

## The ‘Taint of Sordid Industry’: Nicholson and Wordsworth

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Nicholson was, in the main, deferential towards William Wordsworth as a literary forebear. But he was nevertheless outspokenly critical of Wordsworth’s condemnation of the development of heavy industry in and around the Lake District. Nicholson’s engagement with Wordsworth’s River Duddon sonnets is indicative. I refer, of course, to Nicholson’s chiding of the Romantic poet’s description of the Duddon as being ‘remote from every taint | Of sordid industry’.<sup>1</sup>

*Comet* readers will remember Nicholson’s response to these lines in his poem ‘To the River Duddon’. There the poet recalls the ‘nearly thirty years’ he has lived near the Duddon in order to challenge Wordsworth’s account of the river as an idyllic stream. Instead, he writes from personal experience of the Duddon as an industrial waterway: one whereon ‘slagbanks slant | Like screes sheer into the sand,’ and where ‘the tide’ runs ‘Purple with ore back up the muddy gullies’.<sup>2</sup>

Historically speaking, Nicholson is right. Even in Wordsworth’s time, the Duddon was a river shaped and tintured by charcoal making and iron mining, among other industries. Yet, as David Cooper has noted, Nicholson’s rebuff to Wordsworth in ‘To the River Duddon’ is couched not in historical terms but in personal ones.<sup>3</sup> The power of this poem is rooted in its use of autobiographical perspective. It is to his life-long familiarity with the Duddon that Nicholson appeals in order to challenge his Romantic precursor’s characterisation of the river.

This challenge to Wordsworth echoes previous attacks on the Duddon sonnets. Notably, in 1849 Alexander Craig Gibson (whom Nicholson acknowledged as a fellow anti-Wordsworthian<sup>4</sup>) declared that the phrase ‘remote from every taint | Of sordid industry’ stunk ‘of the prime defect in Wordsworth’s philosophy and poetry’: ‘namely, his [...] contempt for’ industrial development, and his consequent blindness to the industrial activity that shapes even the remote uplands of the Duddon Valley.<sup>5</sup> The Duddon, as Gibson goes on to assert:

is by no means very “remote from *every* taint of sordid industry”—these hills are devoted to sheep farming, and though I am far from stigmatizing stock farmers as being more sordid than other classes, yet is their ordinary employment at essentially sordid in its nature, and as coarse, unromantic and disagreeable in its details as any other common mode of money-making[.] (Gibson, p. 37)

I don’t wish to quibble with the particulars of these assertions. I merely want to print them alongside Nicholson’s words in order to explain why I think both he and Gibson are mistaken in their reading of Wordsworth’s lines.

It’s true that Wordsworth’s objections to industrial development were often less than sophisticated. But nothing in the lines I’ve quoted suggests that he held all industry to be sordid; nor, furthermore, is there any overt claim in Wordsworth’s sonnets that the Duddon is not a site of industry. (On the contrary, the 13<sup>th</sup> sonnet contains a telling description of mills along the Duddon; and the 23<sup>rd</sup> sonnet, ‘Sheep Washing’, directly acknowledges the pastoral function of the river.)

What is more, the phrase ‘remote from every taint | Of sordid industry’ appears in the second Duddon sonnet, which is explicitly concerned with the river’s source on the fells of Wrynose Pass. In this context, all these words indicate is that the Duddon rises in a spot that is ‘remote’ from types of ‘industry’ that the poet considers to be ‘sordid’.

Nothing is said here about the aspect of the Duddon closer to its estuary. Nothing, moreover, is said about shepherding not being an industry. Indeed, one is instead left to infer that (*pace* Gibson) Wordsworth did not consider shepherding – in spite of its hardships and difficulties – to be a *sordid* industry.

Nicholson and Gibson, whether wilfully or not, both overlook this, and they thus don’t consider the full significance that the word *sordid* acquires in this Wordsworth’s sonnet.

For Wordsworth, industries such as shepherding were wholesome because they connected the individual to the land and to a local community. Such industries were vital because they supported the growth of a healthy, functioning society. The ‘tract of land’ worked by shepherds, as Wordsworth explained, ‘is a fountain fitted to the nature of social man from which supplies of affection, as pure as his heart was intended for, are daily drawn.’<sup>6</sup>

The rise of heavy industry, and the potential divorcing of labourers from the produce of their labour and their communities, was an ominous development for Wordsworth because it threatened to pollute – to taint – this ‘fountain’ of social ‘affection’. This threat of social pollution is what makes an industry sordid.

Good industry, for Wordsworth, was not a question of occupation, but of an investment of care in both one’s work and the relation of one’s work to one’s society.

It must, of course, be acknowledged that Wordsworth had reservations about the environmental consequences of the development of industrial towns, such as Millom, on the Cumberland coast. His principal concern, however, was not ecological but social, and when we consider this it seems surprising that Nicholson did not choose different grounds for voicing his criticism of Wordsworth in ‘To the River Duddon’.

For much as Wordsworth extolled upland farming communities, Nicholson praised industrial towns as ideal places for the nurturing of social affections. The members of such towns, as Nicholson saw it, invested care in their work, and their pride in the goods they produced enriched their collective sense of individual and communal belonging. He expressed this point succinctly in an essay he published in *The Listener* in 1958:

Just as woodland and ploughland proclaim the nature of the soil, so mines and shipyards proclaim the nature of the work by which men live. In an industrial town a man can see the badges of his trade set up with a kind of grimy pride right across the landscape.<sup>7</sup>

Rather than being barren of social value, Nicholson concludes, ‘the landscape of industry is stamped, signed, and countersigned with human meaning’ (Nicholson, ‘No Poetry in Railways’, p. 924).

This notion of labour as imbuing the world with human meaning is crucial, as it directs attention to an abiding continuity between Nicholson and Wordsworth. For both

men, poetry inhered in those places and objects that bore witness to human love, community, and friendship.

The difference between the two (and the source of Nicholson's, and for that matter Gibson's, disagreement) is a consequence of Wordsworth's anxieties about the socially degrading influence of industrial development. Time and experience have proved the narrowness of Wordsworth's views, but they have also confirmed the basic truth of his belief in the importance of caring for one's community and locality through one's work.

This is a truth to which Nicholson's poetry attests. Indeed, for all his criticism of Wordsworth, a reverence for the worked landscape as a 'landscape [...] stamped, signed, and countersigned with human meaning' remains a shared virtue of their verse.

#### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth, *The River Duddon: A Series of Sonnets; Vaudracour and Julia; and Other Poems* (London: Longman & Co., 1820), p. 4; ll. 1–2.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Nicholson, 'To the River Duddon', in *Norman Nicholson: Collected Poems*, ed. by Neil Curry (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), pp. 24–6; ll. 46–9.

<sup>3</sup> See David Cooper, 'The Poetics of Place and Space: Wordsworth, Nicholson and the Lake District', *Literature Compass* 5(2008), 807–21.

<sup>4</sup> Norman Nicholson, *The Lake District: An Anthology* (London: Robert Hale, 1977), p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> A. C. Gibson, *The Old Man; or Ramblings and Ravings Round Conistone* (London: Whittaker & Co., 1849), p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> Wordsworth to Charles James Fox, 14 January 1801: Ernest de Selincourt (ed.), *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, rev. by Chester L. Shaver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), I, 314–15.

<sup>7</sup> Norman Nicholson, 'No Poetry in Railways', *The Listener* (4 December 1958), 922–24: 924.