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Reflections on Tom Rawling (with a sideways look at Norman Nicholson)

How Hall – the title of our 2009 book of poems and memories - is where Tom Rawling was born in 1916. Norman Nicholson was born in 1914 in Millom, some 50 miles to the south, on the fringes of the Lake District and outside today's National Park. Rawling spent his first years in a house which Thomas Denton, perambulating in 1687, described as the "ancient seat and manor of the Patricksons, standing upon an ascent on the east side of Enerdale".

In November 1799, Wordsworth and Coleridge encountered a shepherd or a farmer with a sad tale at the head of the lake, and this forms part of the narrative of 'The Brothers' – Wordsworth's only poem set in Ennerdale, composed at Dove Cottage in 1800 and published in volume two of the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, with that imperishable opening line: "These Tourists, Heaven preserve us!"

It is unlikely that when he and Coleridge - who were not tourists - came to Ennerdale on 12 November, on their way via Scale Force to Wasdale Head, they stayed overnight at a lakeside house - I am told it received visitors even then - that later became known as The Boathouse and then The Anglers. Its site is 250 yards from How Hall.

In 1802 Coleridge was in Ennerdale again. This time he notes that he took an easier route, via Floutern Tarn. I am happy to speculate - since Rawling loved his history - that Coleridge walked past How Hall, where Rawling's ancestors may have been farming. There were Rawlings in the valley in the 16th century, and the house

had long ceased being the home of the Patricksons, Lords of the Manor of Loweswater.

Coleridge walked the fells familiar to Rawling - they were "mountains ... doing deeds of darkness, weather-plots, and storm-conspiracies". He walked up from the lakeside two miles to Long Moor, where he stayed in John Ponsonby's house. He noticed the "nether bank green and pastoral", and Ennerdale remained a remote valley into the 1920s. Indeed, until 1989 it had no electricity, and it had (and has) no railway, though a route was proposed in 1883. Industrialised Millom had a railway and electricity before 1900. It was open to the world - Nicholson could get to London with relative ease.

Rawling's valley was and is pastoral and green - "always the land continues", he says in 'Winter Digging'. He is kin to Wordsworth's mariner, Leonard Ewbank, the surviving and returning brother, who heard in the " ... piping shrouds ... the tones of waterfalls, and inland sounds / Of caves and trees", and "... in the green wave and sparkling foam / Flashed round him images and hues, that wrought / In union with the employment of his heart ... Saw mountains, saw the forms of sheep that grazed / On verdant hills, with dwellings among trees".

Similar images were deep in Rawling's dreaming mind at home in Kidlington, just outside Oxford. His short memoir, 'A boy at How Hall', written in 1976, concludes: "A golden time of innocence in a clean, strong land, under an everchanging canopy of cloud and sky, with the great fells about me."

Ewbank and Rawling were brothers under the skin, but I cannot claim that Wordsworth (or, dare I say, Wordsworthianism) influenced him as it did Nicholson. In his study, alongside poetry magazines and collections, was the 1975 Oxford paperback copy of *Poetical Works*, and the *Guide to the Lakes*. Neither are annotated, and his daughter has no recollection of him talking about Wordsworth. And yet ...

“I expect them to be there / one day in March by a ditch”

“There is a Flower, the Lesser Celandine”

“From heart shaped leaves / they greet me, open, warm, / their bright young faces / wink away the years.”

“That shrinks like many more from cold and rain / And, at the first moment that the sun may shine / Bright as the sun itself, ‘tis out again!”

I have just entangled lines from Wordsworth’s ‘The Small Celandine’ with Rawling’s ‘Lesser Celandines’. Both poets looked, observed, noted, enjoyed; but for the self-exiled Rawling, who left Cumberland for the South in 1938, never to return except to fish, the flowers seen in Oxfordshire “wink away the years” and take him home.

Are exiles - James Joyce in Zurich or Paris, Seamus Heaney in Dublin, D H Lawrence in Italy, Rawling in Oxford, men who knew where they came from - wrongly or rightly charged with nostalgia? Homesickness - the Greek word ‘nosos’ is illness or disease. Or is nostalgia a term of polite disapproval for poets who imaginatively return to their past? Might it be, to borrow a theory from Toynbee’s *A Study*

of History, a literary example of “withdrawal and return”?

