

Crusader for Justice:

A Tabloid Biography of Francis Neilson

By WILL LISSNER

I

THE LATE JOHN ARCHER of England was one of several writers who have essayed biographical sketches of Dr. Francis Neilson. He recounted that Neilson had been a laborer, actor, journalist, dramatist, novelist, lecturer, politician and producer. And then he asked, "Who has had a more interesting career?" So far as a modern figure is concerned, I do not believe Archer's challenge can be met. That was thirty years ago, three decades in which his subject undertook yet more varied activities. On that account, his question has even more point today.

However, there are three things wrong with Archer's catalogue. For one thing, it omits several important fields in which Francis Neilson has spent his energies. Actor, producer, journalist and politician he has been; but he has also been poet, essayist, patron in art and science and promoter of noble causes. For another, it lumps the fields in which he met with indifferent success, or none at all, with those in which he excelled. Neilson was hardly a paragon as a laborer either when he worked on the docks, dug the soil of Central Park, or clerked in a store; he worked with his hands only so that he might support himself while he was studying, cultivating his mind. As he himself has said, he worked only so long as it was necessary to get funds for his barest needs.

As an actor he attained only minor rôles; he had extraordinary talent for the theatre, but not for this branch of it. The study and practice he gave to acting were really only an apprenticeship for playwriting, in which he reached the top rank, and for stage direction, the task at which he earned a niche in theatrical history at the Duke of York's Theatre and at the Royal Opera in Covent Garden. His novels have high entertainment value and were useful in providing him with funds when he needed income. But I know of only one (disappointingly entitled "The Garden of Dr. Persuasion") that I would expect to outlive him, and until the present even this one has been appreciated by only a few critics of rare discernment. As a poet, the best one might say (on the basis of the published work, a necessary qualification, as I believe the great bulk is unpublished) is that he has written competent verse. Yet here again, it was his keen appreci-

ation of poetry and his effort to cultivate the writing of it that help to account, I think, for the original style he developed as an essayist. It was this style, along with the fecundity of his mind and the wide range of his scholarship, that helped to place him among the foremost essayists of his time.

And so it was with politics. A politician is not judged, according to current standards, by his influence upon the people for whom he speaks and acts. If he were, we would hardly approve Neilson's decision to quit politics. For after the Hyde Division of Cheshire had twice returned him to Parliament, it was said of him that "today there is no man, not even Lloyd George, who is known so well to the masses of people in England and Scotland and Wales." By the world's standards Neilson was an abysmal failure as a politician. Keen for the fight but anxious to avoid office, he chose for his first two contests the Newport Division of Shropshire, an old Tory seat considered to be a forlorn hope. Five years after he had entered the House of Commons in January, 1910, when, as the parliamentary head of the Radical bloc and as the leader of the Young Liberals, he had gained an enviable position in his country's political life, he was acknowledged by T. P. O'Connor and a host of others to be the outstanding worker of his time for democracy. Yet he threw it all over—office, position, even country itself—rather than compromise his principles. In his own view, and in that of any realistic critic of politics, he was an utter failure as a politician; he loathed the occupation. Yet because he was, he, more than almost any other man in his party at the time—his older colleagues, John Morley and Henry Campbell-Bannerman, of course, are the chief exceptions—earned the accolade of statesmen.

But what is more objectionable about summarizing Neilson's career by listing the fields in which he has worked is that it gives the impression that he was a versatile genius who scattered his energies in any field that struck the fancy of the moment. This is not so. The impression is wholly false. For if one studies his activities with care and insight, one sees at once that they are of a piece; they form a consistent pattern. The stage, the platform, the legislative hall, the periodical journal, the book—all these were but media through which he could reach the people with an integrated program by which they might realize their own highest capacities. Actor, poet, politician! Journalist, producer, essayist! The very detail of the catalogue, truthful though it is, obscures the real man. It is a simple thing that Neilson is—and has been all his mature life—a cultural leader among the English-speaking people. Archer had the clue to this when he reported

that Neilson, "the greatest platform speaker in England," reached "hundreds of thousands of the workers" of Britain "with his pamphlets," but he seems not to have realized the significance of these facts. Precisely because it was Neilson's vocation to serve as a cultural leader, in his personality were fused the man of letters and the man of action.

What I shall try to do in this brief essay on the career of Dr. Neilson is set out the pattern into which his activities have fallen. In this way, perhaps, I can contribute more toward the understanding of the man than by any mere exhaustive collection of the facts about him, or by any recital of the successes and honors that have come to him.

II

FRANCIS NEILSON was born in Birkenhead, across the River Mersey from Liverpool, in 1867. He came of an ancient English family and an old Scottish family. On one side he was a Butters, a family that lived in England, as Neilson put it, before "the days of the Norman land-grabbers"; the name is found among others familiar in Saxon times in the Domesday Book of William the Conqueror. An ancestor on this side was associated in the publication of the first modern newspaper.¹ On the other side he came of the same stock as David Hume and William Ewart Gladstone; this branch lately had been settled in Dundee.

