

Something Ill in the Air: Ruskin's 'Storm-Cloud' and Nicholson's 'Windscale'

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In a previous issue of *Comet*, I attempted to trace a few connections between the lives and works of Norman Nicholson and John Ruskin. Both men, as I suggested, were possessed by similar passions, and both were, moreover, guided by compatible philosophical outlooks. Both Nicholson and Ruskin were, for instance, deeply influenced by their love of geology, and for both men this love was inspired by a sensitivity to natural beauty and by an ability to perceive universal processes at work in the most ordinary rocks and minerals.

Such mutual loves notwithstanding, Nicholson was certainly capable of criticising Ruskin's ideas, and he was particularly scathing about Ruskin's engagement with the natural sciences. One need only turn to the eleventh chapter of *The Lakers* for proof. Here, Nicholson is complimentary about Ruskin's powers of observation, but he is dismissive – if not derisive – about the scientific dimensions of Ruskin's thought.

Nicholson's beef, briefly summarised, is that the ostensibly scientific character of Ruskin's thinking is belied by his commitment to an aesthetic and moral point of view. 'Ruskin', writes Nicholson, 'studied science as an artist studies anatomy': in order 'to learn how to look' at the world and to distil lessons from what he saw.¹ Ruskin's ability to draw valid deductions from the study of natural phenomena was, Nicholson implies, consequently impaired.

A key point of contention for Nicholson, in this specific respect, are the claims about the 'plague-wind' that Ruskin advanced in the two lectures he delivered at the London Institution on 4 and 11 February 1884. These lectures, later published as *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*, drew on meteorological observations (mostly taken by Ruskin at his Brantwood estate) in order to denounce a malignant change he considered as having been wrought by industrialisation on the physical and spiritual climate of the modern world.

For Nicholson, Ruskin's theories about the 'plague-wind' were not only unconvincing, but also unscientifically motivated by a personal animus against the expansion of heavy industry on the coasts of Cumberland and Furness. Noting Ruskin's assertion that

¹ Norman Nicholson, *The Lakers: The Adventures of the First Tourists* (London: Robert Hale, 1955), p. 188.

the ‘favourite quarter’ of the storm-cloud lay in ‘the southwest’,² Nicholson remarks: ‘south-west from Coniston lay only the small iron-town of Millom with, a little farther round to the south, the port of Barrow-in-Furness, then by no means as big as it is today.’³

Between Ruskin’s Brantwood and the chimneys of Millom and Barrow, moreover, ‘were miles and miles of moorland and fell, with bracken and birch to trap and filter any grain of smoke which drifted past the Duddon or Kirkby Moors’.⁴ ‘If there was any spot in England with pure air to breathe’, scoffs Nicholson, ‘then surely that spot was Coniston.’⁵

It makes sense that Nicholson, with all his local pride, should challenge Ruskin’s condemnation of the rise of Cumbria’s industrial coast. Nicholson is perfectly right, moreover, to cast doubt on the ‘quasi-objective data’ that Ruskin used to support his claims.⁶ Historically, though, the picture Nicholson paints of the size of Barrow and Millom in this period is a little misleading.

In the generation between 1851 and 1881, Millom’s population rose steadily from 2,115 to 7,698 people, and it was still climbing when Ruskin gave his lectures in 1884. By the next decade, the town would be home to more than 10,000 inhabitants. Barrow, for its part, was one of the biggest boom towns in Victorian Britain. Between 1871 and 1881, its population surged from 18,911 to 47,259 people, and it would rise to more than 50,000 by the early 1890s.⁷

In short, in the 1880s, Millom and Barrow were expanding industrial centres. It was certainly not for nothing that, in 1881, the Barrovian publisher Joseph Richardson could boast that his adopted town had grown, ‘not by fits and starts, but, by rapid development’.⁸ Barrow, declared Richardson, was an industrial powerhouse ‘destined, ere long, to become the formidable rival of others whose origin have been long lost in the mist of obscurity.’⁹

² John Ruskin, *The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*, *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903–1912), XXXIV, p. 34.

³ Nicholson, *The Lakers*, p. 191.

⁴ Nicholson, *The Lakers*, p. 191.

⁵ Nicholson, *The Lakers*, p. 191.

⁶ Nicholson, *The Lakers*, p. 191.

⁷ This census data has been sourced from HistPop <<http://www.histpop.org>> [accessed 15 January 2018].

⁸ Joseph Richardson, *Barrow-in-Furness: Its History, Development, Commerce, Industries, and Institutions* (Barrow-in-Furness, 1881), p. 56.

⁹ Richardson, *Barrow-in-Furness*, p. 56.

These statements, with their chipper, Victorian optimism, might provoke a wry smile today. But they are nonetheless a useful reminder that, in Ruskin's lifetime, coastal towns such as Millom and Barrow were growing at a brisk pace, and it was impossible to foresee how big they might eventually become. It is, therefore, understandable that Ruskin should have been anxious about the environmental and human costs of this sort of rapid, and seemingly unchecked, industrial development.

Nicholson wasn't blind to this deeper, ethical current in Ruskin's thinking. He may have chastised Ruskin's pseudo-scientific musings about the 'storm-cloud'. But he is more sympathetic, and not without cause, to the consternation Ruskin expressed about the hazardous effects of intensive industrialisation on the lives and well-being of working people.

Not long after writing the eleventh chapter of *The Lakers*, after all, Nicholson would find himself troubled by a plague-wind of his own. I refer, of course, to the radioactive contaminants released during the fire at Windscale in October 1957, and to the subsequent outpouring of concern about the potentially lethal consequences of new forms of industry on the Cumberland coast.

Shortly after the news of the fire broke, Nicholson dashed off what was to be his keynote response to the disaster: the poem 'Windscale', which appeared in the *New Statesman* that November. Bitter as it is brief, 'Windscale' offers a bleakly evocative reflection on the dangers of atomic energy. The imagery Nicholson packed into the poem's two squat stanzas – which, in their way, mirror the two piles of the original Windscale facility – is eerily compelling.

Particularly striking is the poem's depiction of a world riven with sickly contradictions: 'a land where dirt is clean, | And poison pasture, quick and green'.¹⁰ With Ruskin's storm-cloud in one thoughts, however, it is the conclusion of Nicholson's poem that stands out as especially noteworthy: 'And storm sky, bright and bare; | ... And children suffocate in God's fresh air.'¹¹

These latter lines, introduced by the image of the 'storm sky', suggest a connection with Ruskin that Nicholson himself may have neither intended or noticed, but which is significant all the same. The Windscale fire, after all, effected more than just the immediate locality. The contamination released, as is now known, drifted well beyond the Duddon and

¹⁰ Norman Nicholson, 'Windscale', *New Statesman* (30 November 1957), 744.

¹¹ Nicholson, 'Windscale'.

Kirkby Moor, and spread like an ill wind across not only the UK, but also much of northern Europe.

True, in this sense, the disaster to which Nicholson responded was more firmly rooted in scientific fact than Ruskin's 'storm-cloud'. But, like Ruskin before him, Nicholson's concern in 'Windscale' is with environmental degradation caused by incautious industrial expansion. This concern proceeds from a truth, which both Nicholson and Ruskin knew: our power to create is unfortunately allied with our power to destroy.