

High Adventure in the Worlds of Art and Politics

By COLLIN BROOKS

My Life in Two Worlds. Vol. 1. 1867–1915. Vol. 2. 1915–1952.
By Francis Neilson. Appleton, Wis.: C. C. Nelson Publishing Co.,
1953, 716 pp., illustrations, \$10.

When Francis Neilson gave its title to this full and fascinating autobiography, the two worlds he had in mind may have been the topographical two worlds of the United Kingdom and the United States, or the sociological two worlds of before and after the first World War. They may even have been the two worlds of penury and struggle and of affluence and creative scholarship. A more fitting title would have been *My Life in Twenty-two Worlds*, for there seems scarcely a phase of human activity in which, during that crowded and questing career, he has not played some part.

Even in our time, when the normal expectation of life has been so much increased, it is given to relatively few men to pass four-score years, and to fewer to display as octogenarians that restless energy and incessant mental activity which marks Francis Neilson from his fellows. But equally, it is rare for a man to be gifted from youth with a physical presence and charm so dominating, a gift of exposition so lucid, and convictions so conscientiously reached and so courageously held. It would seem that Francis Neilson, like a second Cyrano de Bergerac, faced with so many modes of life, decided to be admirable in all. His one-time political opponents would dispute the word "admirable." They could not quarrel with the word "active," for in the story of his life—so faithfully, so frankly told—sheer activity jostles with versatility for pride of place in the category of his characteristics.

The tale begins far from the worlds of conflict and creativeness where the manhood was to be spent. It opens with the revealing confession: "I was a poacher from the first, and Spring was the halcyon time of my boyhood." Its first paragraph is an initiation into the mysteries and mercies of bird-nesting in the quiet English county of Shropshire. ("This boy taught me to recognise the difference between the nests of a thrush and a blackbird. In collecting eggs one law he laid down was never to take the first because the bird might desert its nest. . . .") The home was a modest one, even a humble one. Neilson's parents had married on very little, and had, perforce, to work hard. But they "had what was

essential in their time: persistence, courage, and no fear of work." Shropshire was the father's county. The boy Francis was born in Birkenhead, that ship-building and shipping community which confronts Liverpool across the Mersey, and has been known all through its history as "the city of the future." It is an unlovely place, but it was not so when the baby was born in the years when Andrew Johnson was in the White House and Mr. Disraeli was at the British Treasury.

But the boyhood of Francis was not to be spent in that urbanised surrounding. As brothers and sisters arrived, room had to be made for them in the little house, and he was sent to the home of his grandparents, there to spend most of his days "roaming along hedgerows and even adventuring as far as the county's two hills of singular English beauty." As with so many boys of naturally acquisitive brain and a temperamental lust for learning, school was not congenial to him, nor were those set in authority the right people to deal with his natural vagabondage. There must have been in him much that would have appealed not only to Huck Finn, but to Huck Finn's creator. He made a triumph of truancy, even after he was sent to that famous commercial school, the Liverpool Institute, where, by a coincidence, he must have overlapped with the father of this present reviewer. But Liverpool gave to him the inestimable resort of a great public library, in which, like Dickens, "the boy may be said to have educated himself." The port gave to him, too, the life and companionship of its dockland, stimulating in him that vein of romance without which no boy, or no man, can do anything of note in the world. As the parents' fortune bettered, he was moved to a better school, where the truancy lessened, but the romanticism continued.

In one digression Francis Neilson ponders the experience of his boyhood.

For long years now I have seriously questioned the advantages of what we call education for juveniles. The gamin will survive where the well-cared-for and conventionally educated child will succumb. The philosophy of the back street, which is found by the gutter-urchin, is not to be wholly despised by our mentors, for over and over again during my life I have seen the boy of the street reveal a sagacity, a shrewdness, and an awareness of the actions of men and things which is astonishing, to say the least.