He was the eldest of nine children, born into a household where both parents had to work, leaving little time for home life except on Sundays. As a small child he went to live, for a time, with his grandparents in Wellington, in Shropshire. The old folks' cottage was in the valley of the Wrekin, a mountain about which the Shropshire folk had woven hoary legends. The child imagined (with the older folk of Shropshire) that strange beings inhabited the mountain and that a giant had formed it by taking spoonfuls of earth and dropping them on the site one at a time. In that environment he gained early a love for the countryside where, as A. E. Housman sang,

In farm and field through all the shire
The eye beholds the heart's desire.

His grandfather initiated him into the lore of the common folk. One of the old man's sayings remained with Neilson all his life: "Larning's for the

¹ His father's name was Butters, his mother's Neilson. When he went on the stage he had his name changed legally from Butters to Neilson. He was too well known by his stage name when he entered politics to revert to his family name. This, I believe, is the explanation of the stage name: When he entered the theatre there was a rather well known actor of established reputation by the stage name of Frank Butters so, following theatrical custom, Neilson had to adopt his mother's name to avoid confusion.

rich; *nous* (native wit) is for the poor." The grandfather instilled in him a love for gardening and flowers that was to be a lifelong interest; the influence is seen clearly in the novel Neilson wrote in his mid-seventies, "Dr. Persuasion."² One of the child's favorite hobbies, a sport to which the grandsire had introduced him, was to go out into the country bird-nesting, or looking for flowers, berries or odd plants. That, as Housman tells us, was an integral part of Shropshire life:

The boys are up the woods with day
To fetch the daffodils away,
And home at noonday from the hills
They bring no dearth of daffodils.

Afield for palms the girls repair,
And sure enough the palms are there,
And each will find by hedge or pond
Her waving silver-tufted wand.

This love of nature and the out-of-doors was a formative influence as well as an essential part of his education. It developed in him the habit of keen observation from which he was to learn much. And more, it imbued him with the habit of reflection. These are graces that nature's temple bestows upon its devotees. The Shropshire poet has pictured its attractions:

Once in the wind of morning
I ranged the thymy wold;
The world-wide air was azure
And all the brooks ran gold.

There through the dews beside me
Behold a youth that trod,
With feathered cap on forehead,
And poised a golden rod. . . .

Oh whence, I asked, and whither?
He smiled and would not say,
And looked at me and beckoned
And laughed and led the way.

This Shropshire experience must be accounted the first important stage of his development. It was his introduction to the world of beauty, which he recreated in eloquence upon the platform, in setting and imagery upon the stage, in image and allusion upon the printed page. The impact it made

² This book, published in 1942, is the story of a practical mystic who by his ministrations changed the course of life in an English village. Neilson wrote it to demonstrate the usefulness of mystical religion in everyday life.

upon the personality of the boy can be seen in Neilson's yet unpublished "Reminiscences." The section that deals with Shropshire is another boyhood idyl that, if published, may rank with Clemens's and Tarkington's.

Schooldays began for him in Wellington and were continued in Liverpool. His formal schooling was not very successful; he frequently played truant. The truth was that he hated school. He would rather go to the race course to watch the horses being trained or paced,³ or to a high hill to lie on his back and watch the clouds drift by, or to almost anywhere else out-of-doors than sit in a stuffy classroom. Two teachers, however, made an impression on him, Sir John Bayley in Wellington and James Seward at the Liverpool Institute, Neilson's secondary school. Seward, a teacher of history and composition, read to the class Carlyle's "Sartor Resartus" and "Past and Present." Later, when the centenary edition of Carlyle's works was published, Neilson read each volume as it appeared while traveling on the underground to work at the Royal Opera. Seward inspired the boy to study for himself and to seek to learn to write.

Neilson's boyhood schooling was not without influence on the man; but it was a minor influence. Formally, at any rate, it came to an end at 14, when he was apprenticed to a firm of engineers for five years; the total pay stipulated was £100. Neilson was unsuccessful in the engineering trade for it did not capture his interest.

A fact of greater import is that while he played truant from the classroom, he did not largely give up his time to self-indulgence. He spent much time at the docks in Liverpool and Birkenhead, talking to the sailors. Since the eighteenth century the port had been given up largely to the West Indian and the American trade, but its ships roamed the seven seas. From the sailormen the boy learned of foreign ports and foreign ways. Their tales taught him the variety of cargoes, the things of which they were made, and the things into which, in the course of further exchange and production, they would be turned. It was a practical course in geography, physical and human, in economics and other fields of knowledge, and the student who sat on a pile of rope listening to the world traveler spinning his yarn was an apt, sensitive and impressionable one. Besides the docks, he roamed the streets, and these, like the alleys of any metropolis, had their lore to contribute to him. He haunted the Liverpool Exchange and he learned more of its functioning at first hand than he might have gained from a textbook.

But he had early acquired a love for books, with an especial fondness

³ Until the second world war, he bred racehorses at his stud in England. One, Foletta, won the Princess Mary Stakes in 1938 and the Britannia Stakes in 1939.

for illustrated books. On rainy days he would pore over the pictures in a "History of England" or a "History of the Franco-Prussian War." On his walks he discovered the Liverpool free library, museum and gallery of arts, and here he was a frequent visitor. The library established by Sir William Brown and the gallery erected by Sir Andrew Walker broadened his knowledge from the practical to the aesthetic arts. He also discovered the theatre and, naturally, the Shakespearean theatre. As often as he could manage it he would buy a ticket to the gallery to see the plays performed. Here one of the vehicles in which he was to express himself made its impact. Similarly he made the acquaintance of music. The town was noted for its triennial music festivals, which its principal building, St. George's Hall, was erected to accommodate. As a youth Neilson sang in the choir of the Presbyterian church and took lessons on the organ there.

