

A LIFE AND FOUR LANDSCAPES

Frederick John Niven

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FREDERICK JOHN NIVEN is today almost unknown. That fact alone would warrant a critical investigation of him, but a study thus motivated could easily end by being merely an arid exercise. Fortunately, in Niven's case, the justifications for reappraisal are many. He warrants it because he was unusual in Canadian letters. He lived by his writing without being a hack; he was a conscious prose stylist at a time when stylists were few; he was concerned with problems which affected his time, not (for all his apparently "regional" settings) with merely local issues; he was a man with wit, humanity, intelligence, and a willingness to exercise all three — and if this caused him to rebel quietly against orthodox social codes, to emigrate from the London literary world of the 1910's to the hinterland of British Columbia, and to dare to write honestly about the life that he knew existed, then so much the better for his fiction. He was also the friend of such diverse literary figures as Hugh Walpole, Christopher Morley, and I. A. Richards; the recipient (until he emigrated) of regular and favourable reviews both in the *TLS* and from such critics as Rebecca West; and the colleague of John Murray Gibbon and John Buchan. For all this, the man is a paradox, and difficult to assess. It is probably inevitable that thirty-three books of fiction, two of verse, and a vast array of non-fiction should vary in quality; sometimes his characters were nothing more than stereotypes, and sometimes, too, he found difficulty in reconciling the fiction he was writing with the facts in which his work found its base.

This last item brings us to one of the most interesting features of Niven's work. Available criticism amply points out the difficulties in using historical data which the author faced in writing his trilogy — *The Flying Years* (1935), *Mine Inheritance* (1940), and *The Transplanted* (1944) — about the opening of the Canadian West. Comments by Desmond Pacey (*Creative Writing in Canada*) and Edward McCourt (*The Canadian West in Fiction*) show that Niven's contact with the Canadian environment allowed him to create realistic scenes and moods in these novels, and that his characters, lifted from history books or else pared to meet the demands of the factual events, tend to be wooden. Western Canada was not the only environment he knew at first hand, however, nor was it the only occasion upon which he drew from his own experience for some of the material in his books. My communications with Mrs. Pauline Niven, the author's widow, have substantiated what his autobiography, *Coloured Spectacles* (1938), suggests: that many of the characters other than the historical ones were basically pictures of his own family. In the most successful books there was some metamorphosis; the characters come alive in their own right, and the four landscapes Niven knew well — South America, Scotland, southern England, and western Canada — he sensitively recreated as fictional settings. To examine only the works set in Canada would be to limit our assessment of Niven's ability and our appreciation of what he accomplished. To trace the events of his life and the forms those events took in his work not only reveals some of the character of the man, but also suggests the scope of his literary aims.

South America appears most rarely as a setting, and always in combination with some other place. One of his best books, *Triumph* (1934), uses it well. It traces the life of a would-be musician frustrated by home and family, re-creates the social levels of an English society — consular, but not always diplomatic — in Latin America, and reveals how the man's children in various ways succeed him. The country does not correspond with any specific real one; instead, it lives separately, created on the page. The distant Andes are there, and the heat, and the shimmer of colour, and together they contribute palpably to the novel's success. Landscape is one of the characters in a sense, but in this book at least it does not *replace* the people as the focus or the reality. Works such as the pirate story, *The Island Providence* (1910), set partly in the Caribbean, or the western, *Hands Up!* (1913), which mentions a brother who dies in Panama, are more credible for their scenery than for their characters, and as works of art are better ignored. But they do raise the question of source of detail, which even a cursory investigation of Niven's life quite clearly answers.

