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# Aquarius

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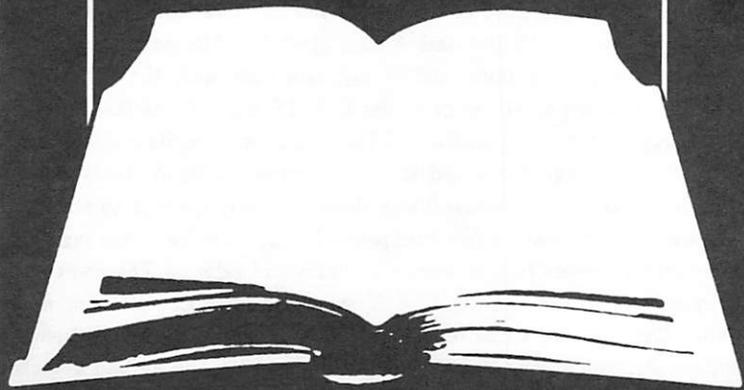
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Norman Nicholson

## The Regional Poets of the Forties

*Norman Nicholson came to prominence as a poet in the nineteen-forties with the publication of Five Rivers by Faber and Faber. He lived all his life in Millom in Cumberland. He died in 1987. (Ed.)*

By "regional poet" I mean simply one who draws his imagery, references or subject matter from one particular geographic area. Often, however, the term is used to imply that the poet's work is of minor importance, restricted in outlook, peripheral to the main stream. It is in this sense — perhaps justly — that I have often been called a "regional poet," though I stubbornly go on hoping that I write, not just about Millom and Cumberland, but about life, about human relationships, human society, the physical world we live on and our relation to it.

The next thing to be said is that the Regional Poets of the Forties and Fifties — or, more precisely, those who emerged during that time — did not belong to a movement. Most of us, I believe, worked in isolation, scarcely aware of what the others were doing. That was certainly the case with me, and I can only tell the story as it was seen from my own small corner.

During the Twenties and Thirties, the urban background had established itself, in Eliot and Auden especially, as almost the only one that a self-respecting young poet could take notice of. The trouble for me was that, while I admired Eliot and Auden almost to the point of idolatry, I was also completely immersed in my own backyard, the fringes of a small mining-town on the edge of the Lake District. I was fascinated by the geology and natural history of that landscape — its rocks, stones, rivers, flowers, fungi, birds and so on. Yet, apart from Auden's interest in geology, this kind of material was almost entirely ignored by the poets I admired. There were a few glimpses of light, however. Among those older poets who were then in vogue, Hopkins and Edward Thomas turned our eyes back to the countryside. Then there were the little poems of Clifford Dymont and those of Andrew Young, whose work I first saw in Geoffrey Grigson's *New Verse*. Grigson himself, though he had attacked the "falsely rural," was himself capable of writing very precise poems about the minutiae of nature, in particular about flowers, of which, like Andrew Young, he knew a good deal.

So much, then, for those side-currents in the late Thirties which seemed to waft me along in the direction I wanted to go, though it was

the collision and contrast between industry and nature which excited me, rather than nature on its own. I was moved by the flowers and ferns of the old mine-workings more than by those of the Duddon Valley; I was compelled by the view from the Millom slagbank more than that from Scafell Pike, which I could never have climbed, in any case. This, however, is purely personal and does not explain why somewhat similar local explorations were being made in quite different parts of Britain.

The War was surely the main cause. For one thing, as I have said, it isolated one poet from another — I am speaking, of course, of those poets who, like me, were not called up. Then there was a kind of patriotism, as with poets of the first World War like Edward Thomas and Ivor Gurney, who looked to the landscape of England and Wales — Scotland, like the past, is a foreign country! — as a symbol of what the war was being fought for. Many poets of the Second World War were cautious about its aims and dubious about its eventual results. They could not write the jingoistic, uncomplicated “war poetry” of soldier-poets like Grenfell or Brooke, but they still found, in the English landscape, something of the world they hoped would survive. That was especially the case, I think, when the cities began to be bombed. The face of London might be changed or even destroyed in a night, but Black Combe, three miles from my bedroom window, would be little different whatever happened in the war.