Nicholson was the stayer and Rawling the withdrawer, the self- exile. Nicholson was born, lived and died in the same Millom house. In ‘The Pot Geranium’ he admits, “ ... my ways are circumscribed, confined as a limpet / To one small radius of rock.” Rawling, even though writing for the first time (as far as we know) in his 60s, is not imaginatively in Oxford - little there engages him – but in Ennerdale. In the title poem of *How Hall* he makes this clear:

How Hall, Hollins, and Howside,
Birkett, Rawling, Williamson;
Enough to know
I belonged to the place.

In ‘Mowdywarp’, the molehills he sees on a “Sunday morning, wandering by the Cherwell” take him straight back to “ ... boyhood fields by the beck / Below ruined Laverock How” and the “black oak dresser / Carved 1675, when all my clan / Was there ...” This is not homesickness, not nostalgia - it is an enhanced sense of place and roots.

It’s probably true, as the Czech novelist Milan Kundera is reported to have said, that a writer’s capital is contained in the first twenty to thirty years of his life. Let’s talk about the War. In 1939, Rawling is twenty-three and Nicholson twenty-five. What did they do with that slice of capital?

TB disabled Nicholson. He is an observer. ‘Corregidor’ (the USA’s Phillipine island fortress) appears in 1943 in a shared *Selected Poems* alongside poems by the soldier-poet Keith Douglas and J C Hall. ‘Stalingrad’, ‘Bombing Practice’, ‘The Evacuees’, and the strange ‘Council of the

Seven Deadly Sins' (in which a parish councillor has a plan to throttle Hitler and bomb Berlin) were published in *Five Rivers* in 1944.

Rawling serves throughout the war, in England, in the Royal Artillery. I don't think either man succeeded; war was not their land, though Rawling learns how to polish a pair of new boots and hears the "whisper of the German gun". He wrote his war poems after 1980, and never found a publisher. Just one - 'Gas Drill' - was in the Poetry Book Society Anthology of 1989/90, sandwiched between Craig Raine and Peter Reading.

Sweat, piss, shit, fart, arsehole! Did he pick up those words in the barrack-room? Not at all. They are used to describe some of the sensual experiences in 'Privy', the only poem of that title anywhere and nearly an international prize winner. These are not words to be found in Nicholson, and they illustrate a major difference between them.

Rawling on the farm, amongst farmers, animals, bodyparts, dirt, noise, smells, is comfortable with the "fit of earth in finger nails". Rawling in retirement was often found in his kitchen garden, digging. In the poem 'The Barn', "countless swathes of / kizzened grass pricked our skin / there was wildflower scent in our nostrils". ('Kizzened' is a dialect word, used to describe over-cooked grass in the heat of summer.)

He learned the basics of fishing from the shoemaker, Johnny Pearson, with whom he "lashed hooks to gut, practised / his whip finish till it was right ... " From so many poems, I have a picture of a vigorous, physical boy, comfortable in a roughness that was alien to Nicholson. Anne Stevenson, one of the judges in the

1985 Arvon/Observer International Poetry Competition, thought the shortlisted 'Privy' should have won - but maybe no poem with 'arsehole' in it will ever win a prize.

Once, talking about Rawling to a group mostly composed of elderly women, I noticed I'd sent half off to sleep. A friend at the back of the room shouted, "Read them 'Privy'!" Nervously, I agreed, and in a trice they awoke. The privy at How Hall is a trifle ruined but there for the curious.

While both men are observers of the natural world, Nicholson is more studied, book-based, and his sense of the rock beneath Cumberland is inspired. Rawling's nature is learnt at the heart of things; he is the country boy with wildflowers in his nostrils. His comparatively small output - seventy-three poems against Nicholson's 235 published poems, their writing lives of fourteen and forty-one years respectively - may mean that *How Hall* contains all that Rawling had to say.

I recorded some Rawling numbers - fifteen birds including fowl, twelve land animals (from worms to Clydesdales), nineteen flowers, fifteen trees and shrubs, four fish, and six fells, most of them local to his patch of Cumberland. Nicholson travels around the Lakes, often driven by his wife. Rawling tramps his acres, fishes the rivers and becks of the territory.

His Cumberland vision is narrower than Nicholson's, but that is a strength. The fells - Pillar, Herdus, Red Pike, Steeple, and Haycock - are the visible frontiers to Ennerdale. At least half his work is about the Ennerdale Cumberland that poured naturally from him once he found his voice.