The brother who died has a prototype in Niven's own brother, who died in Panama when Niven was still quite young. The family in *Triumph* is clearly but not exactly parallel to Niven's family, which was connected with the British consular service in Valparaiso when Niven was born there on March 31, 1878. The youngest of three children (his sister outlived him by several years), Niven did not leave Chile until he was almost six, when his family sent him to school in their native Scotland. Later they returned to Scotland themselves. His father was a manufacturer of sewed muslin there, and a lenient man; his mother was a devout, rigorous, and rigidly orthodox Calvinist.¹ Understandably, the home they supplied in Chile is only dimly remembered in Niven's work; that which they gave their son in Scotland — different in surroundings but probably not very different in kind — was one he remembered with much more detail: with wit, nostalgia, some affection, and no little asperity. In time, the two homes were to lead to substantially different environments in the fiction. *Triumph* is a later work than many of Niven's "Scots" novels, a feature which contributes to its difference from them in thought and in direction indicated by the fictional resolution. By 1934 Niven had emigrated to Canada, and his renewed contact with the worlds of the western hemisphere caused him, in his fiction, to seek within his environment rather than outside it for the solution to the problems he raised. Early protagonists, like Martin Moir in *Justice of the Peace* (1914), cannot succeed because they cannot escape their environment; Heriot, the musician in *Triumph*, fails because he does not exercise his ability in spite of his environment, and his artistic son can only truly know success when he can perform equally well in his father's old world or away in any other. Niven comes to this implied change in attitude partly because of personal experience. Ultimately, with his wife, he determined on one place to settle. But to do this he had to leave a beloved Scotland and an active London behind him, and he had also to escape a particular kind of home.

ONE SUSPECTS, without much clear basis for doing so, that Heriot is partly a picture of Niven's father. *Coloured Spectacles* mentions in passing the manufacturer's voracious appetite for literature and his linguistic facility, but nowhere is there an explanation of what Niven merely calls the man's "restlessness". There are in the fiction, however, some sympathetic portraits of softgoods

manufacturers — Ebenezer Moir in *Justice of the Peace*, Walter Maitland in *The Story of their Days* (1939), and John Simson in *The Staff at Simson's* (1937) — which amplify our picture of his father's business and perhaps of the man himself. Certainly the other members of Niven's family appear as characters — the brother in *Hands Up!*, an unsympathetic sister in *Dead Men's Bells* (1912), and his mother almost everywhere, which makes a consideration of the factual mother-son relationship and of that in the novels a convenient and central introduction to the significance of the Scottish settings in Niven's total work.

Rachel Moir is the fictional extreme. Rebuking and then completely disowning her son Martin, she almost prevents artistry from being developed in him and she certainly goes a long way towards destroying him. Mrs. Niven, similarly, reacted strongly against Frederick's creative talent, but she was not exactly like Rachel, for she also possessed many finer qualities. According to Mrs. Pauline Niven, for example, the fortitude of the title figure in *Mrs. Barry* (1933) and the illnesses and sensitivities of the son, were the result of Niven's consciously drawing upon memory of his mother and of isolated incidents from his own childhood. But the lady's less admirable qualities and the somewhat more ambivalent ones were also to appear in the fiction. Mrs. Niven opposed any venture that was not demonstrably practical and which was not sanctioned by the dour doctrines of Calvinism, and so her vocational ambitions for her son, after he left Hutcheson's Grammar School, were bent towards stern theology or worldly practicality. They were entirely opposed to Niven's own inclinations. In his autobiography, he (typically) understates the case:

I wanted to be a painter; I wanted — we had no Great War then — to be a war-correspondent. . . . My folks, sensibly enough, pointed out to me the extremely precarious existence of a painter — even of a war-correspondent — and compromised: How about an applied art? Or how would it be if, to begin with, I went to the Glasgow School of Art in the evenings, on trial, to see if I had the stuff in me, and was apprenticed to the manufacturing business? Designers were required in that business. I recalled that Alexander Smith had been a pattern-designer — which helped to make me amenable to parental reason, and dutiful. But my mother, I believed, regretted that I had not followed in the footsteps of her folk, alumni of the old Glasgow College, never entered its university. I broke a tradition of her family then — when we humoured each other. That's life.

"Regret" was often open antagonism and it contributed to the break that occurred between the two.