There was a political side to this, too. During the War, many of us resented the centralization of power, the standardization, the ironing-out of regional differences and individualities. It may have been necessary at the time, but we saw it as a worsening of a process which had been going on for ten or twenty years. Some of us — myself, in Cumberland, for instance — had seen our home area, its industries and its people, slowly decline from neglect and, it seemed to us, from the sheer disregard of London-based government. Apart from the resurgence of the immediate Post-War years, when coal and steel were urgently needed, that decline has continued, and the outlook today is little better than it was in the Twenties. We hoped, therefore, for de-centralization, for more freedom, almost for a kind of self-government for the regions. I am reminded by friends with a sense of humour that I once called out for Home Rule for Furness!

The idea sounds comic enough, but it directs my attention to the question of Scottish and Welsh Nationalism as it affected poetry. Now, for an Englishman to call Scottish poetry “regional” is both an impertinence and a misunderstanding of Scotland as a nation. It might be justifiable, for instance, to speak of George Mackay Brown as a Scottish

regional poet, since he is a poet of one distinct region of Scotland, the Orkneys, but to speak of MacDiarmid or Edward Morgan or Norman MacCaig as "regional" would seem to me to be quite ridiculous.

Nevertheless, the Nationalism, political or cultural, of the Scottish poets seemed important to me in England. In the Forties and Fifties I felt appalled at the thought that the future of civilization could be decided by three or four superpowers. I felt that the world would be safer if it was subdivided into smaller units. If we had to have wars, better they should be between, say, Scotland and Quebec than between Russia and the USA. (That, of course, was before the atomic bomb. Today I fear that the bomb might be a greater danger in the hands of a small nationalist group than in those of the great powers.)

Few of these ideas were ever expressed in my verse; few of them, probably, were sufficiently clearly thought out to be expressed at all. But they were among the influences which pushed me — and, I suspect, others — in the direction of regional writing. Again, while there are poets, such as John Clemo, who are clearly and totally identified with one specific area, there are many others who, by upbringing or adoption, have attached themselves to a region, to which they keep returning, from time to time, though they may range much wider in much or most of their work. I think of Ted Hughes, with his memories of Mytholmroyd; Glyn Hughes in the same Pennine Valley; of the Newcastle and Liverpool and Home Counties poets. Even Basil Bunting, whose methods derive more than any English poet of his time from the international modernism of Ezra Pound, has written, in *Briggflatts*, perhaps the most aggressively "regional" poem of the second half of this century.

If, however, in the Forties and Fifties, I were to be listed under any precise category, I preferred to think of myself, not as a "regional" poet, but as a "provincial" poet. The former is attached to a territory; the latter, to a community. "Provincial," of course, is an even more patronising term than "regional," but I seized on it with a kind of gently defiant pride. For what seemed to matter was that I was born, bred and expected to spend all my life in the one small town, where my father, my mother and my step-mother were born and brought up before me.

Let me tell you a little more about that town. A hundred and fifty years ago Millom did not exist, even as a village. Then, in the mid-Nineteenth Century, iron-ore was discovered among the limestone rocks at the mouth of the River Duddon, the most southerly tip of what was then the County of Cumberland. After about ten years of prospecting and exploration, the mining company realised that they had come upon the largest and richest single deposit of Haematite ore discovered, at

that time, anywhere in the world. In the Sixties the mines began to be developed; in 1865, blast furnaces were set up to smelt the ore; and, by the end of that decade, my six grand-parents (including two on my step-mother's side) had moved into the new town from Cumberland, from Westmorland, from Lancashire, and from Devon. During the hundred years or so since then, my relatives from these three strands, have insinuated themselves into every level of the town's life, from uncles who worked as labourers in the mines and iron-works to a cousin who ended as General Manager.

I do not wish to stress this matter of personal kinship. In the course of generations, many of these ties have become slack or have been quite forgotten. My wife, who was a teacher, told me that children I had never heard of would come up to her and claim that they were related to me. Once, walking down a street in the older parts of the town, I was greeted by an old man who asked me to come in to see my aunt. Since I did not know of such an aunt, I went into the house with some curiosity, and found an old lady, the widow of my Uncle Jack, who had been killed at the mine ten years before I was born. I had not even realised that he was married!

To many people today, this life-long attachment to one community and one place — and especially to a place which has no elegance or prettiness about it — seems odd and even rather perverse; but my argument in the days when I still proclaimed myself as a "Provincial Poet," was that, for most people, from Mediaeval times and even earlier, life in a small or smallish community was the norm rather than the exception. Florence, in that respect, had much in common with Stoke Poges.

