THE TWO WORLDS OF FREDERICK NIVEN

"We'll take Scotland with us: a kingdom of the mind." Daniel Munro speaks these words at the beginning of the The Flying Years when the ruthless advance of the Clearances forces him to emigrate to Canada. The words could equally well be spoken in the voice of The Flying Years' author, Frederick John Niven, for all Niven's books are energized by the spirit of the country he left.

It would be impossible in a short article to examine all Niven's writings; he produced well over thirty books of fiction, an autobiography, essays, a number of poetry collections, and innumerable pieces of journalism. It seems advisable, therefore, in attempting an assessment of Niven's work, to examine the best of his so-called "Canadian" books with which Scots in general are unfamiliar and a selection of his "Scottish" novels of which many Canadians have not even heard.

Born in Valparaiso, Chile in 1878, Niven accompanied his mother on her return to Scotland when he reached school age. He was educated at Hutchisons' Grammar School and at the Glasgow School of Art. He worked first in his father's muslin factory and then for a number of years as a librarian in Glasgow and Edinburgh; for a time he was employed in a jewellery shop. All these experiences were immeasurably beneficial to Niven the writer.

Between 1899, when he made his first trip to Canada, and 1920, when he and his wife emigrated permanently to the Kootenay region of British Columbia, he divided his time between the New World and the Old, sometimes working in construction and lumber camps in British Columbia, sometimes engaged as a professional journalist in Britain, sometimes exploring remote areas in the Canadian West inhabited then by only a few white settlers scattered among the native Indian population. His interest in and admiration for the Indian way of life eventually resulted in his being made a member of an Indian tribe; his Blackfoot name was "Apasto," when means "Talking by Signs." As an adult he revisited and travelled extensively in South America; he also spent some time in Hawaii.

During the First World War he was rejected for military service and was employed by the Ministry of Food and the Ministry of Information (one of his most interesting pieces of journalism, "John Buchan--In Memoriam," published in Saturday Night, March 30, 1940, recounts the interview with Buchan which led to the latter appointment). As the 1941-1950 edition of Who Was Who puts it: "Varied career; somewhat of a rolling stone."

From early childhood Niven was fascinated by history and the effect of the past on social institutions and individual behaviour. It is not surprising, therefore, that he turned to the past in order to compile his interesting trilogy--The Flying Years (1935), Mine Inheritance (1940) and The Transplanted (1944). Always meticulous about the authenticity of historical data, he amassed a tremendous amount of specific information which he then incorporated into books designed to examine the changes which occurred in Western Canada from the early nineteenth century to the time of the First World War.

Mine Inheritance opens in 1811 with Lord Selkirk's determination "to help these unfortunate people who are being evicted from their homes in Scotland." His dream was that the settlers would be established "in a part of the world where they can own their land, from which they can never be evicted, that will be an inheritance for their children."

Told from the standpoint of David Baxter, journalist, the novel examines the history of the Red River Settlement in minute detail. Unfortunately, Niven places so much emphasis on historical accuracy and on the theme of a stable agrarian society's replacing the unstructured society of the Indian and fur-trader that he loses sight of the fact that he is writing a novel. His characters represent ideologies and viewpoints or are merely the personification of certain skills; they do not exist as distinct individuals. On the other hand, the description of the tribulations and achievements of the Settlement presents a fleshed-out account of events which is much more memorable than the bare bones of fact contained in the average textbook of history. Niven's ability to write vivid description at
the same time as he conveys precise information is illustrated by an episode in which Jules Main-Gauche, a Metis, has been killed in a buffalo-hunt. His friends bury him in the shallow grave employed by the Metis of the Plains:

They scraped away a hollow, or rather they enlarged a hollow—a natural hollow—already there in the crest of the ridge. They slit the turf with their knives in the same manner as when gathering sods for the roofs of their houses; then with their hands they dug like badgers and made that hollow a little deeper. Their ancestors, upon one side, did not believe in putting the dead in the earth, wrapped them in deerskins and raised them up in the branches of trees or elevated them on scaffoldings over the prairie in lonely places. Most of them probably shared the doubt of full-blood Indians regarding interment, a doubt if the spirit would escape. To assist in that escape a shallow grave was desirable.

