antithesis of the later image in ‘For St James 1943’, and the skeleton’s reanimation seems inevitable:

And in my heart my hands my head  
I know that bones will bud with blood,  
And flesh upon the gristle grow  
Like rings of new wood on a tree.[[96]](#endnote-96)

Knowledge is not only intellectual, but also tactile and emotional: the vivid visual image of (re-)growing flesh is made odder by the fact that, like trees, flesh cannot be seen growing. We must trust that it does and they do, knowing that it can only be evidenced once it has happened, in the future. Nicholson suggests the inevitability of regeneration, even in the face of wartime death.

After the Second World War

Nicholson explicitly links wartime, rurality and deindustrialization – another form of loss to the community. As well as in the aforementioned ‘Cleator Moor’, the consequences of wartime (over)production are addressed in *The Old Man of the Mountains*, a dramatic parable about human impact on the natural world which displaces the story of the prophet Elijah into 1940s Cumberland. Jones calls it ‘an extraordinary play to be written in 1944, well ahead of the ecological concerns raised in the fifties and sixties about the dangers of modern farming methods’.[[97]](#endnote-97) In ‘Glen Orchy’, collected in *A Local Habitation* (1972), Nicholson hears about the closure of the Millom ironworks while on holiday in Scotland. He aligns the silenced factories with a wartime landscape:

[…] ten thousand years of after-Ice-Age weathering  
Crash on an Arras Wood of smokeless furnace chimneys,  
And, blundering among the dead trunks, five hundred men  
At one stroke out of work.[[98]](#endnote-98)

The no-longer-smoking chimneys recall the petrified trees of Oppy Wood, a key site in the Battle of Arras during the First World War.[[99]](#endnote-99) The brutal impact of military conflict on the land is paralleled with the impact on the town of the withdrawal of its main industry. The dead trunks of the trees do nothing to conceal the men, the one stroke perhaps the returned bullet portrayed in ‘Cleator Moor’, or the casual stroke of a manager’s pen; the effect seems the same. The word ‘blundered’ evokes the famous refrain in Tennyson’s ‘Charge of the Light Brigade’, the soldiers sitting ducks, vulnerable to processes – and, implicitly, errors – beyond their control. Redundancy is, for Nicholson, the beginning of the slow death of the town, and the removal of most of its men’s purpose. Steven High suggests that the ‘destruction of industrial areas, and the people who call these places home, is not altogether different from what happens in wartime’.[[100]](#endnote-100) High draws on Robert Bevan’s work on the destruction of key symbolic buildings in wartime, from blitzes of the Second World War to the fall of the World Trade Center towers in the 9/11 attacks.[[101]](#endnote-101) Inherent in the creation and perpetuation of rural towns around extractive industries is the knowledge that that industry will cease, and we can conceive their existence in terms of the violent, unmarked loss of life in heavy industries, and the often prolonged conflict against the withdrawal of the town’s lifeblood. These are not isolated or unique concerns. Favret’s comment on William Cowper’s *The Task* (1785) applies equally here: ‘The georgic emphasis is clear: the island’s climate—physical, political, moral, emotional—cannot be isolated from and must be understood alongside weather elsewhere.’[[102]](#endnote-102) Going back to Virgil, the *Eclogues* and *Georgics* examine their tumultuous era via instances of the pastoral.[[103]](#endnote-103)

The impact of the nuclear and the looming Cold War also echo in Nicholson’s later work. His widely-anthologised poem ‘Windscale’ responds to a leak at the now-decommissioning nuclear plant further up the Cumberland coast, known today as Sellafield. In this poem Nicholson characteristically aligns radiation with fungal and other infestations in the natural world, ‘a land where dirt is clean, / And poison pasture, quick and green’.[[104]](#endnote-104) Brutally condensing Blake’s opening of ‘Auguries of Innocence’, here Nicholson has Scafell, towering over the Lake District barely ten miles inland, a point which ‘sees hell in a grain of sand’.[[105]](#endnote-105) However, to return to *Provincial Pleasures* and where we began this essay, Nicholson predicts that ‘The power-source of the future will not be the coalfield, but the atomic village. The new towns may well be as clean and fresh as a dale hamlet.’[[106]](#endnote-106) That waste products will no longer be necessary is, it seems a good thing, but he fears the loss of ‘that organic unity, that wholeness, which we still find in the old towns’.[[107]](#endnote-107) He conveniently (unusually) forgets that Millom is hardly an old town, less than a hundred years old at the time. Curiously, he imagines its nuclear demise:

Drop half a dozen hydrogen bombs on London and where would it be? Would there be anything left that even next summer’s swallows could recognise? But if a bomb were dropped on Odborough—and surely no one will waste £1,000,000 on so insignificant a destruction—the landscape would show little change. The town might be gone, but Black Fell would still be there, and the sea and the marshes and the rocks. And except for a few roofs, chimneys, fields, and trees, the view from my bedroom window is almost the same as it was at the end of the Ice Age.[[108]](#endnote-108)

Nicholson’s assertion of the eternality of the natural, as opposed to man-made, landscape, is rooted in his faith; even his cherished home town is ultimately insignificant. Human imprints evanesce; the topographical features of the area will remain, the hundreds of metres of dark grey slate of Black Fell (Black Combe) still looming over the site of the town. Wartime is omnipresent, but the threat of ruination in rural areas is both more and less existential than for population centres.

Wartime: Implications and Applications

A critical trend of writing about war and terror followed 9/11, particularly for US thinkers concerned with the ‘War on Terror’. Recent work has deprecated the idea of a bounded wartime, recognising this as a legal truth which often is highly dependent on political, geographical and social positionality and does not reflect lived experience. I have focused on Nicholson’s writings within the conventional boundaries of the Second World War, but the way these critics theorise the everydayness of wartime gives us a useful language to think about the often ephemeral nature of rural wartime. On the industrial periphery of the Lake District, Nicholson was particularly conscious of his poetic antecedents. The affective permeation of conflict into the quotidian is vital to Favret, who asserts that in her Romantic subjects ‘writing and art are attuned to this new sense of a war that has potentially no limits or end, whose scope expands both internally and externally’.[[109]](#endnote-109) Mary Dudziak also points to the long history of ‘war’s tendency to defy time boundaries’,[[110]](#endnote-110) while Nick Mansfield highlights the dialectic of war and peace.[[111]](#endnote-111) For Joanna Bourke, ‘Killing in wartime is inseparable from wider social and cultural concerns. Combat does not terminate social relationships: rather, it restructures them.’[[112]](#endnote-112) The distinctive position of Nicholson, a non-combatant poet in a rural industrial town, enables us to discern the subtle changes effected by wartime in his precisely-articulated world and, by extension, in British social structures.

His late poem ‘There’s a War On’ looks back to the Second World War. The first stanza remembers the proscription of waste during the war, and turns to a second stanza that begins ‘No war now.’ The irony is obvious: Nicholson sees acutely the ongoing political unrest, the conspicuously non-specific scene pointing perhaps to Northern Ireland, the USA, India, or elsewhere:

Bombs in the Market Square;  
Girls, old men, soldiers, faces hot  
With anger, presidents shot[[113]](#endnote-113)

At stake here are wider social issues of inequality. Far from a socialist, Nicholson recognises that this can only lead to conflict, concluding: ‘There’s a peace on! / Has nobody told them?’[[114]](#endnote-114) What these poems reveal, along with Nicholson’s work throughout his oeuvre that charts the rise and fall of his home town, is that he is often miscategorised as a nature poet. His work also exhibits a strong social and political consciousness, which is given a particular focus in his early work by the experience of life in wartime.

What, then, are the ways forward for thinking about wartime and rural modernity? War is an extreme symptom of industrial modernity, not a rupture from it; that the disenchantment of industrial modernity often finds a focus in war, but a problematic one for resolution as the implication is that the issues are bounded, while the structures remain the same. Nicholson, I think, is an interesting and salutary poet for his typicality, which is brought sharply into view by the distinctiveness of his geographical location; the issues that he faces are common beyond his own viewpoint as non-combatant poet, distant from centres of power and the most dangerous targets of the blitz, but also still subject to the threat of structural violence and the violence of war. Thinking about wartime and rural modernity not only as concepts which speak to each other, but which are rooted in the same issues and find a particularly acute and recognisable manifestation when defamiliarized by distance from the city, is productive for both.