The test, in other words, is not in the ability to answer so-called I.Q. tests, but in finding a resolute answer to life itself. The half-neglected schooling, and the assiduous search for real education, did not prohibit the boy from the more masculine pursuits of athleticism. Like David Copperfield, he had his first real fight with a local bully, and, in defense

of a smaller boy, won it handsomely. It aroused the determination to learn how to box. Cross-country running, swimming and other sports followed. To them, in large measure, the adult Neilson must have owed that imposing physique and physical poise which made him so outstanding a figure on the political platform and the stage, so noticeable a personality in any concourse of men.

Neilson's Career in Drama and Opera

LONG BEFORE ADOLESCENCE there developed in the boy a strong attraction towards the theatre—a 'yen'—not the mere egoistic desire to act, but the wish to shape and produce. He passed early into that phase of boyhood which Robert Louis Stevenson knew so well, and captured for all time—the age of the toy theatre, of the "penny plain and tuppence Coloured" cut-out sheets. In Neilson it was to be a lasting love, for later in manhood he brought to the real theatre exactly the same enthusiasm and self-abandonment. "It was in reading the manuscript, as the characters were pushed on the stage, that I excelled," he records, and this early elocutionary exercise was also to help to equip him for his later exhibitions of oratory and rhetoric on the public platform and in the British Parliament.

It need hardly be said that there are two approaches to both the theatre and politics. The one is the purely histrionic, the other the intellectual. In the young, as in the older Neilson, both were mingled. The gift of a cheap edition of the plays of Shakespeare—bought in parts—gave to him the second of the two bases on which his true learning was reared. Like so many Englishmen and Americans of his and earlier generations he is able to testify that:

The discipline, derived from reading the Bible and Shakespeare over a period of eight years, meant more to me in later life than all the lessons learnt at school. I look back to that practice as the means of making me a ready speaker with a fairly large vocabulary, and of imprinting on my memory many of the best lines in our language.

Such a youth could not fail to become an ardent theatre-goer, though maternal prejudice had first to be evaded and then conquered. Much acquaintance with the mummers of that Bohemian period did not make for steadiness under home discipline, and the time soon came when the eupeptic boy, being "far too big a handful for my parents," was shipped to America. That was in 1885, with Grover Cleveland filling his first memorable tenure of the White House.

Within a very few days of his arrival in New York, he was nearly murdered while preventing a woman from being raped in a public

thoroughfare. Some few weeks later he was in hospital from overwork as a truck hand. "Living was precarious, but youth was full of hope—and frequently full of nothing else." A dribble of money from home eased things a little, a very little, but the young immigrant speedily made many friends, athletics proving a valuable *open sesame*.

From truck hand to clerk went the progress. The clerk's job was in a railway yard, and the clerk discovered to his amazement that compared with some of the porters who were scholars he was of sadly neglected education. He also discovered the effects of the colour ban when he found a magnificent gentleman of colour who was a doctor and a lawyer at thirty-two but who declared that when men of his race tried their hands at practicing the professions for which they had qualified "they soon find it is better to empty the slops of the white folks." He encountered, too, some bitter examples of the conduct and comportment of some of the worst types of his fellow Britishers, and there began to grow in him that passion for social justice which was so largely to shape his later political career and wholly to colour his personality. In New York, after a succession of jobs, he made a first vain effort to take professionally to the theatre, and he left New York to return to Boston loaded with debts, trivial enough, but to him a burden. He did not find the New England city the quiet, cultural city of tradition and legend.

I was then only twenty years old, and had been in America some fifteen months, during which time I had led the drabdest kind of an existence and many times had been through hell.

Reciting, piano-playing, casual journalism—in which he discovered in himself a complete inability to achieve descriptive reporting—the quest for a theology and a faith, incessant and by no means desultory reading, including the Greek dramatists: these, and his bread-earning jobs, filled the days until he was able to return to New York, in a too often baffled search for a "white-collar" job. The turn of the tide came with two articles on schools of acting, which caused a temporary stir and resulted in the author being given a free scholarship with a stock company.