In *Dead Men's Bells*, Niven depicts a comparable break over a philosophical-religious question between Robert Lindsay, the hero, and his mother. The con-

flict comes to a head when Rob discontinues his ministerial training because “there is too much of the old necromancy in the theologians” — which was heresy in the mother’s eyes. Later, detecting her son in a lie he felt compelled to use in order to avoid further conflict, she laments:

“Your second cousin . . . wrote at that very time, as if the Lord wad try my soul, as was Job tried of auld, speiring if you was thinking of the future. . . . He . . . said he could put ye in the way of a captaincy. But no — no’ after a lee. . . . Ye will see the justice o’ this. Believe me, your mither, that every sin has its punishment.”

“I ken it,” said I grimly.

The Scotland of this family, like that of the Murrays in *Two Generations* (1916), is “that land where Calvin once gloomed”, and the heroes, like Lindsay or Ted Murray (or like Niven himself), find this incompatible with their own nature. “Heretical” Rob argues with his uncle Tom about this:

“I am like the lad in an auld twelfth-century French ballad . . . — I had rather be in the company of the happy than wi’ the constitutionally gloomy.”

“I do not ken the auld irreleigious ballads of France. . . . Life is stern and sober, and shunnor or later you will find that it is so, and that you have a soul to save or damn for all eternity. . . .”

His advice given me then, as the first cobbles of the street of Eaglesham rang under our tread, made me think that God must laugh, which struck me as a great thought. . . .

But this was “a night of many stars, and the Milky Way was like a plume of feathers, and you can talk little Calvin to a young man in the open and under stars.” To Rob, then, nature offers solace, and to nature he escapes for the adventure that occupies the major portion of the book.

Other heroes cannot escape in this way when they discover, as in *Ellen Adair* (1913), that over their family hangs

the curse of Calvin and a misconceived Christ. . . . The children of such families, if they love beauty, either love it very tenderly, with a minor key in their voices, or are carried off their feet, and are as moths round a candle.

The choice for freedom, or submission, or destruction, belongs to the individual, and as a child in such a house, Niven had himself to choose. Aiming for freedom, he found he could indulge a vivid imagination in solitary play. Remembering this after some years, in the significantly-titled *Coloured Spectacles*, he sees the humour, the humanity, and the loneliness involved in such a situation:

When I was a boy and could travel only on the atlas, Deadwood Dick took me up winding roads between scattered bull-pines into quick-rising hills. The trees were very tall. The forest glades were very quiet. I sometimes wish I had a complete set of the stories in my library now to turn to occasionally from some of the discoveries of the coteries which are thrust at us with an intolerance worse than that which accompanied the advocacy of *Ministering Children*. . . . His flights into the hills were tremendous. They atoned a hundredfold for the egg-like weals upon our wrists delivered by a soulless mathematics master for deficiencies in trigonometry. . . . I followed Dick through the solitudes of tall timber awash with the scent of balsam, on into the thickest forest, on into the canyon. . . .

Up this canyon, then (the stairs up to, and the corridor of the top flat, leading to my bedroom, used to be the canyon), Deadwood Dick guided me. He went over a "divide" (at the top of the stairs), and came down into a "pocket" in the hills, a grassy little valley (where the passage widened), and there, having unsaddled, he left his horse free to graze. . . .

Deadwood Dick strode to some bushes and breasted into their midst. I strode to my bedroom door and breasted against it, having first turned the handle. The bushes whipped back into place and right ahead was a precipice and a cave — for Dick. I presume he kept his treasure trove in the cave but I have forgotten the details of his loot. What he gave me, to last for ever, was a horse, big timber, and silent mountain paths.

Such exploits were only for childhood, and not for Niven's youth, at which time conflict with his parents became most acute. But he began to enjoy solitude, and in spite of the delicate physical constitution which had plagued him since his removal from Chile, he loosed his immense reserve of energy by walking from Glasgow out into the countryside. Walks that Martin Moir could take in *Justice of the Peace*, or Robert Barclay in *The Three Marys* (1930), or Bliss Henry in *A Wilderness of Monkeys* (1911), draw upon these excursions for the observed details that make them come alive. A move of his parents from Glasgow to Edinburgh gave Niven new vistas, for

instead of the Mearns Moor I had the Pentland Hills and soon, extending my tramps, I had the nearer Borders, Tweedside from Symington to Broughton . . . and on to Peebles.²

It gave him new material to draw on later, too, for Peebles was to become the setting for important scenes in *Ellen Adair*.