The body was placed in the shallow grave, the earth was kicked over it. Divots were dropped on the top and then they moved to and fro gathering stones and without exchange of a word piled them over the shallow grave. Click, click, click went the stones against each other, click, click, while the mother stood apart, sobbing. They seemed to be more embarrassed than grieving. (Ch. IV)

The initiative, tenacity and courage of the Scottish settlers in the Red River enterprise possibly attracted Niven to the subject of Mine Inheritance, for the earlier novel, The Flying Years, had also focused on an equally tenacious Scot, Angus Munro, whose father, Daniel, had been forced off his croft by the Clearances. The time span of The Flying Years is great, too great, really, for the book's two hundred and fifty odd pages to deal with satisfactorily (it covers the period between 1856 and the years following World War I). The action tends toward the episodic and gaps in time are often noted in a mere word or two. The Riel Rebellion, for instance, is simply though suggestively dismissed in a sentence: "The miserable business was over, Riel hanged, the snow of another winter quaking down over the land...." And, once again, the emphasis on the theme of change and its accompanying contradictions somewhat inhibits the development of character.

Nevertheless, this novel displays Niven's craftsmanship in a number of impressive ways. Angus Munro is characterised as a man of integrity and tolerance who is interested primarily in the welfare of others and especially of the Indians and Metis over whom, when he achieves his position as government official, he has a certain control. He is not, however, a cardboard paragon; rather, he is a man possessed of doubts, a man who struggles with his conscience.

Early in the novel Angus becomes involved with an Indian girl, Minota, whose entire band is wiped out by an epidemic while Angus is temporarily absent in Scotland. Though he suffers as a result of his loss, and later (in his official capacity) aids his and Minota’s son who has been adopted by a neighbouring chief, he weakly conceals the facts from both his second wife and his Metis son and from his associates. Niven portrays Angus's self-condemnation with subtlety and sensitivity. Another section in which Angus, enraged, kills two pet bluejays which have come to depend on him, demonstrates that even a good man has moments of petty cruelty.

A foil to Angus is presented in the person of Sam Lovat Douglas, another Scot, the epitome of the opportunistic entrepreneur. Though not an unpleasant character, Sam is single-minded in his pursuit of material gain and of course it is he who is knighted and not the self-effacing Angus. Niven’s implicit comment on the worship of materialism is clear throughout The Flying Years for, though he realistically acknowledges the fact that it is impossible to stem the tide of "progress," he clearly decries (through Angus) the exploitation and sad plight of the Indian. And as more and more greedy, unscrupulous
whites (whisky peddlers, racist minor officials, animal poisoners, land speculators and so on) enter the narrative, Niven's undisguised indignation moves the white reader to an uncomfortable feeling of guilt.

His skill in appealing to the reader's senses is also displayed to advantage in The Flying Years. Squirrels "spring their rattles" at Angus while he chops wood; Angus notes the "white powdering" of early snow and the "frail yellow splinters that are tamarack needles"; he listens on the "rolling hills be the river banks" to the "ululating laughter of the coyotes"; he watches the Rocky Mountains "waver" along a sky which is the same "hue that gleams inside the river mussel-shells." Nor is the description always pleasant. Especially horrifying is the account of the smallpox epidemic when a band of Indian victims (a "phalanx of the moribund") rides into the fort singing their way into death:

Close to Angus passes a squaw with her face woefully swelled, her eyes apparently unseeing. On her back was a child, pouched in the slack of the blanket she clutches around her, in the act of having convulsions. Some of them had the pustules all over their bodies, others had got to the last stages, their faces so bloated that hardly could one see the features, the eyes sunk away in the 'swellings. Still, in a kind of herd hypnotism, they raised their melancholy recitative. (Ch. XIII)

Frequently Angus is reminded of Scotland and yearns for the country he has left. Again, one can hear Niven's own voice: "He had Scotland still, the bark of seals on the Black Rocks, the remembered smell of sun-scorched bracken, of peat-smoke beaten down in the gales." He "was a boy again."