The gaunt starveling managed to exist and attend this school of acting, only to be told eventually that he would never be other than a mediocre actor, but had an undoubted flair for stage management. Another long period of privation followed, but it in turn was followed by engagements as a super and a player of small parts. The Francis Neilson who was to become a great authority on Shakespearean production, a man-of-the-

theatre in Gordon Craig's use of the phrase, and a successful playwright was launched.

Even he, at that time, could not foresee how much of his life and talent was to be devoted not to straight drama, but to opera. But much of the first volume of this autobiography is filled by the narration of his contribution to the production of opera—following stage management under Frohman—and of his friendship with Anton Seidl and Ethel Smythe. He moves from America to Britain, from Bayreuth to the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden, back to New York, to Berlin, Budapest and Paris. In that narration the *picaresque* is illumined and decorated by that steady flow of comment, aphorism and exposition which characterises every one of these six-hundred pages—"noble six hundred"—that constitute the two satisfying volumes of self-revelation and objective judgments. There is no better way of conveying the quality and texture than by the absurdity of saying that the story reads as if Henry Adams had written the life of Jack London, or Jack London had enlivened by interpolations *The Education of Henry Adams*. In this musical odyssey one is transported from *Wagner contra Nietzsche* to Neilson *contra* Messenger, to Neilson *contra tout le monde* as chapter follows breathless chapter.

Chesterton, in *The Victorian Age in Literature*, says, soundly enough:

A section of a long and splendid literature can be most conveniently treated in one of two ways. It can be divided as one cuts a currant cake or a Gruyère cheese, taking the currants (or the holes) as they come. Or it can be divided as one cuts wood—along the grain: if one thinks there is a grain. But the two are never the same: the names never come in the same order in actual time as they come in any serious study of a spirit or a tendency. The critic who wishes to move onward with the life of an epoch, must be always running backwards and forwards among its mere dates. . .

So let it be with Caesar!—for Neilson is a kind of Caesar, or, more accurately, a kind of compactum of several Caesars, from Julius to Marcus Aurelius. His mere chronology defeats the reviewer of an autobiography written to a chronological thread.

Neilson's Career in Politics

THE YEARS OF STRUGGLE and self-help, the years of dominance in drama and opera are unfolded, when, so to speak, the curtain descends to mark the passage of time, and a new chapter opens abruptly thus:

Lady Crewe once asked me why I had given up the Opera to go into politics . . . it seemed strange for one who had 'such a bright future' to relinquish the stage for the forum.

The answer might well have been the one word *kismet*. The part of Britain where Neilson was born and bred was always a hot-bed of politics. The great port of Liverpool was a Tory stronghold, but of Tories who were free traders. The city was on the edge of "the Catholic wedge," that part of North-west England which the Reformation left in some parts unscathed but in other parts the home of "Black Protestants," Orangemen, and Dissenters. Where in Britain you find High Tories, you find their corrective, Constitutional Radicals. Francis Neilson grew up in a home of such. But more than temperament and early environment swung him into combative politics. In America the young man had encountered a group of disciples of Henry George. He became possessed of *Progress and Poverty*. Here, to one battling with penury and economic distress, was the answer to that Marxism which revolted his intellect and his *psyche*. Thence, he was to have the courage of Henry George's convictions. Bred in the free trade philosophy, here he found, too, the counter to the protectionists. Land values became his touchstone, at a time when the old aristocratic landowners of Britain, though they did not realise it, were in the penultimate ditch. The story of his fight for the integrity of the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values is as thrilling as any political novel, including a memorable scene with Joseph Fels, the soap king who had been its early supplier of funds. Intertwined with that story is the concurrent story of the rise of British Parliamentary Socialism and of the early days of the Woman's Suffrage agitation.

Neilson's experiences as a candidate, as a tutor of candidates, and as a Member of Parliament are breezily told, but for all the breeziness there is a valuable recording of the condition of British party politics and of the contemporary personalities between the Liberal triumph of 1906 and the onset of the first war, that period seeing the unexpected wane of Liberalism and the clustering in Westminster of some queer and questionable characters.