The information that he gathered for himself in this way was always a source of wonder to his family. "Where does the boy get his knowledge?" his mother often would remark. This questing for knowledge on his own must be set down as one of the large influences of his early life. But it was of inferior importance, as a formative influence, to his home environment. Neilson is very largely a product of his family. His father, an uneducated man, learned to read and write as an adult. Despite his late start, or perhaps because of it, he acquired a taste for the best in literature. He took pride in the library he gathered, from the second hand book stalls, at great sacrifice. Dickens, Thackeray and Trollope were in it, along with Butler's "Analogy of Religion" and Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress." Wordsworth, Milton, Shelley and Keats sang in its pages. Uneducated though he had been, the father was a cultured man, a Liberal of the old school. His library had practically all the speeches and pamphlets of Cobden and Bright that were the product of the campaigns for the repeal of the corn laws, the campaigns that helped to end the "Hungry Forties." The father gathered around him weekly men of similar cultivation and they debated and discussed the great questions of the day in ideas, in politics and economics. The group was catholic in its interests; Rationalists and their opponents, land reformers and capital reformers, all were present. Good Liberals, doubtless, predominated. Here Neilson was steeped in the history of Liberalism and in the Radical tradition, for he, like the other children, was permitted to listen, though they could not be suffered to take part.

But the father influenced the boy in other ways. He required the Bible to be read to the family each Sunday night, and to the eldest son fell the rôle of lector. Francis was asked to read the assigned chapter many times

during the week so that he might repeat it from memory on Sunday. Several of the Psalms, chapters from Isaiah and parables from the New Testament stuck to his memory. The father also encouraged the boy to read Shakespeare. Discovering that the young truant was frequenting the Shakespearean theatre, he subscribed for the Knight edition of the poet's plays. For ten years the books were Francis's constant companions at home and the boy frequently was asked, at a family gathering, to give a reading from them. Once when he was 16 he decided to give the first act of "Hamlet" at a party his parents planned. For eight months he rehearsed his brothers, sisters and playmates in their rôles, he himself undertaking the title rôle. Each of the players made his own costume (some of the draperies of Francis's mother costumed Ophelia); the troupe built the scenery. The audience was duly appreciative and indulgent.

Besides his father and his father's friends, Neilson was considerably influenced by his uncle, George Neilson, a learned Constitutional Radical. The latter knew Latin and history, and had steeped himself in Matthew Arnold. Francis was permitted to join the circle of his Uncle George's three children when his uncle shared with the younger members of the family the works that had aroused his interest. Through the uncle the boy became acquainted with John Stuart Mill. George Neilson read aloud to the children from the "Political Economy" and the "Essay on Liberty." Passages from Green's "Short History of the English People," Ruskin's "Stones of Venice" and Macaulay's "Essays" were etched by the uncle on the boy's memory. The readings inspired the boy to study the classics of English literature. These home influences we must account the third and most important stage of Neilson's development. From the fields of Shropshire he harvested a love of beauty. On the docks and streets of Liverpool he acquired urbanity and self-reliance. But in his home he was introduced to the cultural heritage of the English-speaking people, to their hopes and aspirations. Here he acquired the rudiments of the social philosophy that was to be the foundation of his social outlook throughout his lifetime, a social philosophy that was to dictate the channels in which he was to direct his energies and interests. In the English Bible, in Shakespeare, in Butler, Ruskin and Macaulay he learned to think and speak in simple English, in direct, clear and forceful language enriched by simile and analogy drawn from the teeming life around him. Francis Neilson, the writer, learned the bases of his craft in his father's parlor.

III

THE ENGINEERING FIRM to which Francis Neilson had been apprenticed offered him, as I have indicated, no hope for a career. His interests led in

other directions. When he was 18 he decided to try his luck in the United States. He sailed for New York on the *Scythia* as a third class passenger and was seasick all the way over. A friend awaited him, a young Englishman who shared a small flat with two other young men on Forty-Eighth Street. Neilson took a hansom cab to the address and it cost him ten dollars, almost the last cent he had with him; the driver had taken him in circles to the place.

He had to go to work at once. He found a job in Washington Market where he also was able to sleep. It was a clerkship; when the truckmen came in, starting at midnight, he checked in the produce they delivered. Then he had to record sales and shipments. The hours were long, leaving him little time for himself. He took another job on the docks on West Street. The longshore employment lasted only two days, however. Then he was hit on the head as a "scab." When he woke up in the hospital he was told that if he wanted to work on the docks he would have to pay the fee and join the union.

Instead he went to work as a common laborer, helping with pick and shovel in the reconstruction of Central Park. Thirty-five years later, and again sixty years later, he was to occupy an apartment decorated with *objets d'art* which overlooked the section of the park in which he had worked. It was typical of him that, as he looked from the window and enjoyed the beauty of the lower end of the park, he would tell his friends proudly—and truthfully—"I helped to build that." But the winter of 1885-86 was a hard one for him as he knocked about from job to job. The period was not a wasted one; he was learning to fend for himself in a hard school. Beyond that, however, his development did not proceed until the summer of 1887, when he got a job as a clerk with the Waggoner Palace Car Company in the yards at Forty-Second Street. Here, as an employee of the predecessor of the Pullman Company, it was his task to check in and out the linen used by the porters.