The Transplanted, written at the end of Niven's life (published posthumously and unrevised), lacks the poetic power of the best passages in The Flying Years but forms a fitting conclusion to the historical trilogy. It explores the development in British Columbia of a mining community from the days of the first "strike" to the period of industrial expansion and diversification of the local economy. The central character is Robert Wallace, a Scottish engineer who, disillusioned by the lack of opportunity in Scotland and by the hypercritical attitudes of his complacent middle-class family, emigrates to Canada. As a result of native intelligence, hard work, a certain amount of unscrupulousness, and a good bit of luck he succeeds in realising his materialistic goals. Another character, John Galbraith, who has emigrated from a Gorbals slum, is less enterprising than Wallace and more vulnerable in his relationships with other people; he is presented as a contrasting and possibly more appealing figure. As in the other two books, Niven is careful to place his characters in an accurate historical and sociological setting and even if for this reason alone the novel is worth attention.

The Transplanted contains graphic descriptions of the wild, powerful British Columbia landscape but its most striking feature is its examination of an ideological problem. Wallace, who has been primarily responsible for the technological development of the area, is in favor of "progress" but at the same time depressed by it. It is ironic that the man who has himself contributed to the destruction of the valley's earlier way of life turns to the natural world for reassurance, even solace. Galbraith, too, in response to his wife's unease when she hears the howling of coyotes says, "I like to hear them. They tell a fellow the whole world is not clamped down under paving stones." It is interesting also that in The Transplanted, his last book, Niven still shows his hero torn between the two countries he loved best—his native Scotland and Canada. Yet it would appear that the conflict has been resolved:

He looked down at the flashing of the water and for a moment had a sharp memory of a Scottish river that he knew; yet he was content where he was.

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Feeling so, he asked himself if he was sentimental, sentimental in the
disparaging sense of the word, in an emotion he had for a land in which he
had no wish to live? Its place names were still music for him, from Appin
to Galloway. He found deep satisfaction even in the thought that he came
from that land, knew that land; but the place names here were as magical to
him: Cariboo, Kootenay, Okanagan. (Ch. IX)

Both the "Canadian" and the "Scottish" novels of Frederick Niven exhibit a number
of flaws in structure and style. In addition to the over-swift passage of time which
weakens the impact of a chronologically arranged narrative, there are examples of trite
phrases, an overuse of italics, stilted phraseology and unnatural word order. Occasionally
an effective ending to chapter or novel is marred by a melodramatic conclusion (the main
weakness of Justice of the Peace) or by bathos. The conclusion to Mrs. Barry illustrates
this last point. The bell of the parish kirk which rings every morning at five-thirty always
awakens Mrs. Barry, but at the end of the novel we read: "But Mrs. Barry had found rest.
She did not hear the bell" (italics mine). An interesting letter from R.B. Cunninghame
Graham to Niven refers to this particular ineptitude in Mrs. Barry and it is indeed curious
that Niven, a reasonably sure stylist most of the time, would not have noticed such an
obvious weakness. "I do not like the last sentence," writes Niven's friend 'Don Roberto'
in his almost indecipherable handwriting), "'She had found rest!'...May I suggest, without
offence, that 'Mrs. Barry did not answer. She had not heard (or did not hear) the bell'
would read, I will not say better, but more like yourself" (italics again mine). Cunninghame
Graham's general assessment of Niven's work can certainly be concluded from
the last three words and also from other letters housed at Baillie's Institution in Glasgow
which express approval of Triumph, The Flying Years and The Paisley Shawl. And
Cunninghame Graham's enthusiasm for Niven is shared by (among others) William Power,
Hugh Walpole, Christopher Morley, John Dunlop, Alexander Reid and Rebecca West.
Three prominent Canadian critics who have examined Niven's work and praised many
aspects of it are Edward A. McCourt, W.H. New and Jay Macpherson.2 None of these
critics, though they note some of the faults to which I have alluded, would endorse the
opinion of C.M. Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid) who, in Contemporary Scottish Studies (1926),
dissmisses the work of Niven (along with that of J.J. Bell and George Blake) as "cauld kail
het again."