Francis Neilson as candidate and Member was, to put it mildly, far from affluence. It was at this time that his personal fortunes were timely invigorated by his play *A Butterfly on the Wheel*, but his heart was shaken by the despicable conduct of his supposed friend, Hemmerde, whose gifts as a lawyer and a politician were brought to nothing by a succession of shady actions which made his name a byword for shiftiness and chicanery, and caused him to end his days in the backwaters of a provincial Recordership, though in his youth men had destined him for the highest

legal or political office. Neilson tells of Hemmerde's self-seeking conduct coldly and dispassionately; no emotional heat could have made the indictment of a false friend more damning.

In the recounting of his Parliamentary years, the autobiographer has much to say of interest of many of his great contemporaries, but of none more than of Winston Churchill, for both were young Liberal candidates and young Members in a day of unexpected opportunity for the younger men of their philosophy and party. Had it not been for the trend of world events, their careers might have continued to run *pari passu*. That was not to prove so, for reasons of principle, and in a measure of health. The first war was in its first year when Francis Neilson crossed the Atlantic again for the second American adventure.

With the first World War came a change in the destiny of nations, if not in the destiny of the human race. With the first World War there as assuredly came a change in the *psyche* of Francis Neilson. Although these two volumes are a literary continuum, the second volume has a different tone and tempo from the first. It would be false to say that the book changes, as a sonata might move in its second movement, from the major to the minor, but it would not be misleading. The very opening sentences of the second volume mark, as it were, a change of key signature.

Crossing the Atlantic in the *Rotterdam* in September 1915, I had the first real opportunity of reflecting upon the strange position in which I found myself. There had been little time in my busy life for meditation, and now I realised I should take soundings of my spiritual condition and have a good look at the self.

Those two sentences might have been written by Daniel Defoe. They warn the reader that the zestful extrovert is to show himself, if not as an introvert, certainly as one who is a master of introspection. As the self-examinations and the narrations of events and spiritual experiences continue, a line of Whitman perpetually throbs in the reader's mind.

*Camerado, this is no book,
Who touches this touches a man. . .*

It is not that Francis Neilson puts his heart on his sleeve "for daws to peck at," but that he exposes to his own most pitiless and objective gaze a soul deeply hurt by the defeat of all the causes for which, as a Libertad, he had fought and worked. In Neville Chamberlain's phrase of a quarter of a century later, it was evil men and evil things that free men were fighting, but the evil things and the evil men were not confined to one

side only of the cosmic battle, and Neilson was one of those who knew this, and one of the very few who, knowing it, were prepared to say it, at whatever risk. *How Diplomats Make War*, which went into its second edition in 1916, may not be the greatest of his written works, but to the historian it will not be the least of his monuments. It was conceived in penetration and published in courage. When, in 1917, Woodrow Wilson, re-elected as 'the man who kept us out of the war,' turned traitor to his own election slogan, the world of Francis Neilson further disintegrated.

But that was the poignancy of the public life: other tides of change were sweeping the private life. Of his first marriage and its ending, the autobiographer writes with a restraint that is almost too self-abnegatory. Of his second marriage, to the wealthy Helen Swift Morris, he writes tenderly, but with great frankness. He discerned that the family, and their world, would think him a fortune hunter, though:

riches for myself were the attraction to which I had given least thought. Most of my working life had been passed in making money or renown for others, and men who knew me well did not hesitate to say that I was a born fool. . . . Frugality was second nature to me and my (first) wife.

It was a romantic wedding, without long wooing, without *any* wooing, but with affinity. And there were four children by Helen's first marriage; at least one of whom, from the first, made no secret of his antipathy to the new marriage, if not actually to the step-father. Were the story of that happy, but in some ways difficult marriage extracted from the context of Francis Neilson's life, what a Henry James novel, of the third period, it would make! Helen Neilson by her second marriage was transported into a new world: in her previous homes, the dominating—perhaps almost the sole interest—had been business, business, business, morning noon and night. The cultural and intellectual expansion which the new marriage inaugurated was enormous. She was "a beautiful enigma" with wonderful talents and a remarkable mind, and these pages both portray and celebrate her. The partnership was not an untroubled idyll—nothing in Francis Neilson's battling life could ever be that—but it was still idyllic.