In the course of his work he became acquainted with a man named Johnson, a Negro of powerful physique who at 32 had graduated as a doctor of medicine and had qualified fully as a lawyer—yet, because of his color, was working as a Pullman porter. Johnson brought home to him what it meant to be a member of an underprivileged group, the unskilled and semi-skilled group of white laborers to which Neilson belonged, or the group barred from better occupations regardless of skill or training because of racial discrimination, to which Johnson belonged. Explaining his occupation, Johnson once remarked bitterly, "The white folks treat us like dirt, but

they've no time to waste in cleaning up their own filth." And again, "Colored men may get as good an education as any white man in this country, but when it comes to trying their hand at making a practice in one of the professions for which they are qualified, they soon find it is better to empty the slops of the white folks." Neilson later was to come to understand why groups, with their rights stolen from them by other groups, had become underprivileged; he was to understand the economic and social bases of group discrimination. Through all his lifetime, he was never to forget Johnson's bitter recriminations—which hurt precisely because they were true—against his kind. This reinforced the family influences that dedicated him to be a lifelong crusader for justice for man living in society.

It was the porter who had been educated beyond his opportunities who woke Neilson up to the fact that he was wasting his time merely earning his living, that if he were to get anywhere in life he would have to buckle down to study and learn to excel in a field that would attract his interests. The following winter Neilson, now 20, went to Boston. Part of the time he clerked in a dry goods store. Part of the time he was out of work, and it was the coldest winter in the memory of residents. When his stomach was growling for want of food he wondered why life was so hard, work so scarce and a modicum of comfort so rarely to be obtained even by those willing and able to labor for it. This was the beginning of his higher education in social reconstruction, for he started in earnest to seek the answer to his question. He began to attend all the free lectures he could find, particularly when they were held indoors, where he could keep warm. He spent the free time that unemployment afforded him in the Boylston Street Library, reading every work it contained on socialism. It proved no answer to his problem.

Before he left Boston and returned to New York, Neilson began trying his hand at writing. This was one of the turning points of his life, but it is doubtful if he recognized it as such. For New York, at first, was no more hospitable to him than Boston had been. He was in and out of jobs. For a while he worked at Stern Brothers department store, then located at Twenty-Third Street. He held many another job with no future and offering very little pay. But he was still going to lectures as often as he could, and with all the money he could spare he was buying and reading avidly second-hand books. He was able to live on five dollars a week and he worked only long enough to assure himself this pittance. What confirmed him in his quest for a self-acquired education was an incident at a lecture at Cooper Union. The speaker had referred to Henry George, and

in the question period Neilson sought more information about the social philosopher. By way of answer, the speaker took out of his pocket a paper covered copy of "Progress and Poverty" and gave it to him. The book, with its many references to great works of the past, revived his interest in the classics.

At the close of this period of drifting, Neilson found work on the stage as a "super"; as usual in such a job, he carried a spear or he helped to make up crowds. Now he was finding himself. He was engaged at last in work that gave him satisfaction, if little money; he did not need much money. It left his days free and in the daytime he frequented the Astor Library, the Metropolitan Museum and the Cooper Institute. Pictures, music and books consoled him in his poverty. At the library he read voraciously in the classics, the "Iliad," the "Odyssey," Pindar, Hesiod, the dramatists, Plato, Thucydides, Herodotus, Livy—all that had been translated. His later interest in archaeology had its beginning at this time.

IV

AN AMBITIOUS NOVICE at writing and acting, Francis Neilson made the acquaintance of men who made it a point to help the neophyte. One was Dion Boucicault, who encouraged him to try for supporting rôles and gave him many a pointer on handling them. Another was James Gibbons Huneker, the essayist and music critic, who was then on *The Musical Courier* and occasionally used squibs from Neilson in his column. Huneker gave the youth advice on improving his writing and encouraged him to submit articles and verse to the newspapers, particularly the old *Recorder*, and the magazines. Occasionally now Neilson had an article published in *The Dramatic Mirror*, and once in a while a newspaper would publish a verse or a story of his.

Times still were hard with him, though he was making his way. He spent one summer when he was very hard up with the Forepaugh, Barnum and Bailey Circus, playing, in pantomime, the rôle of Sardanapalus in "The Fall of Nineveh." By now he was a keen student of dramatic technique and a rebel against the prevailing schools of acting and stage management. Emboldened by the increasing acceptance of his freelance writings, he undertook to do a series of articles for *The Theatre* magazine in which he set forth his criticisms of the New York stage and his own theories of acting and stage management. The series was particularly critical of the work of Dion Boucicault, the veteran dramatist, who was then running a school of dramatic art at the Madison Square Theatre. Boucicault was

annoyed by the criticism. Through a fellow-boarder in Neilson's rooming house, Neilson and Boucicault were brought together.

Boucicault offered to take him on as a free pupil. "Instead of taking bread out of my mouth by abusing my methods of teaching," the dramatist said, "let me try to teach you to act, and if you have sense enough to learn I'll make a player of you." Neilson accepted and remained with Boucicault until the latter died in 1890. Though he never became a partisan of Boucicault's methods, he "learned more from him than from anyone." He said later, "I owe him everything."