Notes

1. Norman Nicholson, *Provincial Pleasures* (1959; Bookcase: Carlisle, 1993), p. 188. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Nicholson, *Provincial Pleasures*, p. 189. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Norman Nicholson, ‘The Pot Geranium’, in *Collected Poems*, ed. by Neil Curry (London: Faber & Faber, 1993), pp. 179-80. Hereafter *CP*. I give the dates of first publication for each poem; Nicholson often published works in periodicals before collecting them. Due to the dispersal of Nicholson’s archive, and his destruction of some key correspondence before his death, it is not easy to date writing. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ian O. Brodie, *Norman Nicholson’s Nature* (Sheffield: Wildtrack, 2015); David Cooper, ‘Envisioning “the Cubist Fells”: Ways of Seeing in the Poetry of Norman Nicholson’, in *Poetry and Geography: Space and Place in Post-war Poetry*, ed. by Neal Alexander and David Cooper (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 148–160; Cooper, ‘The Poetics of Place and Space: Wordsworth, Norman Nicholson and the Lake District’, *Literature Compass*, 5 (2008), 807–821; Andrew Gibson, ‘“At the Dying Atlantic’s Edge”: Norman Nicholson and the Cumbrian Coast’, in *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge*, ed. by Nicholas Allen, Nick Groom, and Jos Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 77–90. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Nicholson, in *Authors Take Sides on the Falklands: Two Questions on the Falklands conflict answered by more than a hundred mainly British authors*, ed. by Cecil Woolf and Jean Moorcroft Wilson (London: Cecil Woolf, 1982), p. 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See David Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth-Century History* (London: Penguin, 2019), pp. 429-33. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See A. L. Rowse to Nicholson, 22 August 1967, John Rylands Library, Manchester, NCN1/1/113. Rowse is responding to Nicholson’s review of Rowse’s *Poems of Cornwall and America* in ‘Three Modern Poets’, *Church Times*, 150 (11 Aug 1967), 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Glyn Hughes to Nicholson, 16 January 1976, John Rylands Library, Manchester, NCN1/1/64/1. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Jonathan Bolton, ‘“Lucid Song”: The Poetry of the Second World War’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, ed. by Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 85-93 (p. 86). Mark Rawlinson also points to similar issues in ‘The Second World War: British writing’, in *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing*, ed. by Kate McLoughlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp 197-211. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Kathleen Jones, *Norman Nicholson: The Whispering Poet* (Appleby: The Book Mill, 2013), p. 48, pp. 178-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Jones, *Norman Nicholson*, pp. 78-84. Nicholson, ‘Cockley Moor, Dockray, Penrith’, *CP*, p. 27. See also Cooper, ‘Envisioning “the cubist fells”’. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Jones, *Norman Nicholson*, p. 171. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See Andrew Frayn, ‘Rural Modernity, Rural Modernism and Deindustrialisation in Norman Nicholson’s Poetry’, *English Studies*, 104.3 (2023), 478-99, particularly pp. 484-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Nicholson, ‘Waiting for Spring 1943’, *CP*, p. 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Nicholson, ‘Waiting for Spring 1943’, *CP*, p. 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Norman Nicholson, *Wednesday Early Closing* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), p. 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Nicholson, *Wednesday Early Closing*, p. 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Norman Nicholson, *Greater Lakeland* (London: Robert Hale, 1969), p. 18. On Nicholson’s father’s appeals against conscription, see ‘Millom Local Tribunal’, *Millom Gazette*, 2 June 1916, p. 1; ‘Millom Local Tribunal’, *Millom Gazette*, 28 July 1916, p. 1; ‘Millom Local Tribunal’, *Millom Gazette*, 29 Sep 1916, p. 2; ‘Millom Local Tribunal’, *Millom Gazette*, 27 April 1917, p. 4; ‘County Appeals Tribunal’, *Millom Gazette*, 11 May 1917, p. 4. Thanks to Sue Dawson of the Norman Nicholson Society for pointing me to some of this information. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Jones, *Norman Nicholson*, pp. 67-9, pp. 74-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Norman Nicholson, ‘Poets at War’, *Time & Tide*, 24 (9 Oct 1943), 827. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Rachel Galvin, *News of War: Civilian Poetry 1936-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. James Campbell, ‘Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Poetry Criticism’, *New Literary History* 30.1 (1999), 203-15. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Galvin, *News of War*, pp. 16, 18, 22-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Norman Nicholson, ‘Value in Short Lengths’, *Time & Tide*, 24 (17 July 1943), p. 590. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Edward Bujak, *English Landed Society in the Great War: Defending the Realm* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019); John Keegan, *The First World War* (London: Hutchinson, 1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. See Gary Willis, ‘“An arena of glorious work”: The Protection of the Rural Landscape Against the Demands of Britain’s Second World War Effort’, *Rural History*, 29.2 (2018), 259-80. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Alun Howkins, ‘A Country at War: Mass-Observation and Rural England, 1939-45’, *Rural History*, 9.1 (1998), 75-97 (p. 75). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Thomas to Eleanor Farjeon, quoted by Elizabeth Black, ‘“Literally, for this”: Edward Thomas’s ecocentric war poetry’, *Green Letters*, 21.1 (2017), 1-13. Nicholson takes inspiration directly from Thomas in ‘Do You Remember Adlestrop?’, invoking his poem which dates from before but is often understood as a commentary on the First World War. *CP*, p. 369. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Beryl Pong, *British Literature and Culture in Second World Wartime: For the Duration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Nicholson, ‘Coastal Journey’, *CP*, p. 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Nicholson, ‘On Duddon Marsh’, *CP*, p. 193. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. John Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism: Literature in the Irish and British Isles, 1890-1970* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 220. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Nicholson, ‘Coastal Journey’, *CP*, p. 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 20. For specifics about the Second World War, see Richard Bessel, ‘Death and survival in the Second World War’, *The Cambridge History of the Second World War*, 3 vols, gen. ed. Evan Mawdsley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3, pp. 252-76. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Nicholson, ‘Coastal Journey’, *CP*, p. 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Nicholson, *Greater Lakeland*, p. 197. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Norman Nicholson, *A Portrait of the Lakes*, 2nd ed’n (1963; London: Robert Hale, 1972), p. 84. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Norman Nicholson, ‘Whitehaven’, *CP*, pp. 18-20 (p. 18). See also Gibson, ‘“At the Dying Atlantic’s Edge”’. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. See, for example, Hans Joas, *War and Modernity*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p. 11; Pong, *British Literature and Culture in Second World Wartime*, pp. 89-90. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Leo Mellor, ‘Cityscape: The Bombed City in the Second World War’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, ed. by Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 456-64 (p. 458). See also Leo Mellor, *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Adam Tooze, ‘The war of the villages: The interwar agrarian crisis and the Second World War’, in *The Cambridge History of the Second World War*, gen. ed. Evan Mawdsley. *Vol. 3: Total War: Economy, Society and Culture*, ed. by Michael Geyer and Adam Tooze (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 385-412 (p. 386). Tooze aligns too closely the rural and the agrarian, but the more general point holds. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Norman Nicholson, ‘Man and the Poet’, *Time and Tide*, 24 (3 April 1943), 277-8 [inc. rev. John Pudney, *Beyond this Disregard*]; Norman Nicholson, ‘Poetry’, *Time and Tide*, 24 (5 June 1943), 464 [inc. rev. T.R. Hodgson, *This Life, This Death*]; Norman Nicholson, ‘Poetry in Two Wars*, Time and Tide*, 24 (4 Sep 1943), 726-7 [inc. rev. Alan Rook, *These Are My Comrades*]. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Tooze, ‘War of the Villages’, p. 385. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Joanna Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History* (London: Virago, 2005), p. 4, p. 65; David Pascoe, ‘Warplane’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, ed. by Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 366-79 (p. 372). [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Nicholson, ‘South Cumberland, 10 May 1943’, *CP*, p. 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. John Nixon, *The History of RAF Millom and the Genesis of Modern Mountain Rescue* ([n.p.]: Pixel Tweaks, 2020), p. 2. Nixon outlines that there had been German reconnaissance by 1940 (p 6), that there was a German raid on 14 August 1942 which caused no injuries (p. 51), and that there was another near miss from a US aeroplane which crashed nearby on 23 November 1943 (p. 80). Aeroplane crashes were part and parcel of life at RAF Millom at this time. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Nicholson, ‘Carol for Holy Innocents’ Day’, *CP*, p. 4. Nicholson later recalls this in ‘Ravenglass Railway Station’, *CP*, pp. 201-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Nicholson, ‘The Evacuees’, *CP*, pp. 53-4 (p. 53). [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Philip Gardner, *Norman Nicholson* (New York: Twayne, 1973), p. 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Nicholson, ‘The Evacuees’, *CP*, p. 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Howkins, ‘Country at War’, p. 81. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Gardner, *Norman Nicholson*, p. 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov’, in *Illuminations*, intro. by Hannah Arendt (1955; London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 83-107 (pp. 83-4). [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Galvin, *News of War*, p. 14; Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. xvii. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. On civilian fears and the Second World War, see Bourke, *Fear*, pp. 222-54. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. See, for example, Mary L. Dudziak, *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 23-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Helena Duncan, ‘“The dreadful tides of a new and incomprehensible life”: Rural Modernity and Watchfulness in Early Twentieth-Century Scottish Women’s Writing’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Edinburgh Napier University, 2023). [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Paul K. Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Writing of Anxiety: Imagining Wartime in Mid-Century British Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Steve Ellis, *British Writers and the Approach of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Norman Nicholson, ‘Poem Beside a War Memorial’, *Bolero*, 2 (1938), [15]; Nicholson, ‘Behead a God’, *Bolero*, 2 (1938), [14]. Also featured in this issue is Keith Douglas, the preeminent poet of the Second World War, alongside whom Nicholson would make his publication debut between boards in a shared volume between the two and J. C. Hall, *Selected Poems* (London: John Bale & Staples, 1943). [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Norman Nicholson, ‘Song for St Gregory of Nyssa’, *Time and Tide*, 24 (27 February 1943), 161. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. *Poetry in Wartime*, ed. by M. J. Tambimuttu (London: Faber, 1942); *Poems of This War*, ed. by Patricia Ledward and Colin Strang, intro. by Edmund Blunden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1942). [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Norman Nicholson, ‘Inscription for a Calendar’, in *Poetry in Wartime: An Anthology*, ed. by Tambimuttu (London: Faber & Faber, 1942), p. 115. The poem had previously been published in *Poetry* (London), 1 (May/June 1941), 190. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. David Gascoyne to Nicholson, 27 June 1944, John Rylands Library, Manchester, NCN1/1/2/2; Anne Ridler to Nicholson, 22 April 1943, John Rylands Library, Manchester, NCN1/1/3/1. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Nicholson, ‘Corregidor’, *CP*, p. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. The titles of ‘Bombing Practice’ and ‘The Evacuees’ also allude to the war, but do not directly comment. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Nicholson, ‘Stalingrad: 1942’, *CP*, p. 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Nicholson, ‘Stalingrad: 1942’, *CP*, p. 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Mary A. Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. See, for example, Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 46-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. One might argue that the war is directly alluded to in the titles of: ‘Bombing Practice’, ‘Stalingrad, 1942’, ‘The Evacuees’ and, perhaps, ‘Now in the Time of this Mortal Life’. Poems with a title date are ‘Eskmeals 1943’, ‘South Cumberland, 10 May 1943’, ‘South Cumberland, 16 May 1943’, ‘Waiting for Spring 1943’, ‘For St James, 1943’, ‘Shortest Day, 1942’. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. Pong, *British Literature and Culture in Second World Wartime*, ch. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Both quotations Nicholson, ‘Shortest Day, 1942’, *CP*, p. 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Both quotations Nicholson, ‘South Cumberland, 10 May 1943’, *CP*, p. 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Nicholson, ‘South Cumberland, 16 May 1943’, *CP*, p. 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. It is likely that the poem was retitled as ‘No Man’s Land’ to avoid the north-west English colloquialism ‘tarn’ (lake) for a US audience. See Norman Nicholson, ‘No Man’s Land’, *Southern Review*, 6 (1940), 372-4; Nicholson, ‘The Tarn’, *Poetry Quarterly*, 4 (1942), 89-90. ‘The Tarn’ was republished in *Little Reviews Anthology*, ed. by Denys Val Baker (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1943), pp. 78-9. I refer to this edition. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. Gardner, *Norman Nicholson*, pp. 37-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Jones, *Norman Nicholson*, p. 90. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. Nicholson, ‘The Tarn’, p. 78. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. Nicholson, ‘The Tarn’, pp. 78-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. Nicholson, ‘The Tarn’, p. 79. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. Dudziak, *War Time*, p. 22. See also Pong on photographic time, *British Literature and Culture in Second World Wartime*, p. 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. Nicholson, ‘Bombing Practice’, *CP*, p. 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. Nicholson, ‘Bombing Practice’, *CP*, p. 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. Nixon, *History of RAF Millom*, p. 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
86. Norman Nicholson, ‘After the War’s Desperate Operation’. John Rylands Library, Manchester. NCN3/1/2, [p. 21]. The poem is in a County Secondary School Millom exercise book, which seems to have been written up as a fair copy of an unpublished collection to be titled *Market Square: A Partita*. [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. The apostle St James was murdered and martyred by Herod Agrippa, the last Jewish King of Judea. [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. Nicholson, ‘For St James, 1943’, *CP*, p. 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
89. Nicholson, ‘For St James, 1943’, *CP*, p. 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
90. D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover, A Propos of “Lady Chatterley’s Lover”*, ed. by Michael Squires, intro. by Doris Lessing (1928; London: Penguin, 2006), p. 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
91. Nicholson, *Man and Literature*, p. 65, p. 69. [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
92. Nicholson, ‘For St James, 1943’, *CP*, p. 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
93. Nicholson, ‘Inscription for a Calendar’, *Poetry in Wartime: An Anthology*, ed. by Tambimuttu (Faber 1942), p. 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
94. Nicholson, ‘Inscription for a Calendar’, p. 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
95. Nicholson, ‘Inscription for a Calendar’, p. 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
96. Nicholson, ‘Inscription for a Calendar’, p. 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-96)
97. Jones, *Norman Nicholson*, p. 105. Gill Plain sees the play as part of ‘the revival of poetic drama, but also in the confident resurgence of religious subject matter’. *Literature of the 1940s: War, Postwar, and ‘Peace’* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-97)
98. Nicholson, ‘Glen Orchy’, *CP*, p. 358. [↑](#endnote-ref-98)
99. There is an Arras Wood in Gloucestershire, but there is no logical reason to make this connection given the context. [↑](#endnote-ref-99)
100. Steven High, ‘Beyond Aesthetics: Visibility and Invisibility in the Aftermath of Deindustrialization’, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 84 (2013), 140-153 (p. 141). See also the discourse of ruination and deindustrialization in key works such as Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality* (Oxford: Berg, 2005). Pong discusses ruination and the Second World War in *British Literature and Culture in Second World Wartime*, pt. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-100)
101. Robert Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-101)
102. Favret, *War at a Distance*, p. 137. [↑](#endnote-ref-102)
103. See, for example, Edna Longley, ‘War Pastoral’, in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. by Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), ch. 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-103)
104. Nicholson, ‘Windscale’, *CP*, p. 282. [↑](#endnote-ref-104)
105. Blake, ‘Auguries of Innocence’; Nicholson, ‘Windscale’, *CP*, p. 282. [↑](#endnote-ref-105)
106. Nicholson, *Provincial Pleasures*, p. 185. [↑](#endnote-ref-106)
107. Nicholson, *Provincial Pleasures*, p. 185. [↑](#endnote-ref-107)
108. Nicholson, *Provincial Pleasures*, p. 188. [↑](#endnote-ref-108)
109. Favret, *War at a Distance*, p. 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-109)
110. Dudziak, *War Time*, p. 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-110)
111. Nick Mansfield, ‘Thinking War’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, ed. by Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 562-9 (p. 568). [↑](#endnote-ref-111)
112. Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (London: Granta, 1999), p. 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-112)
113. The poem was first published in *New Angles*, ed. by John Foster (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); presumably it had been composed some time previously. [↑](#endnote-ref-113)
114. All quotations Nicholson, ‘There’s a War On’, *CP*, p. 434. [↑](#endnote-ref-114)