

Michael Tomko

reads

*The Making of Poetry: Coleridge,
the Wordsworths, and Their Year of Marvels*

by Adam Nicolson¹

ADAM NICOLSON'S *THE MAKING OF POETRY* sat in the backseat of our rental car during a journey to see friends in Somerset and provided justification and a fitting companion for a day-long diversion to visit Coleridge's Nether Stowey cottage and the Quantocks. More vital than a typical academic study and more eloquent and studied than popular biographical or travel-writing prose, the book focuses on the life and locale of Coleridge and the Wordsworths' year of creative engagement and collaboration that led to the 1798 publication of the *Lyrical Ballads*, unabashedly vaunted by Nicolson as holding a claim to be 'the most famous moment in the history of English poetry' (1). Nicolson looks to capture the psychology of the precarious but determined circle of new friends, their young lived lives at the troubled end



THE MAKING OF POETRY
ADAM NICOLSON

of the eighteenth century, the determinative terrain, the constitutive sociability, the cultural heritage, the communities enduring and contingent, and the witnessing flora in constellated moments—some truly famous and often retold, some obscure and recovered through Nicolson's retrospective imagination—that made that moment and their 'miraculous productivity' (4). Each chapter of this biography of group and place focuses on a few select months, such as 'September and October 1797', delineated carefully with seasonal markers of stages of bloom or the darkening of beech bark and often punctuated with a formative visit or encounter with a figure such as Charles Lamb, John Thelwall, or the Home Office spy James Walsh. Further denominated with a

predominant human activity (i.e., meeting, searching, informing, voyaging, remembering, delighting, leaving), each chapter narrates how all of these aspects coalesce into the formation of a particular poem from the 'astonishing catalogue' (1), ranging from 'Frost at Midnight' and *The Ancient Mariner*, to 'The Thorn' and the seeds of *The Prelude*, to the perceptive phrases from the observational journals of Dorothy Wordsworth—a full partner in the enterprise whose sharp eye and quiet drive features throughout. Thus, *The Making of Poetry*, not unscholarly but elegantly written for more than scholars,

¹ Adam Nicolson, *The Making of Poetry: Coleridge, the Wordsworths and Their Year of Marvels*, with woodcuts and paintings by Tom Hammick (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

follows these moments into that famous literary moment, not primarily to construct an argument or to make a critical intervention, but rather to see again how the vision of that *annus mirabilis* still endures, particularly in the Somerset sites where those marvels were made.

And so, as we made our own expedition, Nicolson's fifth chapter—'Walking: July and August 1797'—helped us see what we otherwise might have missed, something as basic as the 'Quantocks' themselves:

The ridge of the Quantocks, or Quantock as it is called in Somerset, not plural but a single long hard object, stands out above the wet moors of the Levels to the east of them . . . Most of it is no more than 1,200 feet high, and the whole ridge is only about twelve miles long and four or five miles wide, but it looks and feels more than that, a distinct world, an upland province away from the willow and dairy country below it. (78)

If this passage reads something like a guidebook, that is not misrepresentative. Nicolson's purpose is to invite the traveler—generally the literate reader, but even better the literal traveler—into the same 'distinct world' and then, within that landscape, to blur the lines between then and now. Consider his description of the first strata of vegetation upon climbing out of Nether Stowey:

Even on a hot summer's day the damp hangs and clings in there. Big lolling hart's-tongue ferns, feathery polypody ferns and others more like giant shuttlecocks, with the luxuriant undergrowth of dog's mercury around them, make a jungled Amazonian lushness beside the stream. A broad-bladed frondy apron of fern spreads over the water. This is an English rainforest, coomby with buttercups and little cranesbills, water dropwort and fat, snaking ivies on the trunks of the tress, the whole place womblike, interior. (81)

A further climb ascends into the 'Quantock oakwoods, one of the great, scarcely regarded beauties of England' that were regularly coppiced during the romantic period:

The result is a wriggling snakepit of a wood, in which the trees weave and twist upwards, blotched with lichen, the dancing stems springing from mossy and ferny groins, sometimes four or five to each stool. Their canopy, thirty or forty feet above the bilberries or whortleberries, creates a mosque-like room in which the green carpet of the berries glimmers for thousands of acres beneath them, lined out in avenues of sun-spotted green, an arcaded temple and shrine to growth and light. (81–82)

Go further and yet another world appears on the ridge's peak, barren and open, with a lonely twisted thorn, gyring raptors, and lowly 'tormentil in the

acid turf' (83). Polypody ferns, dropwort, whortleberries, tormentil—this is detailed, canny nature-writing of such high-caliber. It is written with the eye of a keen walker, who can spot the creeping cranesbill geraniums below but not lose the capacious, arching atmospheric effect of the canopied whole or the lush, dewy air 'cool as a glass of cider' (82). None of this is appreciable, and is readily disregarded, through the buffered windscreen of the passing car. Cars don't seem possible in this world—a blasphemy when approaching the oakwoods and an elided intruder when Nicolson surveys the village of Nether Stowey itself and hears the 'almost soundless' roadside stream that can be still heard despite the only competing modern sounds of distant televisions (55). Before the village, he asks, 'Is this what people have always seen? Or am I seeing it because Coleridge has taught me to see it?' (54).