It was Boucicault, incidentally, who discovered precisely where Neilson's talent for the theatre lay. After working with the youth for some time, Boucicault advised him to give up attempting to become an actor. "You would do well as a stage manager," he said. "You should devote yourself to that." But for the time being, the old playwright's advice was lost against his pupil's dogged determination. Trouping around the states, Neilson played many parts, in one-night stands and extended engagements. Tall and handsome, with a striking presence, he was cast chiefly in juvenile rôles—which he loathed—or in the heavy lead. What he was anxious to get were 'character' parts; luckily for him, they were refused him.

After Boucicault was laid to rest in the Little Church Around the Corner, Neilson joined the company of William Gillette. His theatrical fortunes were now rapidly ascendant. He became acquainted with Victor Herbert, an association which was to start him on his career in playwriting and in music. For Victor Herbert's music he wrote the libretto for a comic opera, "La Vivandière." The work was stillborn. But the next on which they collaborated, "Prince Ananias," written for the Bostonians, a well known musical society of that time, turned out to be a smash hit when, two years later, in 1894, it was produced at the Broadway Theatre. A road company toured the country with it in 1895. Through Victor Herbert, in 1891, he met Anton Seidl, the conductor. Seidl adopted Neilson as his protégé and treated him as a son. Seidl directed his studies in music and encouraged him to make new prompt books for all the "Ring" operas of Wagner, for "Tristan and Isolde" and for "Die Meistersinger."

Chance, meanwhile, gave him his first opportunity as a stage manager, fulfilling Boucicault's prediction. Gillette asked him to assist in producing the play "Ninety Days." It was a failure, but Neilson's work in it attracted the notice of Charles Frohman. Frohman engaged Neilson in 1892 to assist Roberts, his stage manager, in producing "The Sporting Dutchess." The assistant stage manager played three or four small parts and was understudy

for two of the leading rôles. It was the beginning of an extended association with Daniel and Charles Frohman for he was sent to London with "The Sporting Dutchess" company as stage manager and actor. When he came back to New York Charles Frohman kept him on as stage manager and actor—not until 1898 was he to drop acting.

Seidl had Neilson at the Philharmonic or the Metropolitan whenever he was conducting a symphony or an opera. Through Seidl Neilson met Anton Dvořák, the Czech composer, who had come to New York in 1892 to head the National Conservatory of Music. Dvořák was looking for material about the North American Indians, about whom he hoped to write a cantata. Neilson was commissioned by the pair to do a libretto. He turned out the rough draft of "Manabozo," but he found so much material that he recommended to Dvořák that they tackle a full length opera. But Dvořák, who had become interested in the Negro melodies, did not want to undertake such a large work; before he returned to Europe in 1895 he had immortalized the folk music of the American Negro in the themes of the "New World Symphony."

Seidl had been eager to do an opera. Dvořák had suggested that he do a cantata on the "Hiawatha" theme but the idea did not interest Seidl. From Dvořák Neilson brought his libretto to Seidl, and the latter at once began writing the music for it. Neilson and Seidl agreed to do a trilogy on the sagas of the Indians, of which "Manabozo" was to be the first part. The three acts of the part took several years to write; Neilson completed them only four months before Seidl died, at 47, in 1898. Seidl, meanwhile, had been able to finish the music for only two of the acts; not until thirty years later was the music completed, with William Lester of Chicago taking up Seidl's task. The libretto was published in England in 1899 but it sold only 300 copies. It remains to be seen whether time will justify Seidl's faith in it.

In 1897 Neilson had a chance to return to England. William Gillette had written "Secret Service," one of his most memorable plays, and Charles Frohman wanted Neilson to take an American company in the drama to London as stage manager. Seidl urged him to accept and seek to make his way on the London stage. Seidl had contracted to go each Spring to London to conduct the Royal Opera. Neilson yielded to Seidl's persuasion. The play opened at the Adelphi in May, with the stage manager in the rôle of Lieutenant Maxwell, and was an outstanding success. Transferred to the Comedy Theatre for a time, it went back to the Adelphi and

in August an English company headed by William Terriss carried on the run.

Before Neilson left New York Seidl had received an invitation from Cosima Wagner to return to Bayreuth to conduct "Parsifal." They agreed to meet there if at all possible. The festival was more than a musical occasion; it was a gathering place for the intellectuals of Europe and Seidl and Neilson met many of them. One party in Seidl's honor attracted fourteen men to the Reichstadler and among them were Beyerlein, George Moore (whom Neilson was to know intimately later in London), Herman Klein, Schultz-Curtius and Massingham. They discussed Europe and internationalism. Nothing came of it. A more eventful meeting was between Neilson and Queen Alexandra and Lady de Grey. The two women were the moving spirits of the Royal Opera in London which, Archer says, "was an ancient institution with an old stage, battered scenery, tattered dresses and scarcely any facilities for doing opera on a modern scale." Neilson, with his iconoclastic ideas, made an impression on the opera devotees.

