

# **The Norman Nicholson Society *Comet* and Outreach Report 2024-2025**

Prepared for the AGM of the Society on 27<sup>th</sup> April 2025

## **1. Introduction**

This report covers our member communications via *The New Comet*, *The Comet Bulletin* and emails. Members will recall that *Comet* is no longer a printed magazine but is published online, on a private Sway micro-website. The material is split between *The New Comet* (articles, close readings, reviews and creative writing) and *The Comet Bulletin* (events, news, reports and member news). There is some overlap between the two 'publications', but material of more lasting relevance is generally published in *The New Comet*.

This report also includes information about the Outreach activities of the Society which are not covered in other reports by Officers of the Society.

## **2. *The New Comet***

NN Society members received links to two private online *New Comets* in the 2024-2025 Membership Year, published in July and December.

The July issue included articles by Kathleen Jones and Susan Cartwright-Smith, based on the talks they had given at the September 2023 Norman Nicholson Symposium, as well as creative writing, a review of our late member Chris Pilling's posthumous collection of poems, and an interview with our 'Associate Member' Mehak Vijay Chawla, a student in India. The issue also included some interesting photos and images, illustrating the text, including photos of the performance of *Prophecy to the Wind* by the Questor's Theatre in April 1949. These give a very vivid sense of the performance and why the play was 'well worth doing', as Alfred Emmet, the founder of this renowned amateur theatre said.

This issue has had **177 views** (or readers) as of 13.04.2025.

The December 2024 issue of *The New Comet* also had a number of interesting pieces including Ann Thomson's article on *A Match for the Devil*, based on her talk at the September 2024 Symposium, Jess Dandy's commentary on the setting of 'Fossils' by the composer Joel Rust, a close reading of Nicholson's poem 'Rising Five' by Luke Bateman, a poem by our member Martyn Halsall, and two reviews of books of poetry by our members Mary Robinson and Kelly Davis. This issue again includes some very interesting

images, including photos of the production of *A Match for the Devil* at the Green Room, Carlisle, and of the Quarry Theatre, Mirfield, where Nicholson's play *Birth by Drowning* was performed on the 9<sup>th</sup> July, 1959 to a 'vast crowd' of 3,000 people.

This issue has only had **75 views**, which is something of a disappointment. The material is well worth reading and viewing and keeps our members up to date with recent thinking about Nicholson's oeuvre as well as reinforcing our sense of our own community.

The editor will provide the material in plain format (i.e. without the images) as a PDF on request.

Many thanks to all contributors for the valuable and insightful material that they provided for both these issues.

### 3. *The Comet Bulletin*

*The New Comet* was supplemented by two *Comet Bulletins*, published in the Sway online format in May and October 2024.

The bulletins contained information about our own events and about events linked to Norman Nicholson which were featured by other organizations. The May Bulletin also contained information about the committee and a request to help us in our work, particularly in the build-up to our celebrations and commemoration in 2027. Our member Caroline Gilfillan was remembered in a moving tribute by Kerry Darbishire and news was shared of our members publishing successes. The October Bulletin brought news about the Norman Nicholson House CIC (Project 14), information about events, reports, and member news. The May Bulletin had **89 views** and the October Bulletin had **145 views**.

Between the two *New Comets* and the *Bulletins*, the editor sent out many emails, keeping our friends and members updated with information about our events.

A huge amount of work goes into the writing, editing and layout of the online materials. Please do make good use of them and remember that you can return to the *New Comets* at leisure; that material doesn't go out of date.

If you ever need the links to be re-sent, please contact Antoinette Fawcett at her usual email address: [antoinettefawcett@gmail.com](mailto:antoinettefawcett@gmail.com).

#### 4. Outreach activities not covered in other reports

In addition to the editorial activities detailed above, the Society has been involved in a number of networking and outreach activities which have helped to spread the word about our author.

##### i. **The Alliance of Literary Societies' AGM Weekend and Gathering**

On May 18<sup>th</sup> 2024 Glenn Lang and Antoinette Fawcett attended the **Alliance of Literary Societies' AGM and Conference** weekend at the Windermere Jetty Museum, which was hosted by The Arthur Ransome Society (TARS). TARS not only celebrates Arthur Ransome's work but promotes outdoor activities, particularly in the Lake District which featured in so many of his children's books. The ALS is chaired by Marty Smith and headed by the renowned BBC journalist and presenter James Naughtie as its President. Naughtie gave a very interesting talk at the conference which focused on the role of literary societies in combating the current darkness of the world, as well as ensuring that the legacy of their authors was kept before the public. Literary societies, James Naughtie stressed, are 'guardians of the flame' and an 'antidote to fashion'. There is a full online report of the event on the ALS website: <https://allianceofliterarysocieties.wordpress.com/als-agm-2024-in-bowness-on-windermere/>

The ALS currently has over 100 member societies, representing at least 50,000 readers. It gives the Norman Nicholson Society the chance to spread the word about our author, particularly through the networking contacts, the display areas, and the evening readings. Antoinette read Nicholson's poem 'The Boathouse, Bank Ground, Coniston', which those familiar with Ransome's work will recognize as the setting for many of the *Swallows and Amazons* novels, in which the farm is called 'Holly Howe'.