The plots in Niven's Scottish novels are, for the most part, slight, because Niven is
interested primarily in examining the everyday lives of everyday people, lives which are not
involved with highly dramatic events. He concentrates rather on the creation of
atmosphere and character, on the complicated interaction between characters, and on the
examination of central themes which grow out of his particular understanding of a
particular society. His settings, out of which the atmosphere is partly created, are varied.
His portrayals of the warehouse district of Glasgow or of a below-stairs workshop in an
Edinburgh jewellery store are as vivid as his depiction of a rural scene on the Isle of Arran
or of a Barbie-like mythical village of the Borders, "Solway." And so successfully does he
combine these elements of fiction that it is difficult to discuss one element in isolation
from any other.

The theme which Niven most frequently explores in his Scottish novels, however, is
the theme of individual (though not selfish or unlicensed) freedom: freedom for a person to
live his life as he sees best, freedom to develop the potentiality with which he is endowed.
The failure of many of Niven's characters to exercise such freedom results from weaknesses
in their own personalities, their inability to reconcile their responsibility to themselves with
their responsibilities to others, unsatisfactory personal relationships and a repressive social
structure which is inimical to the development of individuality. And the complexity of the
theme can be grasped only if the reader is willing to examine a goodly number of the
Scottish novels, for the central characters are diverse. Some of these are unusually gifted,
others almost limited, and because they are drawn from all strata of society, the forces which thwart their fulfillment vary from novel to novel.

The class structure of Scottish society is clearly drawn and almost symbolically emphasised—even families, community groups and business establishments are arranged in distinct layers. Many of the individual characters spend their lives attempting to pull themselves up into the class immediately above their own or are so intent on maintaining the rigid rules of behaviour which belong to the class they are in that they behave more like automatons than normal human beings. Foolish Mrs. Adiar (Ellen Adiar), though far from being an unkind woman, is ashamed of her husband’s natural, ungenteel manners and concentrates on coaching her daughters to behave like “ladies” in the hope, of course, that they will marry “well.” The result of her training proves disastrous for rebellious, empty-headed Ellen. Mrs. Moir, too, of Justice of the Peace, whose husband is a prosperous manufacturer of “soft goods,” insists on decorum at all times because she has a position to uphold. Mabel Murray and her friends (Two Generations), though they consider themselves intellectually enlightened, are nevertheless preoccupied with correct manners—proper gloves, hats, tea-time etiquette and so on. Mrs. Grey, the wife of the Rev. Thomas Grey, M.A., D.D. (A Tale That Is Told), refuses to allow her daughter, Florence, to work in her son’s bookshop (“a woman of your station would only enter a profession”). As a compromise, she suggests that Florence “might go into the place and do a little secretarial work sometimes, just for a change, without any loss of our standing.” Tom Grey, in the same novel, returns from Oxford filled with self-importance, calls his parents “Mater and Pater,” the “real man” hidden “behind extravagant gestures, and blinks and almost incessant laughter.” The novel’s hero, unassertive, imaginative Harold Grey, who Rebecca West saw as a chekhovian figure, finds himself over-shadowed by Tom, especially in the eyes of the mother “who inculcated in us a sense of her refinement.” The Rev. Dr. Grey himself, though loved by his family, is status-conscious. He is especially proud of the fact that “he was commanded to preach before Her Majesty the Queen at Balmoral.” In contrast, Mr. Moir (Justice of the Peace) and Mr. Simpson (The Staff at Simson’s), both influential business men, are people with no “side.” If the reader is amused by the humbug noted in connection with the class system and endorses Wee Macgroggor’s joyous oversimplification “I wudna by gentry for anything,” he reacts differently when he views the entrapped state in which working people find themselves. The “sacking” of Watty Yule (The Staff at Simson’s) emphasises the precarious position of the employee; old Fenwick’s incarceration (in the same novel) after he puts his suffering sister out of her misery with an overdose of opiates suggests that there is one law for the rich and another for the poor; young Peter’s mother, a desperate alcoholic (The Staff at Simson’s), kills herself when she drinks a bottle of spirits in which a lizard has been pickled. Mrs. Barry (Mrs. Barry), once prosperous, is reduced to taking in lodgers in order to provide for herself and her son, Neil.