In her introduction to *How Hall*, Anne Stevenson recalled that he could “call to mind every farm, field and face native to the country in which he had grown up.” The litany of field names in ‘How Hall’ – “Broad Close, Wham and Fittimer” – create an authentic and exactly remembered reality in the same way as Nicholson’s urban ‘Bond Street’, where “... the road remained unmade” in “... the one street in all the town / That that no one ever died in ...”. For Rawling’s fields, substitute the street names listed in Nicholson’s ‘Millom Old Quarry’.

Anne Stevenson encouraged Rawling in the poetry workshops that she ran in Oxford. She describes “a tall, lean craggy man in his sixties” who told her she was talking too much, and ‘craggy’ - with its mountain echoes - tells of a man whose hands could hold a spade as skilfully as a pen. There is constant awareness of the physical, the tactile, the sensual. I mentioned the plain words of ‘Privy’ - I don’t find that physicality in Nicholson, whose Millom home had no garden.

“The feel of wood, worn to my hand, / The heave of the body’s lever - / This heavy loam ... “ and “Blisters, muscle-ache, / A clinging shirt,” come from ‘Winter Digging’. The aching muscle leads me on to Rawling the fisherman.

While Nicholson knew his cricket (see ‘Old Man at a Cricket Match’) he was not, I think, a player. Certainly he was not one for the complexities of fly-tying and night fishing. Nicholson’s elvers – “Live darning needles with big-eye heads” – are looked-at elvers. The schoolboy Rawling, in Churchyard Beck,

Eagerly began to feel
Under every ledge and rock.
My fingers touched an eel,

Slimy, sinuous shock.”

‘The Eel’ is a rare rhyming poem of twenty-four short, spare lines in quatrains. He could not kill the eel. But with the hunter’s urge he came to know killing, even though, as in ‘Wild Harvest’, he writes of a sea trout caught and clubbed:

As the torch admires
A dead eye clouds,
Yet stares its question.

The fish drew Rawling back to Cumberland in his middle age, long after his time at Ennerdale Village School where his father, a war-scarred veteran, was Headmaster. His father beat him hard so as not to show favour, and drank too much - or “liked his drink”, as an aged Rawling relative once corrected me.

It was a fraught relationship. On one occasion his father, asserting the truth of the Catechism, wanted the budding atheist to agree, by swearing on the Bible, that Jesus was the son of God. He did – “ ‘Succour thy father and mother’ / Even with a lie”, he wrote in a bitter poem of family life, ‘Honour Thy Father and Mother’.

After school he escapes the land that contained him, studies History, becomes a teacher, marries, then rises to Head of English at an Oxford school. He discovers the Oxford poetry workshop in 1976. By now he is also writing articles on fishing. Ted Hughes once observed to Anne Stevenson that the fishing poems which Rawling sent him for comment were amongst the best he’d read. They were corresponding in 1994, as much about fishing as poetry. Once, they fished together on Ted Hughes’s beat on the Devonshire Torridge.

Rawling also corresponded with Seamus Heaney; there is much of Heaney in his verse, and they shared a rural childhood. The poem 'Sloe Gin' is dedicated to Heaney and he wrote that it gave him "great pleasure", although he suggested alterations that Rawling did not adopt.

"He who would seek her in the clear stream / Let him go softly as in a dream ..." are the opening lines of a musical, hypnotic poem, 'The Names Of The Sea Trout'. Its ancestor is in Heaney's 'The Names of the Hare', itself going back to an anonymous Middle English poem. It is one of twelve intensely experienced poems of hunter and prey and unique to Rawling, whose victim

... came for the feather
found the hook.
What followed was the craft of killing.
Her virgin scales cling to my hands.

The shift from past to present; an element of guilt, like the salmon or trout's dead eye questioning; the eel he could not batter to death; the parents he had to lie to, the mother who "dared to pour a whisky / For me, thirty years too late." Nicholson's home was a happy one, but locked him into Millom for life.

Rawling shared poems and fishing with Ted Hughes, but they were first tried out in the Oxford poetry workshop. The poet Pauline Stainer was an undergraduate then, and remembers him describing how he felt when writing these poems. 'Kingfisher' and 'Torrige Salmon' were two: "The recollection was so vivid that he found himself standing up from his chair, about to cast".

