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BOOK REVIEW

Alastair Niven, In Glad or Sorry Hours, London: Starhaven, 2021, 0-936315-482, 256 pp.

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Alastair Niven's memoir, *In Glad or Sorry Hours*, was launched from his home in South London (11 February). Since Niven has lived on a large map and made many friends in the course of his life, the virtual event brought onto adjacent screens people from around the world.

Nowadays anyone wanting the barebones of a life such as Niven is living heads for on-line reference sites. The schools and the universities attended, the positions held, the books and articles written are all there, along with, in some cases, 'early life' and 'family life'. Niven's 250-page memoir, with a title taken from one of his grand-father's poems, offers the same life in different colours and tones. It is a memoir and we should always put the word 'personal' in front of that word. The account refers to the positions held, but offers personal views. It gives us sharp insights and resonant anecdotes, and it is characteristically marked by modesty and self-deprecating humour. In fact, Niven is hard on himself - and occasionally even 'beats himself up'. He brings himself before us as son, student, scholar, teacher, father, actor, and organiser; he is a 'safe pair of hands' who is, he tells us, a bit clumsy. He is also a man who has repeatedly reached out, stretched himself, taken the road un-travelled by and risen to unanticipated challenges.

Niven established a firm reputation in a now conventional area of Lawrentian studies, but he refused to rest on those academic laurels. He has repeatedly engaged with the new.

He has, for example, listened to the voices of his generation - and the generations born in the 1930s - from around the world. Initially many of these were African and he has published extensively on African writing: on Achebe – with whom he enjoyed a long friendship, Elechi Amadi, and Jack Mapanje – their sons kicked a foot-ball around together! But he has not confined himself to Africa: supervised by A Norman Jeffares, of whom more below, he completed a wide-ranging PhD thesis at Leeds that meant he had to address fiction not only from Africa but also from the Caribbean and from India! After Lawrence he turned to Indian writers , and he has published on Nirad C Chaudhuri, Mulk Raj Anand, R K Narayan and Raja Rao. He has also taken on disconcerting, disruptive figures who move confidently around the English-speaking world upsetting people and trailing controversy. That is to say he has, in various ways and 'in real time', he engaged with both V.S. Naipaul, dubbed 'V S Nightfall' by his fellow West Indian Derek Walcott, and Salman Rushdie, who has been called many and much worse names! Niven has repeatedly moved away from the comfortable and conventional coming to terms with those who have little in common with his roots in Scottish manses, his South London upbringing, or his 'off to Africa' spirit.

Niven comes from a large family, and has a well-populated hinterland on the distaff side. His mother, Elizabeth Isobel Robertson Mair, was the second of the thirteen children born to the eminent Classical scholar Alexander Mair and Elizabeth Mackay Bisset (1882-1950).[Twelve of the children of that marriage survived infancy and Niven had a total of thirty-five first cousins! On his father's side, he was a 'grandchild of Empire' – his father was educated in the UK from a very early age while *his* father worked in Burma.

Thanks to 'the Dulwich experiment', Niven was able to attend the College in South London founded by Edward Alleyn. There he benefited from exceptional teaching and from there he won an Open Exhibition in English to Cambridge. The progression was not quite straightforward since, Exhibition or no Exhibition, he had to knuckle down in the third year sixth in order to satisfy the University's requirement of an 'O' level pass in mathematics or a science. Those were weaker areas for the young Niven, but he was helped by the Master of Dulwich College, Ronald Groves, who, unwilling to see an Oxbridge place slip through his fingers, stepped in to give two terms worth of one to one tuition. The coaching paid off. Niven earned a mark of 56% for 'O' level Chemistry, and the way to his grandfather's College, Gonville and Caius College was cleared. In the memoir, Niven writes that he 'was able to follow (his) brothers to Cambridge, but it had been a close run thing'. Unless the reader is careful, the talk of difficulties with science may dim the distinction of the Open Exhibition: on his chosen terrain, literary studies, Niven was an exhibitioner, the *crème de la crème*!

Our memorialist does not dwell on his academic accomplishments and wears his learning lightly. The staff at−Dulwich must have played a part in his emergence as a scholar, critic and teacher, but extra-curricular activities also helped to shape the Niven who became known to many as an accomplished, articulate performer in the public arena. Niven writes revealingly that '(Dulwich College) dramatic society was a lifeline for someone who did not excel at sport'. In addition to College drama, he was also involved at school and later with the Rafter Players that 'started up in the attic' of a school friend, and from those modest beginnings went on to tour internationally. The group gave Niven a chance to take on challenging roles, such as Leontes, and reflects his interest in theatre, that, like his commitment to family, runs throughout his life.

While a schoolboy Niven became adapt at delivering lines written by others on stage, and he also cultivated his own speechwriting and developed the ability to think on his feet. These qualities were encouraged in the debating chamber and in school competitions. Niven writes, with characteristic modesty, that he 'did sufficiently well in inter-school debates to be elected Chairman of the Public Schools Debating Association'. About which one might add: 'Yes, and the rest!' By which I mean that he must have brought many other qualities to the election. In addition to eloquence, there must also have been confidence, competence, organizational skills and the ability to improvise. All of these qualities have been in evidence down the years.