Although the "art question" had been curtailed for a time when it was discovered that Niven had a degree of colour blindness (regarded by his parents and sister, Mrs. Pauline Niven says, as a "disease"), he still had no interest in

the business to which he was apprenticed. In *Coloured Spectacles*, he notes his feelings:

Tremendously though manufacturers interested me, and warehousemen, and packers, and weavers, I was not enthusiastic about manufacturing. The intention was for me to pass through the various departments and *learn the business*. I began with winceys and it was Charlie Maclean, head of the wincey department, who informed me, gazing at me solemnly one day, "Freddy, the plain fact is that ye dinna gie a spittle for your work."

Like the hero of *Justice of the Peace*, Niven attended night classes at the Glasgow School of Art, studying under Francis Newberry; after a while, like Ted Murray in *Two Generations*, he quit the warehouse to work in a library: "The only trouble was that sometimes I would be lost in a book when I ought to have been attending to a subscriber." To assist in the payment of his art school fees, Niven also worked part-time in a jewellery store, and this experience was to appear first in *Ellen Adair* and *Justice of the Peace*, and then as the background for a full novel, *Old Soldier* (1936). But the question of becoming *either* a painter *or* something practical stalemated when doctors recommended that Niven move to a drier climate. He was therefore sent in his late teens to the home of some missionary friends of his mother's in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia, and the move, which cured his ailments for a time, was markedly to affect both his work and his life.

THE MOVE WAS NOT, this trip, a permanent one, but it did give him a number of experiences which were to lead to his becoming an author at all. For one thing, it introduced him to new settings and to another response to life, but for him the contact with North America was more important than this at first indicates. In fact he was to spend the next two decades moving back and forth from Canada to England, trying to settle down and trying to reconcile his attachments to several worlds. In his fiction, during this same period, he continually returns to two equally thorny and obviously related situations. The person in his books who rebels against Calvinism and yet remains within the Calvinist world dooms himself to attritive conflict, and the person who flees to the wild west runs the danger of being "diseased" by an aimless and therefore crippling wanderlust. Ultimately Niven could find a satisfactory solution within both Scots and Canadian settings, but this was in works which were written well after he

at last decided to emigrate. In the early Old World settings, characters like Rob Lindsay had to flee from their restricting environment in order to be successful; such characters as Harold Grey in *A Tale that is Told* (1920) are merely worn away by their environment when they remain within it. In the later New World settings, contrastingly, flight is an irresponsible act, not a constructive one. Robert Wallace in *The Transplanted* (1944) would be a failure if he left the small B.C. town in which he lived, for he would then be deserting a society to which he should and can contribute. Reflexively this solution begins to work in the later Old World settings as well, and so John Maitland in *The Story of their Days* (1939) discovers a niche — controllable, but still alive, unlike that of Harold Grey — within a larger world with which he cannot entirely agree. The difficulty here, of course, is in reconciling a responsibility to society with an equally nebulous responsibility to self.

In Canada on his first trip, Niven travelled as much as possible and worked at whatever job presented itself — on the railroad in the dry Thompson Valley near Savona, in a lumber camp near Shuswap Lake, in ditch-digging crews in Vancouver. He rode rods and walked ties with acquaintances whom in *Above Your Heads* (1911) and *Wild Honey* (1927) (published in Great Britain as *Queer Fellows*) he named Hank, Slim, Billy, and Foureyes, and in *Wild Honey* he recounts in detail two of these trips: from Savona once to Vancouver and once through the Camp McKinney gold fields to the Kettle River Country. Writing later for *Saturday Night* (July 5, 1941), he remembers his first jobs in Vancouver:

after a spell of ditch digging I had change of manual labor in shovelling macadamised rock off scows that were brought by tugboats and moored sometimes near where the Yacht Club boats lie now, sometimes at False Creek. In those days Indians used to watch us at our shovelling — with commiseration in their dark eyes I used to think. Yet what a miserable youth I was when owing to a strained muscle in my back I had to forsake manual labor and take a job indoors.