Now the English village or small town, or, come to that, the African tribal settlement, depended for its whole life on the seasons, the crops, the harvest, the produce of soil and rock. So, too, in its own way, does Millom — on the ore, which, when it failed, in the 1960's, left the town stranded, without purpose and perhaps without future. So, again, do the coal-mining villages of Durham and South Wales. The intense affection, the deep atavistic loyalties which the mining people feel for their grim and often ugly town is something that the South-country suburbanite can hardly begin to understand.

To be a provincial poet, as distinct from a regional poet, it seems essential to me that one should live through one's life in the place where one belongs. Lawrence wrote of the Nottinghamshire mining world better than anyone has ever done — but he left it. He did not live through the changes in the community; he did not share, except in the admittedly enormously important years of his youth, the vicissitudes, the anxieties,

the disasters and celebrations of a people moving steadily through the years. He saw Eastwood more as a still photograph than as a film.

It is this sense of change which is the special material offered to a provincial writer. Not the change that happens when a vast acreage of farmland is turned into suburb or a great area of industry falls into dereliction, but the slow, gradual, day-to-day, year-by-year, generation-by-generation changes of ordinary life, the shifting of personal relationships, the breaking off and re-binding and making new ones. I can go out into the street and meet the great-great-grandchildren of old men I knew as a boy.

What this means to me above all else is that in my small town I think I can see the pattern of human life on this earth — the dependence of man on his physical environment, the dependence of one person on another, the linking of people of different class, politics, religion, education, and so on. This pattern of interdependence is the same everywhere, of course, but, in the larger cities, where people tend to be segregated according to income or occupation, it is easily lost sight of. In a place like Millom, the postman, the milkman, the dustman, the lawyer, the ironworks foremen and the mines manager are all people you know by name. If they are of your generation, you probably went to school with them. You cannot think of them just as members of this or that class, this or that political party, this or that church or chapel. My father was a shopkeeper, yet his livelihood depended, as much as any farmer's or quarryman's, on the rock on which we lived. That rock was limestone; the limestone gave the ore, the ore gave the pig-iron, the pig-iron gave the work, the work gave the waxes, some of which went into the till in my father's shop. The whole economy of production and profit could be seen here in miniature, and seen, too, in clear relation to the lives of each one of us.

Obviously, I am interpreting the term "provincial poet" very much in the light of my own experience and background. Nevertheless, I feel that, whether they would be ready to acknowledge it or not, a somewhat similar concern can be felt behind the work of such poets as George Mackay Brown, Glyn Hughes and R.S. Thomas, who, though he was not born and brought up in mid-Wales, reversed Wesley's motto and made his parish his world.

The name of R.S. Thomas, however, reminds me that I can only speak of those Welsh poets who write in English. Of those who write in Welsh I know nothing, and, so far as I can judge, there seems little communication between them and their English-writing compatriots. The whole question of the Welsh language is so bound up with political matters that it would be quite inappropriate for me to try to comment

on it — even though my own county is, etymologically, the land of the Welsh, the Cymru.

In Scotland the problem is rather different. The old language, the Gaelic, is now confined to the Hebrides and some areas of the west coast, and there seems to be no quarrel between those who write in Gaelic and those who don't. Sorlay Maclean's Gaelic verse has been translated splendidly into English by Ian Crichton Smith and into Scots by various poets. In Scotland, the cause of Nationalism has attached itself, not to the Gaelic, but to Scots or what Burns called "Lallans." Burns did not restrict himself to the dialect of Ayrshire, of course; his vocabulary is drawn from the Lowlands in general. Twentieth Century Lallans, beginning with MacDiarmid, draws from a still wider range, including the "literary" Scots of such poets as Dunbar, Henryson, and Gavin Douglas. The aim, at least on the part of such Scottish Nationalists as Douglas Young, was to create a "classical" language for Scotland, related to though not the same as the spoken language. It is not for me to say how far this movement was successful nor to venture into the vast and acrimonious argument between Lallans and non-Lallans poets or among the Lallans poets themselves. Let me just say that MacDiarmid's early poems, in the language he had almost invented, seem to me to be among the most marvellous lyrics written in any form of English during this century.