Returning to London, he became Charles Frohman's representative there. While waiting for Frohman's activities to begin, he staged the opera, "Rip Van Winkle," for William Boosey at Her Majesty's Theatre. Beginning in February, 1898, Frohman took over the Duke of York's Theatre. Neilson produced a succession of plays for him, including "The Adventure of Lady Ursula," "The Cowboy and the Lady," "An American Citizen," "The Christian," "Miss Hobbs," "Madame Butterfly" and "The Lackey's Carnival." At the Criterion he directed "The Masked Ball" and "My Daughter-in-Law" and at the Vaudeville "Self and Lady." Meanwhile he had another go at opera, staging "Tristan and Isolde" for the Carl Rosa Opera Company. Sometimes he rehearsed three plays at one time.

What Neilson did in "Rip Van Winkle" and "Tristan" was not lost on Queen Alexandra and Lady de Grey. Before the season of 1900 they prevailed on the directors of the Royal Opera at Covent Garden Theatre to invite Neilson to go there, put in a new stage, reorganize the whole institution and do opera on as big a scale as it had been done anywhere on the continent. As *The Era* of London reported, Covent Garden "structurally" underwent "many alterations" when Neilson took over.

He had continued to write short stories and short plays. While busy with his first season at the Royal Opera, he completed his first novel, "Madame Bohemia,"⁴ and it was published at the height of the season. Three Londoners took up in tutoring him for the writing craft where

⁴ This novel received exceptionally fine notices for a first effort.

Huneker had left off. They were George Douglas Brown, the novelist, who was on *The Illustrated London News*; David Meldrum of *Blackwood's Magazine* and James Symonds. Having made his way on the theatrical ladder to the top rung, Neilson was beginning at the bottom to learn the art of the essayist. In the latter field he was not to achieve his ambitions until twenty years later. His adventure in the theatre reached a quicker climax. But then, politics had not intervened.

V

DURING THE BOER WAR Neilson's interest in politics was aroused. His home in the pre-Raphaelite village of Bedford Park was a center for a group of men on the ascendant in journalism, music, literature and politics. It became the battle ground of many of the Radicals of the time. Brown, who was writing a Life of Kruger, asked Neilson's help in ferreting out the diplomatic documents. Neilson, though he was working twelve or fourteen hours a day directing companies, reading plays, writing and giving lectures, found time to give it. The activity enlisted him in a lifelong fight against imperialism.

What set him off as a politician, however, was Sir Michael Hicks-Beach's budget in 1902, placing duties on wheat. Neilson began speaking on land value taxation, which had been adopted into the Liberal platform a few years before, and on free trade, then still the main Liberal plank.

After he had been four seasons at Covent Garden and had established an international reputation for his stage direction there, Lord de Grey, husband of his sponsor, suggested that he assist in the reorganization of the Liberal party. The great Liberal revival was then on the horizon. Neilson threw himself wholeheartedly into the task. Henry Campbell-Bannerman was proclaiming that "our policy is the policy of freedom in all things which affect the lives of the people." Neilson became the Liberal candidate in his grandfather's district, the Newport Division of Shropshire—a safe Tory seat, even in a landslide. Free from the burden of office, he could campaign up and down the country for the other candidates. He supported himself, meanwhile, by his pen and by lecturing.

In these activities he demonstrated his ability as an organizer, pulling together the loose threads of a campaign as if it were a play. But he was no party hack. He fought on the basis of principle. An incident in 1906, after the Taft-Vale decision making labor union funds amenable to seizure by the State, is illustrative. He was sent up to the West Riding of York-

shire to help the candidate. The miners told him if his man was not prepared to vote to reverse the decision, he had better not waste his time. Neilson repeated the demand to the candidate. "What shall I do?" appealed the man. "Do?" Neilson replied. "Do whatever your conscience tells you to do. I shan't tell you how to pledge yourself." The candidate had no stomach for that kind of politics. He rang up party headquarters in London and Herbert Gladstone advised him to make the pledge. He did, and was elected. The decision was reversed by the new Parliament.

In the general election of 1906 Liberalism swept the polls and was at the beginning of its last great bid for power. Campbell-Bannerman captured the imagination of the people with his watchword: "Let us colonize our own country; let us make our country more a treasure house of the people and less of a pleasure ground for the rich." In the general election, as in the by-election of 1908, Neilson contested the safe Tory seat.⁵ By now he was the leader of the young Liberals.⁶ Over the opposition of Gladstone and the older leaders of the party, he and his associates were determined to do battle with the Fabian Socialists on the basis of a Radical program. From their labors in stumping up and down the country, making speeches, giving lectures and taking part in debates,⁷ came, beginning in 1907, the Land Values Campaign, which culminated in Lloyd George's land values budget of 1909. Lloyd George asked a question on everyone's mind: "Who gave the land of Great Britain as a perquisite for the few, and made the rest of us aliens in the land of our birth?" When the House of Lords intervened to protect land monopoly, the Liberals went to the country.

In the resulting general election, Neilson stood for the Hyde Division of

⁵ He very nearly won, however. Ashley Mitchell, the distinguished British liberal leader, reports that "Neilson put the landed aristocracy into a positive panic when he almost won an election in one of their rural areas of Shropshire." Cf. his brief memorandum, "Francis Neilson, a Great Liberal," of Nov. 22, 1946, which I have deposited with the Neilson papers.

⁶ Ashley Mitchell says that the huge majority in 1906 "was largely due to the tireless propaganda of a band of stalwarts of whom Francis Neilson was a shining star." Cf. his memorandum.