Those two questions, and their interrelation, capture well Nicolson's dual approach to nature writing and to literary biography. With regard to the former, the chronological whiplash in passages like those on the successive microclimates of the Quantocks may be the most important element of *The Making of Poetry*. Nicolson is a decorated landscape writer, who has described life where lands and waters meet with sensuous detail and learned eye. In this book, Nicolson's reader is charmed into forgetting whether the paragraphs are in the historical present tense recounting the freshly coppiced woods interwoven with the paths of eighteenth-century charcoal burners or simply in the present tense reacting to the twenty-first century protected area of natural beauty that Nicolson himself walks. This confusion—or rather transhistorical convergence round a common site—of past and present is established early and intentionally by Nicolson:

Early in June 1797, Coleridge was walking south through the lanes of Somerset and Dorset to visit Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy. I walked with him, the same lanes, the same air, absorbed in his frame of mind, my first embedding. (6)

That the lanes and air separated by two centuries are exactly the same is implausible; that the two writers separated by two centuries can nevertheless be said plausibly to walk together is the point of this 'embedding experiment' (92). Calculating the July moonrises in 1797, Nicolson also sets out from Nether Stowey during the evening's 'violet hour' after Thelwall and Coleridge, saying 'Of all their experiences it is the most recoverable' (119). Such cross-chronological recoverability is occasioned by Nicolson's close attention to the relatively stable, remaining aspects of Coleridge and the Wordsworths' world. In other words, what common terrain abides and what common vision can be claimed. Justifiably, contemporary nature writing so often emphasizes what has been lost and predicates all that will be lost and altered in decades to come. To be reminded here of the possibility of finding continuity is a solace and delight, as well as an ecopolitical reminder of all that could be lost with climate change, not just in terms of environmental degradation but also of alienated historical

community and cultural inheritance, of the traditionary annealing that comes from walking through the same envisioned landscape with those who have gone before and will come after.

What Nicolson calls ‘embedding’, ‘embeddedness’, or his ‘embedding experiment’ is his method for achieving this re-creative conflation (6, 14, 92). The term does echo the approach of the war-time journalist, but it may owe more to the philosopher Charles Taylor’s depiction of the ‘great disembedding’ of the modern individual from social and civil institutions and the animated cosmic order. To demonstrate his counter-move, Nicolson sinks himself, body and soul, into the surprisingly fecund ‘blood-warm cider-soup’ water of a ‘rhyne’ —the Somerset word for the drainage streams dividing the damp fields—seeking the ‘deepest possible co-presence with the earth’ (14–15). There he seeks Coleridge and the Wordsworths—not so much amid the half-mud, duckweed, arrowhead, and fleeing eels—but rather in their own search for a revitalizing ‘co-presence with the natural world’ in the Quantocks (15). Where this loco-descriptive immersion and imaginative reconstruction meet produces a series of striking literary readings that refresh often familiar poems with a granular contextualization. The stadal pathway through those different worlds of the ‘Quantock’ traces what Coleridge had to imaginatively and vicariously enjoy when he could not accompany Lamb in ‘This Lime Tree Bower My Prison’. Written from Coleridge’s Nether Stowey cottage, the poem, according to Nicolson’s mapping, ‘borrows this form of the Quantocks: out-and-up-and-back-and-in, enlargement and containment, extent and privacy, solitariness and connectedness, other people and the world at large, this world and a world beyond’ (98). Likewise, Nicolson goes combe-crawling, looking for the likely spot where Kubla Kahn was composed. Following the direction of a local farmer who tells him ‘That’s a place that is no longer there’, he comes to Withycombe and traces how its current Wordsworthian re-wilding embodies the exotic energies of the poem, thus providing another loco-descriptive ‘road to Xanadu’ (142). Amid all that’s known and imagined and questioned and extrapolated about those lines and their composition, there is still something ineffably valuable in the grounded account added by Nicolson’s visit to nearby Culbone Church, with its ancient green oak pews, ‘polished dark on the upper edges where the hands of shepherds and charcoal burners have held them as they stood or knelt’ (142). Likewise, his visit to Alfoxden in its current state of ‘decay and breakage’ as a ‘half-ruin’ rightly seems more Wordsworthian, in light of Wordsworth’s subsequent characteristic poetic tropes, than it did in its genteel time of the Wordsworths’ residency (75).