Angus Macdonald, though he praises Justice of the Peace and The Three Marys, considers Mrs. Barry sentimental, but one has the feeling that after the failure of the City of Glasgow Bank in 1879 there would have been a good many Mrs. Barries in Glasgow (Glasgow in 1901, that indispensable reference book, notes the squalor and suffering in documented detail and Guy McCrone in Wax Fruit records the general panic among people of Mrs. Barry’s class at the time of that disastrous event). Mrs. Barry maintains her equilibrium by devoting her life to her young son and she is fortunate in having reliable lodgers (Mr. Amara is surely one of Niven’s best-drawn minor characters). She is, however, doomed, for she is in no position to consider having an operation (the consultant’s shilling fee is difficult enough to raise) and, of course, has postponed going to the doctor for so long that her situation is hopeless. Far from being a sentimental portrait, Mrs. Barry is a living example of the stoicism of the honest poor.

The whole middle section of The Three Marys also depicts the suffering of the poor and the degradation of slum areas—the children begging at close openings, the “old hag”
who charges 2/6 to rent a room to a prostitute, the general air of enforced amorality which Robert Barclay notes. The second Mary, a poorly-paid factory-worker by day and a prostitute on occasion by night, takes Robert Barclay to the room bare but for “the bed, a small table with an ewer and basin on it, and a cracked mirror on the wall behind.” Barclay, a lonely, unhappy innocent, cannot forget the protective attitude of the girl for whom the Tom Greys and Mrs. Moirs of this world would have only contempt. “Puir laddie,” she says to him and, after they have made love, “Feeling happier now?” Later he wishes that he could find her again but fears that “out of that sweet, sad passion might come gamins who would sit drowsy in entries when they should have been abed, peering up at strangers with pitifully young old eyes....” Niven underscores the contrast between rich and poor when Fra Raeburn (modelled on Francis Newbery of the Glasgow School of Art) comments to Robert Barclay: “And there are young whipper-snappers in this city who don’t know what to do with the money they have. Play games. Golf. Go up to the Highlands and get men to frighten grouse over their heads to shoot at out of turf boxes where they sit half soused with champagne.”

Old Soldier, set in Edinburgh, and one of my favorites among Niven’s novels, excoriates the plight of the unskilled working man. Stewart Reid, the old soldier, is employed as a polisher and delivery man by a prestigious firm of jewelers in Princes Street. Unlike many of the novels which are set in the late nineteenth century or in the early twentieth, this account of life in the 1920’s emphasises the fact that for the working man of that time conditions had improved but little. Like Mrs. Barry, Stewart’s ailing wife is reluctant to consult a doctor and dies as a result; the weekly pay packet has to be divided carefully if the two small sons are to be clothed and fed; in holiday time only day outings can be considered to provide a break in “routin”; Stewart can indulge only occasionally in “refreshment” and looks forward to making the Christmas deliveries to the houses of the wealthy because a dram may be forthcoming; though far from young, Stewart makes his deliveries on foot, many of them taking him to the outlying parts of the city. Yet Stewart, though limited by his lack of opportunity, is a man of sensitivity and imagination. He takes pride in his work (the atmosphere of the jeweller’s establishment is brilliantly evoked); he finds joy in his home and children, even in his managing wife who, he knows, is unselshin in her concern for the family; he muses touchingly on the horrors of war; he pensively watches “the mealy commotion and puffing of the porridge.” Above all, he loves the beauty of his city and the nearby countryside. To him the Forth Bridge is “like lace”; all his life he has “liked to see growing things in gardens and in fields.” With Teddy, a young fellow-worker, he stands at the corner of George and Hanover Streets “and the world to north below was suddenly visible, a surprise of a city descending to clumps of trees and the firth, and beyond that broad and glittering firth the fields of Fife making a quilted pattern under the dazzling blue and the high white clouds.” Says Stewart, “I like it. It’s bonny. There are folk over there now at work in the fields.”

As Niven develops his main characters’ search for fulfillment within the rigidity of the class structure, he examines the religious climate of Scotland, touches upon some aspects of the educational system and the attitude to the arts, and looks with perceptivity at the intricacies of personal relationships. In many of the novels the reader is aware that destructive forces lurk behind the veneer of respectability and gentility of “united families” (Ted Murray, for example, towards the conclusion of Two Generations, recognises that the “united family” is a facade).