His heart and lung trouble, however, seemed in the meantime to have disappeared.

Homesickness of a kind drove him back to Scotland again, and it was after his return (aboard a cattle boat from Montreal, as described in *The S.S. Glory* [1915]), that he first took up journalism. “Three Men in a Shack” appeared as sketches of Western Life in the *Glasgow Herald*, and success led him to editorial work on various Scottish and English papers. In 1908, he was discovered in the London literary world by Mrs. Isobel Thorne, the fiction editor for Shureys’ Publications. Mrs. Pauline Niven writes:

My mother . . . began to write for various magazines and ended up editing one of them published by the firm of Shureys'. As the firm grew and expanded my mother's position grew. . . . She was also responsible for Frederick's first book — *The Lost Cabin Mine*. He offered it to her but she urged him to try the English publisher, John Lane, who published it and the one that followed it [*The Island Providence*] which he wrote in Devon on the advice of John Lane who was, I believe, a Devon man. I can't remember how long Frederick was in Devon, under a year, I think. I was still at school but he sent his Mss to me and I typed it in the evening.³

These were active years. His first novels appeared, strongly influenced by the work of Stevenson and by the Deadwood Dick stories; he was publishing also in such periodicals as the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Morning Leader*; and in 1911 he married Mary Pauline Thorne-Quelch, then eighteen years old and fifteen years his junior.

He spent several months of 1912 and 1913 travelling and freelance writing in Canada — four novels appearing during these two years. He had returned to London before the war broke out in 1914, but, his heart trouble recurring again in England, authorities rejected his application for military service. He served in other capacities, therefore — as Assistant Food Controller in the Ministry of Food attending to the distribution of rationed goods; and finally in the War Office under John Buchan as Associate Editor of Articles for Allied and Neutral Powers. Five more novels, a book of verse, and a collection of short stories that were written about 1912 appeared before the end of the war, and two more novels, including *A Tale that is Told*, which won the enthusiastic admiration of Rebecca West, soon followed. Quality, critical reception, and popular approval fluctuated greatly, for several works were frankly money-making pot-boilers. But even these have a place in the development of Niven's thought; they demonstrate along with the more serious works the division between Old World and New World settings which Niven consistently used.

MAY 1920 is a significant date for observing any change in his work, for it was at that time that Mr. and Mrs. Niven came to Canada together and stayed to settle. Initially it was to be only a three-month visit, on a commission from John Murray Gibbon of *The World's Work*, to gather material for more articles on Canada. Several visits back to the Old Country, however, only confirmed their choice of a home at Willow Point, on the beach of Kootenay

Lake a few miles from Nelson, B.C. In many ways this mountainous area is like parts of Europe, but Niven notes a difference when he speaks of what called him back to the West:

The Alps are in a pocket of Europe, and seem almost a kind of sleeping partner of Messrs. Cook; but the Rockies run the length of the continent, and are in league with Eternity. . . . What is the lure? It is a sense of freedom. It is the pines mounting up the steep hills, and the smell of the pines and the quiet under them. . . . It is the rank tea, tasting like nectar after working in the woods. It is the wagon-roads, the two deep ruts, going down through the sands of the Okanagan, or up into the Cariboo, or twining through the pine-needle floors of the tall timber tracts in the Selkirks, the Cascades, or the Pallisers. It is the trails leading off from these, with the gashes blazed on the trees, blaze by blaze showing the way, as lighthouses con ships through sea channels. It is, as in Murray Gibbon's song, "the lakes of melted jade", these lakes that the winds play with, as a hand ruffling and smoothing velvet. It is the lonely call of loons in the hush before twilight, when the grasshoppers all suddenly cease to chirp. It is the mosquito-hawk that zig-zags overhead, with a flight somewhat like bat or swallow, in the drizzle of a reflected sunset. It is the clear air that lets the eyes roam over great spaces. It is the moon rising to silhouette a ridge of firs and light their tips all down the slope — and the wonder of it all getting into one's blood.⁴

