

FREDERICK NIVEN

LAWRENCE J. BURPEE

"A PROPHECY is not without honour, save in his own country". Frederick Niven had made Canada his home for a quarter of a century; in that time, and as the result of an earlier visit, he had written about this country much that will live. He died in Vancouver at the end of January, and his passing has gone almost unnoticed, which is not to our credit.

Born in Valparaiso, Chile, in 1878, of Scottish stock, he was taken back to the land of his fathers as a child. In Glasgow he, like John Buchan, got the solid foundations of education at the famous old Hutcheson Grammar School. For a time he hovered between art and literature, taking lessons at the Glasgow School of Art in the evenings and working during the day among the books of a Glasgow library. In the end, literature won.

Also he had the itch to travel that was part of his Scottish heritage, and, coming from a people who had had so much to do with the fur trade of Western Canada, it was natural that he should as a boy read such books as Butler's *Great Lone Land* and Ballantyne's *Hudson Bay*. After a time, reading about the Far West was not enough; he must see with his own eyes this country that seemed to be a magnet for so many adventurous Scotsmen. He was still a young man, with the eager and receptive mind of youth, when he first saw the Canadian prairies, felt the strange influence of their far horizons, and, in spite of the turmoil of quickly growing towns and boundless fields of grain, could imagine the wild excitement of incredible herds of buffalo chased over the plains by Indian hunters, and the more placid but equally curious traffic at fur-trading posts.

Beyond the prairies came the mountains, ground more familiar to the Scottish lad, and in British Columbia he found something that would draw him back, a place that was to become his home. He saw more of the far western province than most of us do, because the state of his purse compelled him as he travelled to earn his daily bread, which he did in sawmills and railway camps, thereby storing up for future use much that was real in human conduct, as well as the magnificent stage on which the simple drama was played. Finally he came to the little mining town of Nelson, on the west arm of Kootenay Lake, and fell in love with it.

He made his way back to Montreal, and sailed home on a cattle boat. A series of articles in the *Glasgow Herald* on Canadian subjects brought him into journalism; he filled various editorial posts there and in Dundee and in London. The success of a novel, one of some thirty, divided his allegiance. Thenceforward, while he never abandoned journalism as a freelance, most of his time and thought was given to prose fiction, with an occasional essay in verse. His occasional articles went to such periodicals as the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the *Morning Post*, the *Athenaeum*, *National*, *Glasgow Herald*, *Scots Pictorial*, and *Sunday Times*, and his verse appeared from time to time in the *English Review*, *London Mercury* and the *Nation*. Later he became a contributor to *Saturday Night* and other Canadian papers.

In 1911 Frederick Niven married Mary Pauline Thorne-Quech, of London, England, a young woman of marked musical ability. Abandoning her own career, she became her husband's companion and secretary. With her he discussed the plan and progress of each novel, and she not only helped him in gathering material and checking facts but also did all the necessary typewriting.

A commission from *World's Work*, shortly before the first Great War, for a series of articles on Canada, led some time after to an invitation from John Buchan to see him at the Foreign Office. This was in 1916, when the future Lord Tweedsmuir had been called back from the front to organize the Ministry of Information. Niven became Associate Editor of Articles for Allied and Neutral Powers, a job which he found interesting but rather exhausting, and one that left him no time for his own work.

With the coming of peace he was once more free to use his imagination (he was always very emphatic that the British Ministry of Information did stick to the facts), and he was also foot-loose. The scent of pine in an English wood turned his thoughts to British Columbia. He and his wife made up their minds to go west for a six months' rest. They went to British Columbia, and British Columbia held them. From the Rockies to the Pacific there were few spots in southern British Columbia they were not to visit in the years that were to come, and wherever practicable they went on foot. Frederick Niven was strongly of the opinion that that was the only satisfactory way of seeing the countryside.

It is not possible at this time to say much about his books. Some of the novels are based on his own experiences in British Columbia, others deal with the days of the mining fever, or the fur trade. *Mine Inheritance* and *The Flying Years* are probably the best of his Canadian novels, and *Mrs. Barry*, *The Staff at Simon's*, and *Justice of the Peace*, of his tales of Scottish life and character. The last named enjoyed the distinction, in an American edition, of carrying two prefaces, one by Hugh Walpole and the other by Christopher Morley. *Wild Honey* describes one of the tramps of Frederick and Pauline through Southern British Columbia. Some of his verse was put in book form in *A Lover of the Land*, and *Maple-Leaf Songs*.

Always a conscientious craftsman, Niven took infinite pains to have his facts and historical atmosphere right. For that very reason some of his novels have appealed rather to the comparative few who could appreciate their real worth than to the multitude looking only for entertainment. He did sound work in fiction and verse and also in journalism, and much of it will live.

But, to those who had the privilege of counting him as a friend, Frederick Niven the man was of more moment than Frederick Niven the man-of-letters. Kindliness, simplicity, sincerity, these were the qualities that stood out in his character, these and humour. What more could any man ask for in a friend? The putting of his thoughts into words was not only his vocation, but it was his means of livelihood, and he was one who worked slowly and sometimes painfully, putting his best into whatever he tried to do. Yet I have never known him hesitate for a moment to drop his own work, whatever it might be, in order to help a fellow-craftsman over a literary stile; and he could do it in such a way that he almost succeeded in making the one helped believe he was the benefactor.

That was Fred Niven, a writer of distinction, a good citizen—he counted himself a Canadian, and a man who will live on in the memory of his friends.