A historical novel set in the early eighteenth century, Dead Men’s Bells (one of Niven’s most aptly symbolic titles), examines the doctrine of “double election” and the Phrasiaical attitude of many of the devout. The Canadian critic, William H. New, in his comprehensive essay about Niven in Articulating West, states that Niven is writing out of personal experience and comments on the Scot’s proclivity for theological argument. He notes the break between the hero, Robert Lindsay, and his mother “over a philosophical-religious question” and goes on to say that the Scotland of this eighteenth century family
is "like [the Scotland] of the Murrays in Two Generations, a land "'where Calvin once gloomed.'" But though New does equate orthodoxy with "practicality" in the novels set almost two centuries later than Dead Men's Bells, he does not emphasise strongly enough that the established church of Niven's youth as portrayed in Niven's novels has become an enclave of the prosperous. Religion (or the practice of religion) is respectable; it sets one apart from the working-classes. And the gods of the religious members of the establishment are Mammon and Power.

Niven's Church of Scotland clergy are all socially pretentious and for the most part either frauds or humbugs. The Rev. Mr. Tannadice (Two Generations) in an unctuous hypocrite who pretends interest in his parishioners when in fact he scarcely knows one from the other; the Rev. Dr. Grey honours the local photographer by posing for him and (like Hardy's Satires of Circumstance parson) rehearses his benediction in the vestry; the clergyman to whom Stewart Reid (Old Soldier) delivers a parcel from the jewellery store ignores the "tradesman," does not even turn to look at him. (All very different from the picture of her unselfish, intellectual Free Church father which O. Douglas [Anna Buchan] presents in The Setons.)

The evangelical denominations (or the more evangelical element within the established church) do not escape either. One of Niven's carefully worked out ironies occurs in The Rich Wife in which Mrs. Hepworth, the wife of an affluent ship-builder, tries to persuade her husband that it would be more advantageous if he, as a prominent business-man, were to leave the nonconformist church of which he is an influential member and join the more socially acceptable established church. Mr. Hepworth angrily rejects her suggestion but by so doing facilitates the meeting between his daughter (the "rich wife" of the title) and Byron, the son of the Rev. Joseph Humphry, a visiting evangelical preacher of great "power". The Rev. Joseph, prodded by his mercenary wife and daughter, encourages Byron to "marry money" in the person of Margaret Hepworth; Margaret's misery results from the family's conniving. The attitude of the Rev. Joseph is revealed in an unconsciously humorous remark he makes himself. The author of a biography of Byron, the reverend gentleman has also published a number of immensely popular devotional books and advises his son, who is starting his career as a writer, to be hard-nosed in his business dealings. "I drove a good bargain with Our Heavenly Father," he says.

Let us return briefly to the subject of the respectable families which to the casual observer seem happy and close-knit but are inwardly divided against themselves. Two Generations, Triumph, The Story of Their Days and Justice of the Peace all present examples of how sensitive, imaginative characters are destroyed or almost destroyed by the pious or conventional members of their families who consider them eccentric or ungodly.

George Murray of Two Generations, a man of brilliant mind, has been brought up by a mother warped by a Calvinist belief which allows her to practise with impunity all kinds of cruelties and self-deceptions. (The opening chapter of Two Generations is one of Niven's greatest achievements as he sets forth George's unfortunate circumstances in a trenchantly witty introduction which resembles some of the background chapters in Trollope.) George escapes from his mother but is incapable of coping with the machinations of his pietistic, vindictive wife and daughter and ends his days as a derelict alcoholic. His son, Ted, likewise tortured by the two women, realizes the true cause of his father's downfall too late to help the pathetic, though still dignified, old man but in time to effect his own escape.

Triumph, the most striking part of which is set in South America, focuses on a musician, George Heriot, a sensitive but weak man who also turns to drink in order to overcome the frustration of battling the attitudes of his calculating, unsympathetic wife and the conventional rigidity of his society. And The Story of Their Days, which examines three generations of the Maitland family with the recurring image of the Pennylands Fair providing a symbolic, never-changing motif, presents yet another destructive character in Mrs. Maitland. She is less deliberate in her actions than her counterpart in Two
Generations but equally culpable, for she persistently mags her husband concerning his (in her eyes) harsh treatment of Fraser, her favourite--and completely disreputable--son, and accepts unquestioningly the sacrifice of her daughter, Ann, an artist of great promise, who gives up her career in order to look after her mother. Mrs. Maitland, after her alcoholic husband’s death, is convincing that “Walter had not died in grade”; she spends the rest of her life sometimes dwelling sentimentally on what she considers the “bliss” of her childhood and youth and other times indulging in what her perceptive husband had earlier described as her “mortuary melancholy.”