Nicolson sees this mode of following the footsteps of poets into the lines of their poetry as itself following the model of his mentor Richard Holmes (3). This seems right, in a way, but in another way, Nicolson does not seem engaged in another project of authoritative, overarching biographical narrative in the manner of *Early Visions* and *Darker Reflections*. The scope and spirit of his writing seem more akin to another mentor, Seamus Heaney, who appears in the epigraph articulating a focus on ‘touching territory that I know’ (3).

Heaney's archaeological and geo-anthropological collecting and contemplating artefacts mirrors Nicolson's transhistorical, tactile approach and also extends to the more than three dozen, colored woodcut illustrations by Tom Hammick. Perhaps most remarkably in this CGI age, the materials for these works were crafted using fallen limbs gathered from Alfoxden. Many of those hardwood trees would have been present during the Wordsworths' tenure and overshadowed their conversations. Nicolson notes that the 'grain and growth' of the planed and planked timber is still visible in the illustrations as another material connection to that time (337). The illustrations themselves do not possess the kind of realistic cross-hatching that one might expect from a monochrome woodcut. Unlike the botanical minutiae of Nicolson's prose, the illustrations often offer broader vistas, with lone, primitive figures, sometimes accompanied by more conceptual images that speak of a dreamscape. They are brightly, chromatically painted, sometimes suggesting a Rothko aesthetic, though more representational. I could not help feeling at times that Hammick's woodcuts, artworks in themselves, went against the grain of Nicolson's manuscript and a bit of me yearned for something more akin to an Ordinance Survey map. Yet there is a wisdom in Nicolson's calling the book a 'collaboration' between these two artists, and their united, but not univocal, creations are another way that *The Making of Poetry* reflects and embodies its collaborative subject, the writers' friendship and the dual authorship of the *Lyrical Ballads* (335).

For while Nicolson's episodic and temporal series of chapters is focused on the successive moments that make their time in 'retreat' and the developments in their 'refuge-cum-laboratory', there are consistent themes that emerge (2). 'Gathering' is not one of the gerunds given to a chapter heading, but it is infused throughout all. There is the gathering up of 'sibylline' timbers by Nicolson and Hammick; the sociable gathering together of the poets and their visitors; the gathering power of the imagination that unites nature and humanity into one spirit; the Imagination's metaphysical power of bringing together and articulating 'the interfusion of flesh and spirit, symbol and fact' that Nicolson, following Coleridge, terms 'Consubstantiality' and the 'great gospel of interfusion of all in all and each in each to which this year is dedicated' (124, 82). Notably, it is all of these disparate elements gathered together in one place, among one circle of people, for a particular span of days. Such 'gathering' is particularly Coleridgean, and it was these visions—along with Dorothy's resilient support, that, in the book's narrative, brought Wordsworth out of his initial despair and loneliness and gave him the creative confidence that would define his voice and career. In the end of their time together, a breaking and erratic Coleridge is not potent enough, however, to check Wordsworth's growing pride—a pride that feeds on insecurity.

Elements of *The Making of Poetry* demonstrate that Nicolson is not naive about the political and postcolonial investigations that have dominated romantic-era studies in recent decades: Lamb's day job in the East India Company; Thelwell's persecution and the reality of state surveillance; the hard,

disheartening, and sometimes violent poverty of the beautiful Somerset countryside; the narrow-minded xenophobia of the locals that gossiped about the 'French' renters; and the high-minded condescension and sexism of the gentry and clerical classes. Yet Nicolson's dominant theme remains gratitude, for the mirabilia of the Quantocks and for the marvels of this *annus mirabilis* of poetry and prose—those wonderful works that enabled a way of seeing those natural wonders more than two centuries later. And the predominant gratitude is to Coleridge, for his continued teaching. That second question about Nether Stowey ('Or am I seeing it because Coleridge has taught me to see it?'), Nicolson repeats in an even more expansive key, 'What doesn't feel like Coleridge country now?' (294). Flawed, benighted, and chaotic as he was, Coleridge gave others, especially Wordsworth, a way of balancing contemplative solitude and sociable meditation. Thinking through Dorothy's apt phrase of the 'melting' Somerset evening, Nicolson unabashedly dilates on nature, society, and human life:

But this is the difference made by the poets' having been here, having heard all this and having felt the significance of it: in those melting moments, the material world matters less than your own presence in it. Being here and being involved with this world, recognizing that others have been here in that same way, is what seems good. The legacy of these poets is a universal human inheritance, one of the bonds between us, so that to be alone in the world is not to be alone at all. (104)

So it seems good that Nicolson has been there too, and *The Making of Poetry* seems good for those who gather together in a journey through the Quantocks, by car or on foot, and also for those who, like Coleridge in the lime bower, read of these 'joys' with 'lively joy' as if they were there.