Significantly the details of his life now begin to appear in his nonfiction writings, largely in periodical essays and related to his contact with natural environment. The wilderness was what inspired him to write (and writing was by this time his sole source of income); at times, as *Coloured Spectacles* showed, it also reminded him of the Scotland he still loved:

There is a season of the year . . . when . . . Scotland comes to me. . . . The creeks, tom-tomming in the gulches, clutching wanly at protruding rocks, delaying in trembling amber pools become, in fancy, Highland burns in their glens. Kootenay Lake is changed to a Scots loch. A stipple of rain is on the polished water; the hazed slopes, seen through that *smoor*, might be of heather, with a birchwood yellowing here and there. Nothing is asked of imagination save to turn the odour of weed-smoke to that of peat — and the trick is done. All Scotland is mine then, from forsaken St. Kilda and the roar of the Atlantic on its cliffs to the piping of a piper, on a Saturday night, by the Broomielaw.

But the separation from the old world still existed.

Living in Canada had its drawbacks, one of which was the tendency for his reputation in England to suffer. Niven sets forth his friends' advice and his own reply in one of his verses in *A Lover of the Land* (1925), which is noteworthy only for its biographical fact:

"Come you back from hill and beach,
 Come and let men know your name,
 Here in London seek your fame,"
 But I cannot seek her there,
 In the heavy thrice-breathed air. . . .
 No, I live the life I write,
 Writing little for delight
 In the living with such things
 As that great hawk's patterned wings.

The natural world sets up a different kind of isolation, and it caused Niven to find in his many friendships with such persons as Mr. George Gooderham, Dr. W. O. Rose, and Dr. I. A. Richards, a reaffirmation of the necessity for human contact.

Innumerable climbs in the mountains of the Nelson and Windermere areas, trips to Calgary where he learned sign-language in order to communicate with the Blackfoot peoples,⁵ occasional travel throughout B.C., to the Yukon, and to Hawaii, together with his vast memory of lands he had previously known led to a number of non-fiction articles and books: *Canada West* (1930), *Colour in the Canadian Rockies* (1937),⁶ and *Coloured Spectacles* (1938) — which, except for *Mrs. Barry* (1933), was the first of Niven's books since 1920 to be given a *TLS* review. More fiction had also appeared since he emigrated; *The Wolf* and *Treasure Trail* came out in 1923 (like many of the Westerns, first written serially for New York papers), followed by a second collection of poems, and fourteen more novels. Of these, *Mrs. Barry* and *Triumph* were among the first Canadian novels to be selected as Book Society choices.

There is a development of thought in the later novels that culminates in the posthumously-published *The Transplanted* (1944), but this work is technically much weaker than many of his other novels. Always conscious of word choice (*Mine Inheritance* was completely rewritten from third to first person, for example⁷), though never what one could justifiably call a stylistic innovator, he died before revising *The Transplanted* into a final form. The heart and lung weakness which had dogged him during his life caught up with him again. In a letter to Christopher Morley in 1929, he had written:

A long talk I fancy this may be. I have the time for it! I am laid up. I seem to have overdone it on my last High Country expeditions and have enlarged my heart. It feels enlarged in more senses than one. I lie here with a very full heart indeed, thinking, thinking — and remembering, remembering. Sometimes I feel

it might burst. Extreme athlete's heart the doctor calls it. You know I am crazy about the High Country — away up above timber. . . .⁸

He recovered; he continued to live, to climb, to enjoy life, to write, to acquire what Jay MacPherson, in the *Literary History of Canada*, calls his "human and literary maturity", but repeated heart attacks at last caused a move from Willow Point to Nelson, and in 1943 to Vancouver, where he died in St. Paul's Hospital on January 10, 1944.