Rachel Moir (Justice of the Peace) is a woman whose religious life is socially rather than theologically based. Interested in causes, she attends “serious drawing-rooms”: in Kelvinside where the members listen to “a frock-coated Armenian,” “a nasal man from Newfoundland,” or “a fat lady with three chins, and little piercing eyes” whose aim is to enlist the members’ sympathy “upon behalf of purity.” Mrs. Moir is fearful for her son, Martin. Intent on “uplifting” the lives of her husband and artist son by purging them of “vulgarity,” Mrs. Moir becomes a sadistic manipulator who alternately loves and tortures them. Martin, who loves his mother dearly, is torn between his desire to satisfy her and his need to live his own life. Because she hates his painting, he is forced to practise all kinds of deception, but well before the end of the novel he becomes alienated from her forever. Her long-suffering husband, who believes in enjoying life and who assesses people by their character rather than by their social status, initially attempts to stand up to his wife but frequently “gives in” for the sake of peace. At the conclusion of the novel, however, in a series of vigorous speeches which the reader applauds, he passes judgement on her brand of Christianity, her absorption in spurious causes and her petty jealousy. Indeed, Ebenezer Moir is so impressive a character that, though his son is ostensibly the “hero” of the book, it is fitting that the title should bear his name.

Justice of the Peace and The Three Marys are the two Niven novels which would seem to me most worthy of reprinting, though I could qualify the statement by adding The Staff at Simson’s, A Tale That is Told and two or three other titles. These two, however, exemplify Niven’s sense of history and society, his ability to create complex character, write credible, lively dialogue and vividly descriptive prose. In addition, because the heroes of both novels are aspiring painters (Niven himself wanted to be an artist), he draws them with an especially loving hand.

The atmosphere of Glasgow, as many critics have suggested, is skillfully evoked in both novels. The reader sees the dingy close openings, hears the trams, visualizes the Cluthas and the horse-drawn lorries. The brutality of the educational system is grimly emphasised. Ebenezer Moir (Justice of the Peace) removes his son from the “City Grammar School” after the boy has been brutally flogged by the drill master (the Rector’s “proxy flogger”) for “bursting a paper bag full of water on the playground.” Before Robert Barclay (The Three Marys) leaves his school forever, he walks over “to the fountain for a last drink of water out of the hanging chained iron mug...[which]...clanged once or twice as in a tolling of an end.” This touch of local color provides a fitting conclusion to Robert’s stay at Carruthers’ Academy, depicted as a “purgatory of youth” in which “St. Vitus’s dance was common, simply through over-flogging.”

Alexander Reid in “A Scottish Chekhov?” which assesses Rebecca West’s enthusiastic praise of Niven’s subtle, psychological effects, suggests that Carruthers’ Academy may be based on Hutchesons’ Grammar School or at least on Niven’s own experience there, and references in Coloured Spectacles would seem to support such a suggestion. Niven notes, for instance, that as a young boy his absorption in tales of the exploits of Deadwood Dick “atoned a hundredfold for the egg-like weals upon our wrists delivered by a soulless mathematical master.” In this connection, one immediately thinks of John Buchan who was an older student at Hutchesons’ at the same time as Niven. It is significant, I think, that in Memory Hold the Door Buchan does not mention Hutchesons’ and that in Unforgettable Unforgotten his sister Anna (O. Douglas) merely states that he attended it.
Robert Barclay and Martin Moir both delight in the beauty of rural Scotland. In *The Three Marys* Robert, lost and alone when he returns to Glasgow as a young man, remembers the farm he has left:

