

At The Musical Festival

As a boy, Norman Nicholson competed in the Millom Musical Festival. In *Wednesday Early Closing*, he describes music festivals as ‘one of the favourite winter sports in our part of the world’ and it seems that his performance of R.L. Stevenson’s ‘Christmas at Sea’ in one Festival Elocution class, for which he received 94 marks, was melodramatic in the extreme: ‘I took about a quarter of a minute over the final line, wringing out the last drop of sentiment like a girl wringing out a wet hanky’! He became Millom’s favourite boy reciter.

To mark his centenary, the Society asked the committee of the South Cumbria Musical Festival to set some of Norman’s poems in the classes for their Speech & Choral Speaking Day. ‘Scafell Pike’ and an ‘Own Choice’ were set in the two classes for School Year 6, which the Society sponsored.

‘Scafell Pike’ is a difficult choice for this age group to recite, each deceptively simple short line needing its particular emphasis to maintain the overall rhythm and continuity of the poem to its climax. But its theme and vocabulary would be well understood by the four children who entered and they achieved high marks for their performance, the winner being awarded the Coniston Shield.

There was only one entry, but an interesting one, in the ‘Own Choice’ class: Matthew Ward from Barrow recited ‘Old Man at a Cricket Match’. The subject obviously appealed and he recited it well, winning the Rydal Award. We hope that perhaps in later years, the children may recall these poems, learnt by heart, with pleasure. It is worth mentioning that Norman published several children’s poems in *The Candy-Floss Tree* (1984).

Attending this year’s Festival set me reminiscing because the South Cumbria Music Festival had its ‘roots’ in the Millom Music Festival whose long tradition since 1919 had had only two short breaks. It came to be well-known and respected as having the same high standards of competition and performance as its bigger counterparts, drawing in competitors from all over the north. The Millom Male Voice Choir regularly competed and was noted, among other achievements, as having sung with Kathleen Ferrier at the start of her career: the festivals were a training ground for many now famous musicians.

After a short break in the ’60’s, the Millom Festival was revived in 1973, mainly due to the huge success of a Schools’ Festival (including groups from Barrow and Ulverston) held the previous year. It was re-launched with the efforts of a small but enthusiastic body of supporters and the music adjudicator was the renowned soprano, Isobel Baillie, C.B.E., M.A. It is especially interesting to the Society that the speech and drama adjudicator was Yvonne Nicholson, L.R.A.M., A.D.B., Norman’s wife.

Unfortunately, there was to be only one more Millom Festival, in 1974. It was well supported locally and a success, but the combination of a noticeable change in musical tastes and Millom’s perceived geographical ‘remoteness’ – few trains and ‘twisty’ roads! – was seen as a serious drawback to future development. The solution was to transfer the Festival to Ulverston which had better access to the Lancashire area and the motorway. The first ‘South Cumbria Musical Festival’ took place in the Coronation Hall, Ulverston in 1977.

As a member of the original Millom Festival committee, I’ve watched the SCM Festival expand and succeed beyond all expectation. It nurtures and encourages young musicians and artists, many now performing on the international stage, to reach their highest potential. It has also inspired the creation of a highly regarded Annual International Festival of Music. I’m confident it will continue, like the ‘loved local baritone’ of Norman’s poem, to ‘give it Wigan!’

Peggy Troll June 2014