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An Epitaph for Francis Neilson, 1867–1961

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FRANCIS NEILSON, writer, pacifist and social reformer, was born on January 26, 1867; he died in his sleep the evening of April 12, 1961. Thus his life spanned ninety-four years, all of them eventful years.

His experience was enhanced by the living tradition of his forebears. From childhood until he breathed his last he collected the lore of his times. What perspective the very century-wide span of his firsthand experience gave him! We who survive him have seen the liquidation of the British Empire, but in Neilson's life span it reached its zenith with Benjamin Disraeli. We have witnessed the passing of the French Empire into receivership; in Neilson's time the latest manifestation of it was born with the Franco-Prussian War. We have watched with fear and trembling the birth of a second western German empire that took control virtually of all Europe and made a second effort to expand into Africa before it disintegrated; Neilson saw the whole course of German empire. Neilson witnessed the transformation of Russia from a feudal to a modern State, and watched the rise of the Red Star over Asia.

With great empires in collision, misery, poverty, exile, disease—and horrible brutal death—afflicted tens of millions of people. Human dignity? Never were the possibilities for its flowering greater. Yet never was human degradation the lot of so many! Human rights? At no time were they seen so clearly, acknowledged so widely. Nor so often violated, mocked, suppressed!

Of all these developments Neilson was no mere onlooker. He was not

satisfied just to observe the course of history and to record it. As a critic he was ever in the thick of things. Beginning with the Boer War, he exposed the machinations of the imperialists whenever he could. As a member of Parliament he fought the trend of the times toward war and conquest. In print and in correspondence he protested the brutality of man toward man. For, first and foremost, he was a thoughtful, active and responsible citizen. He not only participated in events of his time by keeping in active communication with the centers of current influence but sought, insofar as it lay within his power, to control the forces that shaped the destinies of himself and his contemporaries. He tried to enlighten men's minds by laying before them facts and logical arguments about the dangers they might face. As a people's representative in Parliament before the first World War, he came to be regarded as a cultural leader, devoid of personal ambition for place and power.

Although political and social crises engaged his thought, voice and pen from the time of the Boer War to the Korean conflict, they did not circumscribe his interests. These ranged over music, art, literature, archaeology, anthropology, philosophy and theology—indeed nothing in human culture was foreign to his inquiring mind. He cultivated each field seriously, getting to know its background and the main lines of its development, its leaders and what they were doing. He was not satisfied merely to read reports in the newspapers and the reviews, though he devoured them in enormous quantity in several languages. Nothing would do but to meet at first hand the men who were widening human horizons, to share their hopes, buoy them in their defeats, and perhaps help them to overcome their obstacles. Himself rooted in the humanities, he nevertheless paid close attention to developments in the natural sciences, treasuring an acquaintance with Albert Einstein (in the days before the discoverer of relativity became a celebrity), Arthur Compton and other such pioneers. Indeed, he was keenly interested in very high energy research (then called cosmic ray research), at a time when only a handful of Americans and Europeans knew of the phenomena that first appeared as nuclear particles from space, or suspected that there were potential sources of energy in sub-nucleonic and in magnetic phenomena which far surpassed fusion of the hydrogen atom.

In journalism, literature, drama and music Neilson was a professional with a high order of competence, frequently demonstrated. In certain other fields he was an outstanding scholar known and respected by small groups of co-workers in nearly every civilized country, one not infrequently consulted by them. Yet he never posed as an expert. Outside his occupa-

tional fields he would say of himself: "I am what they call in England a serious amateur, a student." Close knowledge of the range of human interests and activities was an essential in the field in which he was an original worker of high distinction, cultural sociology.

The prose form in which he attained excellence was the essay and as an essayist, I think, he will be remembered longest. But the essays which will achieve a permanent place in our literature are those which report his studies in human culture. His appreciation of the political, economic and social influences upon human culture accounted for the originality of his viewpoint and the findings he winnowed from his indefatigable research. Yet in each of the other fields of his professional competence he produced work of comparable originality. In journalism he was associated with notable reviews; he was one of the chief figures of the old *Freeman*, a weekly journal of opinion which for the quality of its contents, the eminence of its contributors and the style of its writing was in a class of its own among English and American journals. In the theatre he became a successful playwright and a top stage director, both in New York and London. He rebuilt the stage at Covent Garden, revived the German opera in London, and introduced plans for a national opera company. At various times in his life he wrote novels for thoughtful readers, and his lyrics and verse stamped him as at least a minor poet of his times. In these varied activities—in politics, scholarship, the arts—Neilson found self-fulfillment. He lived a long life and a very full one. Aware of his potentialities, he had the ambition and energy to realize them.

Yet that is not the measure of the man. No, not by half. For, though Neilson sought to fulfill himself, this represented only part of his interests. In all the circles in which he moved he pursued an ambition inherited from influential friends and patrons who themselves had inspired him to seek self-fulfillment, men such as Dion Boucicault, Victor Herbert, Anton Seidl, James Gibbons Huneker, George Douglas Brown, David Meldrum and James Symonds. He sought to instill in his intimates the thought that each was a unique personality, endowed with talents far beyond his imagination. These talents, he believed, varied as widely as the spectrum of human activity; one man might be destined to find satisfaction working in stained glass, another in mathematical physics. Neilson encouraged each person with whom he came into contact to increase his productive activity beyond his efforts to fill the larder, as he put it; and he spurred him on in intellectual activity with the wide-ranging example he set and with all the help of which he was capable. His own success took second place to those of his friends and acquaintances. This idea was brought

to fruition at Liverpool Cathedral, where he introduced his "school of cultural studies." Boys from middle class and working class homes who joined the choir were stimulated to pursue their artistic or scientific interests and were encouraged to develop and expand their cultural outlook. Aided by his generosity and benefactions, several score today are among the most promising young people in the arts and professions of England.

Neilson did these things not to gain public acclaim but as the active expression of an original social philosophy he had evolved on the basis of study of such thinkers as Henry George and Franz Oppenheimer. In these activities, as in politics, he was a democrat of the old school, with contempt for notions that leadership in the arts or in politics was reserved for an elite, and with firm faith that the people, the so-called common folk, can best manage their own concerns. For the people he sought justice, in politics, in economics and in social life, For them he also demanded liberty so that they might realize the destinies for which their natural endowments prepared them. Justice and liberty! Ancient watchwords, which Neilson bore on a banner before him all his life. His own career, in which he produced work of merit and distinction in so many fields, found its apex in his demonstration that men and women might make such self-fulfillment as was his commonplace.

Neilson's career was a fascinating one and this brief review of it underlines his favorite thesis. What a life he had! What a life we could all have, if we dared but try. This is the message he would wish us to contemplate as we reflect upon his passing. If recalling the essentials of his experience will inspire another few to undertake living to the full as Neilson envisioned it, he would have considered his life well spent.

Justice is from the beginning and is not a mere legal term as it is understood by men today. Justice is indeed so closely interlinked with the conception of natural law that it is impossible to dissociate the two. My own definition of it is: "Justice is the law of Providence inherent in nature." It comes from the Creator; indeed, creation itself is unthinkable without it. It determines the natural right of man to use the source of his well-being. Those who scorn the idea of natural law or natural right do not realize when they do so that, at the same time, they deny justice. Many are guilty of this through ignorance, but how many in repudiating natural law and justice do so for the sole purpose of legalizing ill-gotten gains?

FRANCIS NEILSON