Niven's "maturity" is most evident in an ability to evoke atmosphere. He recorded dialect well, but this was just one part of his clear perception of the world around him. His sense for the human and the natural landscape, for the world of his youth and the world of his adult life, was accurate and strong. It led to the immediacy of his descriptions of nature and to the artistic success of many of his character sketches both in fiction and non-fiction. His contact with Canada not only introduced him to a new environment and a new set of characters, it also started him writing; it heightened his sensitivity to the nature of landscape and to its influence upon people; and, in time, it altered the way in which he chose to resolve his characters' conflict. He himself absorbed the landscape in which he lived, and in his two best and most productive periods, 1913-1920 and 1930-1939, he demonstrated an appreciation of the power and beauty of descriptive language.

The problems he recounted in his work were very largely ones he had himself met and tried to solve. This does not mean that the events of his fiction are wholly autobiographical, for they are not, but they do bear a distinct relationship with the particularly itinerant life that he himself led. If matters ended there, the fiction would be exceedingly limited in scope. In many ways, however, Niven's life, and the problems he met, were typical of his age; his works have interest as Edwardian and post-Edwardian social documents, therefore, and (more importantly) the questions they concern themselves with are still significant today. One of the problems his heroes, like Rob Lindsay and Martin Moir, face, for example, involves their reaction against a code of values they find stultifying. This to some extent is an objectification of Niven's own conflict with Calvinism, but it also serves as a microcosm for his society, which was at this time reacting in different ways to moral codes that were much more overtly liberal than those current during the nineteenth century. Life was altering rapidly, and in some quarters this was equivalent to chaos. For Niven himself it meant disorder — but it also allowed another order to come into existence. The restlessness that led him part-way round the world he could ultimately control in the "sanctuary" of a peaceful

home in Canada. For his character John Maitland, "disorder" was an unhappy marriage and a world at war, both of which seemed to negate the values which he felt he knew through art. Yet for him, too, a reachivement of order is possible; "Broad Sanctuary," which is Maitland's resting-spot in London, is, though a retreat, no escape from the world, and it becomes an image of another stability that can emerge from change.

As Niven also found out, the determination of a way of life lies in large part within the power of the individual, but a person often finds that in a complex environment he must choose not between right and wrong but only between two wrongs. This problem, too, Niven's fiction explores. Robert Wallace in *The Transplanted*, for example, is forced at the last to choose between friendship and truth; he cannot have both, and a denial of either one is contrary to the dictates of his conscience. He cannot remain neutral about the question either, for this would leave him in limbo; in order to find happiness — a third intangible — he must and ultimately does make the necessary choice. Again we can see Niven's personal reaction against one system of belief lying behind this, but like the other conflicts he presents in his fiction, it is not at the last completely personal or local. Instead, the problems his characters face are those that arise anywhere when an individual and a social conscience are at war within a solitary man. As a novelist Niven did not always present these with artistic skill; sometimes he did not even escape triteness and flatness of characterization. But his work still is worthy of attention, for at its best it transcends the doubtful fictional virtues of documentary and apologia. His imagination at those times goes beyond the facts he remembers and allows him to create out of his several landscapes an arresting and credible world.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Conversation with Mrs. Pauline Niven, May 28, 1962.
- ² "John Buchan — In Memoriam," *Saturday Night*, LV, no. 22 (March 30, 1940), 6.
- ³ Letter to the writer, July 7, 1962. *The Lost Cabin Mine* was first published in 1908, antedating by one year the date listed in Watters.
- ⁴ "The Call of the West," *The Canadian Magazine*, LV, no. 3 (July 1920), 224.
- ⁵ One of the tribes accepted him as a member and gave him the name *Apasto* (= "Talking by Signs"). See "Amerindian," *Dalhousie Review*, XIX, no. 2, (July 1939), 145.
- ⁶ (Toronto: Nelson, 1937), 125 p. Watercolour illustrations by Walter J. Phillips.

Not listed in Watters. Reprinted in 1962, this is the only one of Niven's works to be presently in print.

- ⁷ MSS are in the U.B.C. Library. *Mine Inheritance* was also made into a radio play for broadcast over the C.B.C. in three parts: January 8 and 14, 1959. Part III is undated.
- ⁸ Quoted by Christopher Morley, "The Bowling Green," *Saturday Review of Literature*, VI (December 28, 1929), 603.

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