##### ii. **Millom and District Local History Society April 20<sup>th</sup> 2024**

Antoinette Fawcett gave a talk entitled 'Norman Nicholson: Beyond the Lakes' at Holy Trinity Church, Millom as part of the Millom and District Local History Society's regular monthly events. She was paired with Jeff Cowton of the Wordsworth Trust who gave a talk called 'To the Lakes!', based on the current exhibition at Wordsworth, Grasmere, which examined early tourism in the Lakes. Jeff recognized and paid tribute to Nicholson's pioneering role in examining the history of tourism in this area in his book *The Lakers* (1955), a

topic which was explored in more detail by Antoinette. The links established and maintained through this event with both the Wordsworth Trust and MDLHS are an important element in keeping Nicholson's name and work before the public eye.

iii. **University of Cumbria Cultural Landscapes Lecture Series**

On May 7th our member Dr. Andrew Frayn of Edinburgh Napier University gave a talk at the Ambleside Campus of the University of Cumbria entitled 'On the Perimeter and Fringe of War: Norman Nicholson's Cumbria and Rural Wartime'. The audience was large and appreciative. The event was another example of the Society's (indirect) collaboration with the University of Cumbria and a great way to extend knowledge of Nicholson's work among the general public. The talk was also published as an article in the academic journal *Modernist Cultures*. This is the third major article on Nicholson which Dr. Frayn has had published. We are grateful to Dr. Frayn's efforts to keep Nicholson's work alive and to show how relevant it is to current academic concerns.

iv. **The Ulverston International Music Festival June 2024**

Our Vice-President Neil Curry and the contralto Jess Dandy performed at a concert called 'Knowing Your Place: Ideas of the North in Words and Music' (June 7th). Neil read a range of poems, including some by Nicholson, and Jess performed Joel Rust's setting of Nicholson's poem 'Fossils', which she had commissioned and which was set perfectly for her voice.

v. **The 2<sup>nd</sup> Norman Nicholson Symposium September 28th, 2024**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Norman Nicholson Symposium was a major event for the Society in 2024 and has been well reported already both on the Society's website (<https://www.normannicholson.org/symposium-2024.html>) and in the *Comet Bulletin* that was sent to friends and members in October 2024. A report, written by our member Ann Thomson, was also published in *Radius Performing*, the magazine of the Religious Drama Society of Great Britain. We are immensely grateful to our anonymous US-based donor and to Dr. Penny Bradshaw of the University of Cumbria for making the series of symposia possible. We were delighted to welcome Professor Jonathan Pitches of the University of Leeds as our keynote lecturer and hope that this too will lead to further collaborations and research.

vi. **Lectures**

Both Dr. Laura Day and Dr. Antoinette Fawcett gave lectures on Norman Nicholson and his work in November 2024. Laura's lecture was given at the Armit Museum, Ambleside and was entitled 'Norman Nicholson and Me: Exploring Cumbria Together, A Century Apart'. The audience was extremely appreciative and asked lively and relevant questions. Antoinette delivered her lecture, 'Norman Nicholson: A Writer for Our Time', at Higham Hall College to a receptive audience, some of whom had met Norman Nicholson and remembered him well.

Both lectures were attended by members of the Society and the general public and both enabled us to collaborate with important Cumbrian cultural organizations. Higham Hall was dear to Nicholson's heart. He often gave readings there and, by all accounts, was a very welcome guest.

vii. **Norman Nicholson Residential Course – Higham Hall, March 2025**

Antoinette Fawcett delivered a course entitled "I Hack and Hammer at the Handiwork of Verse": an Exploration of Norman Nicholson's Poetry'. Higham Hall College is an educational charity, devoted to adult education for all ages. Fourteen students from a wide range of locations took part in the course and were highly engaged and enthusiastic. At least two of the students intend to join the society and many were keen to attend a follow-up course next year.

To sum up: in addition to a full programme of in-person and online events organized in 2024-25 by the Norman Nicholson Society, we have collaborated with a number of important Cumbrian cultural, heritage and academic institutions and have continued to spread the word about Nicholson's work to the general public. The educational element of our remit as a Society is clear: our Symposium is provided free of charge to the general public; we support the South Cumbria Musical Festival through sponsorship and patronage; we have given bursaries to students who studied Nicholson's work in depth on the Higham Hall course; and members of the Society have freely given their time and knowledge to researchers and enquirers. The vast majority of our events are open to the public and most of them have been free of charge.

Antoinette Fawcett

13.04.2025