⁷ For the flavor of the debates, see the transcripts of two of them in pamphlets in the Neilson papers: Willie Dyson and Francis Neilson, "Tariff Reform and Employment," Annan, Scotland, Newbie Liberal Committee, 1909; Francis Neilson and L. S. Amery, "The Taxation of Land Values versus Tariff Reform," Shrewsbury, England, Livesey Ltd., 1909.

At this time he helped to organize the Brotherhood Movement. Francis Neilson gives this account of it: "This grew out of the Pleasant Sunday Afternoon meetings, which were organized by men attending the Nonconformist Chapels. They determined to relieve the clergy of the trouble of discussing social problems from the pulpit, and thus enable them to devote their sermons to things of the spirit." The order of the meetings was: the Lord's Prayer, a reading from the Bible, three hymns, a speech upon any subject except party politics, and a benediction. The service lasted only an hour."

Cheshire, the county in which he was born, and won. As the representative of the industrial city, he entered the House of Commons in January, 1910, and remained in it until his retirement from politics in 1915. In the House he headed the Land Values Bloc and from 1912 to 1915 he served as president of the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values. Philip Snowden has charged publicly that the land reform policy failed of adoption because Lloyd George betrayed it. Neilson's explanation is that the party betrayed itself by giving itself up to superficial reforms; Lloyd George, he says, "proved incompetent." Personally, I find Snowden's charge plausible. But Neilson's statement that the great Liberal revival was crushed, after the Agadir crisis of 1911, by imperialism is beyond cavil. When Asquith, Grey and Haldane formed a war party, it was the end of the possibilities of social reform,

As Richard Cobden had done earlier, Neilson threw himself into the fight against imperialism. But the odds were too great. The declaration of war in 1914 ended the fight. Then it was that he wrote his first book to become celebrated, "How Diplomats Make War." In a white heat of indignation, he dictated it in six weeks to his daughter, Marion, who served as his secretary. He was determined to expose the machinations of the war-makers. At first the publishers spurned it. It was brought out anonymously in the United States in 1915 and went through a succession of printings and translations. It was credited with initiating the literature of the Great Disillusionment. Neilson, meanwhile, resigned his seat in Parliament, retired from his position in his party, and quitted England for the United States, where he foreswore his allegiance to the Crown and became an American citizen. He was through with politics.

VI

THE EXTRAORDINARY SUCCESS of "How Diplomats Make War" encouraged him to devote himself thereafter to a literary career. At first, to recoup his fortunes, he went on a lecture tour. Playing the Chatauqua circuit was no new experience for him; in 1912 he had traveled 7,600 miles to deliver thirty-six speeches in twenty-nine days. Now, however, his health was broken by his labors in Parliament.

His novel, "A Strong Man's House," was published in 1916. Luckily for him, for he needed the money, it was well received. It was the story of the disillusionment of a munitions manufacturer who believed that the way to prevent war was to prepare for it.

But soon he was enbroiled in journalism again. From 1906 until 1908 he had got out *The Democratic Monthly* in England and it had proved a powerful medium for disseminating his ideas. Perhaps with that experience in mind, but knowing, anyhow, that he was eager to take up the cudgels again for his philosophy, his second wife, the former Helen Swift Morris, was easy prey when Albert Jay Nock sought to persuade her to establish a weekly in New York. Mrs. Neilson and Nock overcame Neilson's misgivings and *The Freeman* was founded as a journal of opinion and a literary paper combined. From 1920 to 1924 Neilson was associated with Nock in the editorship and they were assisted by a remarkably able staff. It included Ben Huebsch, Suzanne LaFollette, Van Wyck Brooks, Geroid Tanquary Robinson and Walter Fuller. It fought gallantly for lost causes and it established new standards of periodical journalism.

Malcolm Cowley has lately written grudgingly of *The Freeman* as having been dedicated to "good prose and the Single Tax." Good prose, prose as good as Addison ever achieved, indeed was its preoccupation. But this is a superficial judgment. Its dedications were to Native Radicalism in politics and public affairs, the best in the world's literature and cosmopolitanism and urbanity in the approach to the arts. It was a civilizing influence, as powerful an antidote to American provincialism and cultural isolationism in the twenties as Huneker's essays had been after the turn of the century. Virtually every important writer here and abroad contributed to it. It died because at best it attracted only 7,000 subscribers (could the founders have hoped for more?), too few to support an undertaking operating on so grand a scale. It was a period, moreover, when literary magazines were in a decline that has persisted until this day and when the literary supplements of newspapers were supplanting them as advertising media; a period when commercialism was engulfing American publishing.

What *The Freeman* demonstrated was that the English do not have a monopoly of the ability to turn out memorable reviews, although one would think that they do, considering the estate of our reviews and theirs today. It was almost wholly an American enterprise and it showed that American writers and critics, given adequate support, could turn out a review that would stand comparison with the best English product. But it also proved that Americans, by and large, were not cultivated enough to provide an adequate readership for so serious an effort. When the time is ripe, though not perhaps in my lifetime, the eight large volumes of the paper will provide a model for a similar band of literary adventurers.