Neilson's Career in Journalism and Letters

FROM THAT MARRIAGE were to flow enterprises of great pith and moment—the founding of *The Freeman*, that great crusading journal, an exploration of post-war, shell-shattered Europe, with Neilson now an American citizen; visits to all manner of celebrities and significant persons (by no

means always the same thing) including, unexpectedly, Marie Corelli; the infusion of energy into the Union of Democratic Control. Neilson in the between-war years moved about America and Europe as a Libertad unleashed.

His narration of that part of his odyssey is crowded with pictures of persons and places, no less than with expositions of the political and cultural causes for which he so unrestingly fought. There came a new link with Liverpool. The boy truant who had roamed about the dockside had become the man of vision and power deeply interested in the building of the Cathedral and the work of Professor Garstang and the University. Music and the drama in these years were not waning interests, but perpetual delights: even the distractions of the depression years, and the development of Neilson's financial flare, did not lure him from those literary and creative devotions which made so much of his life glorious to him, and helpful to those about him. Behind all the physical and mental activities the awkwardnesses of family relationships—the step-father, step-children relationship in particular did not diminish. In dealing frankly with them, Francis Neilson seems at times to change the mood and mode of the later Henry James to that of a less despairing Dostoevsky: there is understanding and compassion and pity that does not degenerate into self pity. The last, long illness and the death of his “beautiful enigma” are tenderly, but not tragically told. Helen had gone from her “dearest Neil.”

Of the effect upon Francis Neilson of the years that mounted to the second World War, and of that insensate conflict, his other books have amply told—notably *The Makers of War*. The autobiography keeps those years in perhaps a too narrow perspective, which it will be for a subsequent biographer to enlarge and correct. The compensation is that this truly monumental work ends with a number of chapters discussing a wealth of interests, ranging from modes of writing to changing social trends, from political coteries to encounters with the authentic great, from ways of life and thought to the consolations of a vigorous old age—though it is the vigour and not the age which illuminates all of these.

What has Francis Neilson given to us? The picture of an exceptional personality, certainly. The unfolding panorama of humanity over nearly a century, equally certainly. But he has given much more. Here, were one to contemplate abstracts, is an arsenal of anecdote and epigram, a store of little philosophic essays; a wealth of *obiter dicta* on all that rightly interests a wide-ranging, active mind; a summing-up of man's relationship

to his fellows, and to the Unknown and the half-known on which all literate men must perpetually ponder.

Francis Neilson calls himself a rebel: he has always been, and remains, a rebel. But his is a revolt, not against sound established order, but against narrowness, abuses, restraints and restrictions. This reviewer has called him a Libertad: Whitman himself would not have denied him the appellation. But it is more than his frenetic love of liberty which links him with Whitman, for they share, too, the same universality.

If Whitman would have welcomed his comradeship, Thoreau—how different a man!—and Henry Adams would not have disdained his fellowship. He was a high-hearted adventurer in his setting out: he is the high-hearted adventurer in his setting down. His book is the measure of the man. There can be no better tribute than that to its vitality, its vibrancy, its provocation, its warm humanity. It is the Major Testament of Frank Neilson.

London

Book Notes

Industrial Management in the U.S.S.R. By A. Arakelian. Trans. by Ellsworth L. Raymond. Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1950, 168 pp., \$3.

An excellent translation of one of the important Russian sources on the subject, published in Moscow in 1947.

The Economics of Agriculture. By R. L. Cohen. New York 19: Pitman, 1950, 216 pp., index, \$1.75.

An application of economic analysis to key problems of agriculture.

The Ruling Class in Italy. By Vilfredo Pareto. New York 11: S. F. Vanni, 1950, 143 pp., \$3.50.

One paper in English and three in French which delineate Pareto's concept of the ruling class.