I never met Tom Rawling, and I was a lousy fisherman, so to this anecdote I add a few more to fill out the picture of the

man, described by Grevel Lindop in Trout and Salmon magazine thus: "there has been no voice and no life quite like it."

Pauline Stainer again: "he had the clear eye of childhood."

Bill Herbert: "I think Tom built his childhood into an anti-pastoral in much the way Wordsworth built his into a paradise ... he continued Norman Nicholson's task to free the Lakes from over-concentration on their literary past and so to blend Cumbria back into our sense of a poetic present."

Elizabeth Garrett: "a man of earth colours and textures ... had the properties of reflection of a trout-pool."

Childhood and family - troubled or untroubled - ancestors, the histories of Ennerdale and Millom, were important to both men, and they both had much-loved grandmothers. Compare 'Boo To A Goose' with 'Bridge End':

A bridge of refuge, back to Ennerdale,
Hills to look up to,
Clear waters flowing.

And only Rawling's grandmother knew
why eating beasemilk pudding mattered:

We ate as in a ceremony
of which the words were lost
the ritual no longer understood.
No one smacked his lips
said that he tasted mystery.
Only Grandmother was sure
of more than frugality,
that the blood was meant to be eaten.

'Beasemilk' is the first rich milk from the cow for the newborn calf. When I googled those two words, up came a review last year of How Hall in the Whitehaven News,

so I guess 'Grandmother' is another poem, like 'Privy', that is so utterly local and specific to a Cumberland ritual. The same goes for 'The Old Showfield', on the Ennerdale Show of the 1920s (which has its Nicholson counterpart in 'At The Music Festival'). The poem is a realist masterpiece - teasing, humorous, and true local history. On a CD of his poems, Rawling reads it in a voice that is dry and factual, with just a hint of the Cumbrian.

Ned Nelson pointed with his pipe
as I stood silent in my new school cap,
"Is this yan o' thine, Jerry?"
"Aye Ned, he's Thomas's lad."
"A see thy neb's still cummin."
And off they went to the sheep pens,
talking dead tups back to life.

Norman Nicholson has written much on other writers, and Wordsworth is with him in the Duddon Valley. Dedications apart - to Heaney, Hughes, St. John Perse - the only Rawling poem to refer to another book is 'The Upper Reading Room' (located, I assume, at Whitehaven Grammar School). It is a clue to (let's say) ancestor worship - Dickinson's *Dictionary of Cumbrian Dialects* (7,000 words listed and defined, first published in 1859) transports him back to school with the pace-egg and the dunt.

We know that, close as he was in childhood to the Ennerdale of Wordsworth and Coleridge, the unmarked *Poetical Works* does not point to devotion to the Lake Poets. Although a committed atheist, his daughters recall that he could quote much of the King James Bible. His school prize in 1934 was *The Oxford Book of 16th Century Verse*.

Nicholson was on his bookshelf too - the 1966 *Selected Poems*, the 1973 *A*

Local Habitation, and *Between Comets*, the 1984 anthology in celebration of Nicholson's 70th birthday. No one asked the only other Cumbrian poet of that generation for a poem, even though Oxford University Press had published *Ghosts At My Back* in 1978, and in 1984, the publisher of *Between Comets* (Taxus) had also brought out Rawling's pamphlet, *The Old Showfield*.

Nor is there, among the majority of off-comer poets, a single poem in the 1991 Bloodaxe anthology, *The New Lake Poets*. The editor of the latter and *Between Comets* was William Scammell, and when I first found Rawling - in 1996, after reading a warm memoir by Anne Stevenson - I asked Bill why not. I got a sort of grudging apology for an obvious error of judgement.

In my own haphazard and defiantly non-academic way, I appreciate this opportunity to pair the real local (it's not a dirty word) and two best 20th century Cumberland poets together. My man is Rawling, an atheist whose landscape was sacred, something set apart and "entitled to veneration", recreated in plain-spoken poems without obscurity, loving the language; pastoral which, stripped of the derogatory label from metropolitan critics, is the stuff of rural life.

His work may be occasionally sentimental, but why not? If I had had as rich a childhood among fields, secret streams, sweaty animals and ancestral places, I too would have been a sentimentalist. Rawling was sensual and physical in a thoroughly human way; a killer of fish, but transforming cunning into art as sea trout and man engage in the moonlight.