After *The Freeman* suspended, the Neilsons returned to the midwest. Except when they were traveling in this country or abroad, they lived in Chicago in the winter and spent their summers in Wisconsin. In 1924 Neilson returned to playwriting with "The Sin Eater's Hallowe'en," a dramatic satire on international politics that made use of English folklore. Until 1929 he turned out a series of plays, culminating with "Le Baiser de Sang," which was presented at the Grand Guignol in Paris in that year and revived in 1937.

The Great Depression, developing into the collapse of 1932-33, brought him back to essay writing, although now his vehicle was the book rather than the periodical. The books this turn in his interests produced fall into several classes. First, there are the political essays. In this class he had turned out in 1919 "The Old Freedom," a work in which he had sought to bring Wilsonian liberalism down to earth. Entering the fray against the Fabianism of Roosevelt's New Deal, he turned out "Control from the Top" in 1933 and "Sociocratic Escapades" in 1934. Then there are the satires and polemics, including "A Professor's Hotchpotch" in 1934; "Hate, the Enemy of Peace," in 1944 and "The Devil and All" in 1945; I would account these minor works.

Of permanent value are the books in which his social philosophy is set out in a systematic way. This group includes "The Eleventh Commandment" turned out in 1933, "Man at the Crossroads" (1938), "In Quest of Justice" (1944), "The Roots of our Learning" (1946), and a book scheduled for publication in 1947 which is as yet untitled. These last two books, like the theme essay of the preceding one, consist of essays contributed to THE AMERICAN JOURNAL OF ECONOMICS AND SOCIOLOGY.

Neilson had nothing to do with the founding of this JOURNAL and when he was first invited to write for it he shied away, perhaps because his experience with *The Freeman* was too green in his memory. The contributions by which he was represented in the early issues were reprints of papers written for other occasions. But he soon came around when he saw what the review was promising to accomplish (he gave it moral support from the first) and how much a writer of his mettle was needed. He tells his friends that THE JOURNAL's assignments gave him a new lease on life at a time when, save for a single major project, he was prepared to retire. But knowing what little likelihood there is that he will retire while he retains possession of his faculties, I set his story down as an effort to make light of our demands upon his pen. At any rate the reader

can see for himself in these books that the pressure of his commitments to this JOURNAL has resulted in some of the best writing of which he is capable. In these essays on religious, cultural and sociological investigations, as in the earlier ones that compose "The Eleventh Commandment," he shares the fruits of his lifelong studies with his readers. And more important than that, he enlists them in his lifelong crusade for justice.

This list of publications is a rather long one, and it is by no means all-inclusive; less salient details are avoided. Certainly it is a record of which any man, at 80, might be proud. But I have reserved until now mention of his scholar's master-work, his writing of "The Tragedy of Europe" in five volumes. He began the writing of it while the second world war was in the making and he turned out 3,500 printed pages. Written from the viewpoint of his Constitutional Radicalism, it is a day-by-day commentary on the war, an effort to discover its causes, a record and analysis of its development, an assessment of its results and, most important of all, an attempt to learn how peace may be won and maintained. The very enormity of the task is staggering. It was completed after his wife died and he had returned to New York to live in 1945.

It would be gratuitous at this time to attempt to present any definitive account of this period in Dr. Neilson's life. For one thing, happily, though he is 80, the period is by no means ended. The projects in which he is engaged may, if completed, cast his former works in a different perspective. For another, the material is wholly lacking. This period is not covered in his "Reminiscences," and I have had no opportunity to examine his voluminous correspondence. Indeed, I should be presuming upon intimacy and betraying confidences if I enlarged upon his activities during this time as a patron of art and science. I can only indicate the scope of his interests by mentioning that for a number of years he has maintained an archaeological expedition in the Near East; he provided the fund by which the musical works of William Byrd were collected and published and he made substantial contributions toward the building of Liverpool Cathedral.

What his career has amounted to up to now, however, can be set out briefly as an effort to socialize our heritage of beauty and an attempt to realize a social order based on justice. Books, like man's other deeds, often outlive their creators. It is much too early to try to discover how far Dr. Neilson's effort and attempt have succeeded. It can be said that for the truth that is in him, at 80, he is still fighting valiantly, still waging an epic

fight that for those who have come after remains an inspiration—and a source of hope.⁸

New York

⁸ Bibliographical note: The writer wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to Miss Phyllis Evans, Dr. Neilson's literary secretary, for the assistance she gave him in gathering material for this study. Miss Evans made available to me the manuscript of Neilson's "Reminiscences" covering the period up to his entrance into politics, and made notes from the manuscript to facilitate its use. She also made available her bibliography of Neilson and the following items, all that were in her files: John Archer, "Francis Neilson," *Indiana Forum*, n.d.; John Archer, "Neilson of Hyde," Hyde, England, J. Andrews & Co., n.d.; "London's Stage Managers: A Chat with Francis Neilson," *The Era*, London, Dec. 8, 1900; Eileen Campbell, "Francis Neilson, A Man of Achievement," *On the Campus*, Chicago, June, 1944. I have incorporated some data gleaned from conversations with the subject and other matter from standard sources on the theatre and on British Liberalism. Dr. Neilson, of course, has not seen the manuscript and it was not possible to submit it to Miss Evans; there is, therefore, nothing "official" about the study. I doubt if an adequate biographical study can be written until Dr. Neilson's "Reminiscences" and his letters are published.