Among the fogged crowds he could see the farm at Pebble Glen, even to a straw on the cobbles of the yard, the hard bristle broom leaning at the door of the byre, a hen high-stepping surrounded by her brood. He saw too acutely to withdraw his mind as swiftly as his body. He could still see Mary. He saw her grin (a brave grin as she waved good-bye) turn to a baby’s puckered cry. She had moved away and catching up her apron held it to her face. Here the crowd justled, the carts rattled over cobbled streets. There Mr. MacCulloch sat on the chair by the ingleside, fastening the buckles of his leggings that he had loosened—"loused," was Mary’s word—before dinner, for it was close on one o’clock. (Ch. XIV)

And in *Justice of the Peace* Martin Moir’s equilibrium is momentarily restored by an early morning walk outside the city:

He turned the corner and took the road to Mill-brae, past a quiet road of pleasant houses that looked out on a farm. Somebody clattered with a pail in the stables; there was the hissing of an unseen man grooming a horse. In the paddock a rooster strutted and suddenly flapping his wings crowed vigorously. The sun showed its top half, a segment of gold shield, over a garden wall. It was like a Caldecott rooster—a Caldecott sunrise...It was pleasant...to be out this early in the morning glory. (Ch. VI)

A new world (very different from the Grammar School world) is opened to both Robert Barclay and Martin Moir when they attend the Glasgow School of Art. Out of his own experience Niven conveys the excitement of the new movement in art in Glasgow at the turn of the century. Like Ann Maitland (*Story of Their Days*), Martin Moir frequents Miss Cranston’s tea-rooms where every detail of decor is aesthetically pleasing ("The spoons in that tea-room were things of utility and beauty, designed...by Rennie Mackintosh"). Earlier in the novel when Martin is working at his father's "wareus" in Glassford Street (the entire operation vividly and minutely detailed by Niven), he escapes as often as he possibly can in order to read art books and periodicals in the Mitchell Library and before catching his train home at the end of the day "he [dives] down to his sanctuary, the tea-house in Ingram Street." In the "deserted smoke-room" he is at peace; then when two men quietly enter and play a game of chess, he slips out his sketchbook to put figures into the "subdued richness" of the room.

Under the guidance of the instructors at the Glasgow School of Art (whose names barely conceal the real identities) the students, after they understand basic techniques, are urged to be independent in their choice of subjects and methods. Robert Barclay paints the second Mary and later a subject dear to Niven’s own heart, pigeons; the painting is called "City Waifs."

It is rather fitting to conclude a brief analysis of Niven by noting something which reveals Niven the man combined with Niven the creative artist—his fascination with pigeons. Like Neil Barry, he himself (as he tells in *Coloured Spectacles*) had a doo-cot when he was young and many of his most sympathetic characters are those who recognize the iridescent beauty of these often maligned birds. The gentle hero and heroine of *The Porcelain Lady*, for example, provide a contrast to their artificial colleagues at the publishing house; one senses Niven’s approval of John Brough and Ruth Winter in several chapters devoted to their love for the pigeons who shelter on the top of the building. Ruth notes the stillness of the pigeon-loft, stillness broken only "by a homer running his
coral beak down the quill feathers of his outstretched wing, or combing the wing's underside with a stretched claw." And Lord Renfield of Under Which King, one of the most credible of the characters in the historical romances, is a knowledgeable pigeon-fancier. (There are other pigeon-lovers as well.) Pauline Niven, in a letter to John Dunlop written after her husband's death in British Columbia in 1944, notes that one day while he was working, Niven had a dazed look in his eyes and explained, "I have seen the pigeons in Ingram Street." She continues, "[H]e dictated a lot and at such times one could see him practically reporting what he saw before his eyes--very like an artist at a drawing."

I am sure that the reader of this article, if he has persevered thus far, will see that my preference among Niven's books is for the Scottish novels. Possibly another quotation from Pauline Niven's letter to John Dunlop (the original is to be found in the Baillie Institution archive) will account for the clearer perception and control of the material which the best of the Scottish novels display. "He never ceased to be a Scotsman in interests and outlook," Pauline Niven writes, and a little later in the same letter, "[H]e did truly have Scotland with him."

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NOTES

1 Niven uses the phrase "kingdom of the mind" when speaking with his own voice in the final chapter of his book of autobiographical essays Coloured Spectacles (London, 1938).

Rebecca West, "Notes on Novels", The New Statesman (October 9, 1920), 22.
Edward A. McCourt, The Canadian West in Fiction (Toronto, 1970), 42-55.