The Lallans poets illustrate in an extreme form one of the main assets of the regional poet — his access to a regional vocabulary. Wordsworth ignored that vocabulary, in spite of his intention to write in the language really used by men, but it has enriched the work of such diverse poets as Hopkins, Hardy, Heaney and Harrison — to restrict myself to one initial letter! I am no great lover of that kind of dialect verse, phonetically spelt, all apostrophes and dropped "h's," but here, in Cumberland, the vocabulary Wordsworth ignored is still alive and in everyday use. Fell, tarn, beck, gill — these words are still used by speakers of standard English as well as by dialect speakers. It was, then, a feeling for our native language as well as our native heath which made some of us turn into "Regional Poets" back in the Forties. It may seem, so far as it was a movement at all, to have been a movement at the periphery, but I think it pointed the way to a new variety and richness in the decades which were to come.

Gavin Ewart

## Two Poems About the Forties

### In the Old Days

(“Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot”)

When John Roberts tried to seduce Betty Jesse  
by buying her clothes from Dorville,  
when there were people called Simon Watson-Taylor  
and a harelike man called Nicholas de Wattville  
whom I always thought of as The Easter Bunny,  
whom I never spoke to but occasionally saw  
(but he came later, a year or so after  
I worked for Tambimuttu and Poetry London) —  
why, in those days, all these people were real!  
Living and breathing and walking round London!  
People in London were meeting in pubs and drinking,  
they were falling in love and out of love again  
and the black shiny taxis beetled through the streets!

When you forget exactly who Süsmayer was  
and the names of the Masons who supported Mozart  
and for some minutes you forget the name of Haffner  
and for six weeks you forget the name of that other Mason,  
James Mason, the movie star, one of your favourite actors . . .  
why then you will know that like the year 1946  
all the years before and all the years after  
are going to blur in the same way, and vanish!  
All those years — to remember — do we really want to?  
Perhaps we forget them as a kind of consolation.

## Norman Nicholson: 1914–1987

The death of Norman Nicholson was announced whilst the present number of *Aquarius* was going to press. One of the finest poets of his generation, almost all his life was spent in his native Millom — apart from a period during his adolescence in a sanatorium in the New Forest. In his later years improvements in medical science enabled him to lead a full life and to travel. But he still preferred to remain in the area which his poetry celebrates with loving intimacy — industrial (now post-industrial) south Cumberland. Its people, its landscape and its geology were his subjects, but always illuminated by visions, springing, explicitly or implicitly, from his Anglican Christian faith. He was a supporter and contributor to *Aquarius* who will be missed. The writer of the present note also mourns a valued friend.

John Heath-Stubbs

For someone as sympathetic as Smart (there was no-one she could not include in her understanding, except perhaps the hypocritical and the pompous) it is an irony that her narrator was to find her life's meaning over the dead body (as it were) of another. "My foot danced by mistake over the helpless and bled no solace for my butchery." If she was momentarily obliged to tread on her lover's wife (or a jellyfish in the sand) she atoned one thousandfold.

The novel about the aftermath of the affair: *The Assumption of the Rogues and Rascals* has always been less popular, not because of any lessening in perception or burning phrase or concentrated wisdom, but because its subject is less dear to our hearts. Who wants to know about paying life's bills?

The original publication of *Grand Central* in 1945 was ignored, and it was only after its republication in 1966 and the enthusiasm of the critic Brigid Brophy that Smart's reputation became an open secret at last. Brophy wrote: "I doubt if there are more than a dozen masterpieces of poetic prose in the world. One of them I am convinced is . . ."

Smart's poetry, written in old age, was as dewdrop-fresh as her youthful prose was ancient-wise, and her public readings garnered her a whole new generation of admirers — such poems as "What is Art?", "The Bonus" and "Parental Doubt" — "Your glittering world turns out to be all lies; / Why didn't you give us a healthy taste of hell?"

But it was always the intolerable that brought out her brightest flames. After the early death of her beloved daughter, she wrote "Rose Died," which opens like a wound: "Unstoppable blossom / Above my rotting daughter."

Shortly before Elizabeth Smart's death in April of this year a new book *In the Meantime* was published in Canada (the country of her birth and young womanhood and indeed the scene of her great novel). It is a collection of poems and prose pieces, both old and new, of which "Dig a Grave and Let Us Bury our Mother" gives stunning evidence of that budding talent, with its incisive cut to the bedrock, that was to flower later.

The poet Sebastian Barker, her son and Literary Executor, is at present sorting through her papers, including her journals, and there will doubtless be more gifts to come from her rare imagination. Her art lies not just in the shock and torque of the prose, but in her ability to convey things without tedious detail. There are only 120 pages in *Grand Central*, and to read each one is like watching someone dancing on hot coals.

Jill Neville