Given that he had reached such heights (Chairman!) as a schoolboy debater, it may seem surprising that Niven did not make a mark at the Union when, in 1963, he went up to Cambridge. By way of explanation, he writes that the debating forum was 'in the hands of a Conservative oligarchy. Led by future Chancellor of the Exchequer Norman Lamont.' He confides that he 'found (himself) too nervous and too intimidated to flourish in these self-consciously august and narcissistic surroundings' and adds, harshly: 'I was a flop.' (48). Perhaps. In any case, the Union's loss was the ADC's gain, and Niven's love of theatre became apparent once again. He gestures towards his contemporaries in the ADC (= CUADC = Cambridge University Amateur Dramatic Club) writing: 'The big student stars were Germaine Greer and Sally Kinsey-Miles.' Of his own achievements, he writes briefly that he 'appeared in some good productions' before moving on to round off the paragraph with a self-deprecating anecdote.

Niven writes appreciatively of tutors and lecturers at Cambridge, and clearly missed Donald Davie when that tutor took up a professorship at the University of Essex. We should not, however, take him entirely seriously when he says he only had 'one small triumph' while an undergraduate - winning a hymn-writing competition. I think the Cambridge years were important for the maturing critic and scholar, but I can see that they were not, perhaps, 'the making of him'. He was 'made' both earlier and later. His farewell to the university town reads: 'I still love (Cambridge), to which I have returned many times, but though I look back on my time there with gratitude I am not sure I do so with much affection.'

Towards the end of his final undergraduate year, Niven found out about the Commonwealth Scholarship scheme for post-graduate work and he applied to do an MA at the University of Ghana. Readers of this publication will be particularly interested in the 12 ½ pages devoted to the three years spent at Legon. On those pages, he refers to politics, more precisely he quotes from a letter written home after the 'aborted insurrection on 17th April 1967', and he includes several observations about the theatre in Accra and Legon. He refers to playing Sir Andrew Aguecheek in a cast that included Paul Danquah as Feste, and he comments on student productions of work by Joe de Graft. He also mentions the British Council-sponsored visits by James Cairncross, Judi Dench and Barbara Jefford.

Niven deftly brings alive members of the Legon community including Alex Kwapong, Alan Nunn May, and his fellow Commonwealth Scholars, Ruth Banfield and Jean Le Guen. It was, however, the English Department that was the centre of his life, and people connected with it are given particular attention. The West African staff during his time included Ime Ikkideh, 'on occasion' George Awoonor Williams, and Niven's thesis supervisor, Dr Kojo (later Kwadzo) Senanu. (Kofi Sey, Tom Kwami and A N Mensah were also there - the memoir is not meant to be comprehensive!) The Head of Department when he arrived was Douglas Duncan, and Duncan gave way to M Bryn Davies. The 'grandee of the Department' was, we read, Robin Mayhead, who was 'steeped in the Leavisite mode of critical discourse', and the external examiner was Norman Jeffares, who was known as 'Derry' and as 'Professor Fixit'. This sobriquet had been earned because of the academic network he was at the centre of an 'empire' that enabled him to 'place' academics in lectureships or chairs in various Commonwealth countries. Davies was one of those so placed, and so was Alec Hardy, who succeeded Davies. The manipulating 'External' was important for Niven, as we shall see, but he was not the most important person connected with the English Department. That distinction went to the most junior member of staff in the Department when he arrived, a VSO called Helen Trow who, in due course, became Mrs Niven.

Niven mentions three of students he got to know at Legon: James Kofi Agovi, Joyce Aryee and Chris Asher (Jr). And there is much to be said about each of those remarkable people! Niven is, however, legitimately content to introduce them, point quickly towards areas in which he knew them and in which they moved, and then pass on. *In Glad or Sorry Hours* is a personal document, and the reader relishes the particular, the individual observations that the author offers in his well-paced prose. A stylist, Niven sums up his feelings for the West Africa country that was his introduction to what is sometimes considered the post-colonial world in a manner that illustrates the overwhelmingly positive tone and the manner of his writing: 'Part of my heart remains in Ghana …. I have occasionally returned. My liking for the people, my admiration for their ancient cultures, and my enjoyment of Ghanaian cuisine never dim.' The Legon years were, as is apparent from the direction his career took, very important.

From Ghana, on the advice of Jeffares, Niven undertook a PhD at Leeds, supervised by Norman Jeffares. As anticipated about, the topic of his thesis was a wide one: a 'comparative study of African, Caribbean and Asian fiction in English focusing on the relationship of the individual to the community.' That is to say, it was dauntingly innovative in scope and subject. The memorialist spares us the agonies of composition, preferring to set down his observations on Jeffares as a conscientious supervisor and a sometimes distracted head of department. For further reading on Jeffares, readers are advised to skip the Wikipedia 'stub' and go for John Sutherland's *Guardian* obituary. The *eminence gris* role that Jeffares played at Legon bred justifiable local resentment, and I recall that Senanu challenged Hardie's expectation that 'the external' would rubber-stamp his degree classifications at the expense of students. In due course the academic grip of literary neo-colonialism was loosened, but it was a painful process.

After a year teaching in the University of Leeds, and by this time married to Helen, Niven moved to the (new) University of Stirling. From the memoir, it is clear that Niven's eight 'glorious years' in Scotland were particularly rich in friendships, in the development of new interests and in the racking up of achievements. For example, he established the University's high profile for Commonwealth literary studies - or the 'new literatures', and he directed a major Ionesco play! It was, incidentally, clearly important during this period, Helen was moving forward with her own impressive career in the Open University.

At this point (1978), and because he 'feared being stuck in a groove', Niven made a bold decision and left full-time academia for a job in the voluntary sector. He took the first of the jobs that make his career profile so distinctive, and that is shown by the letters after his name. In his MA and PhD are followed by OBE and LV0 – the latter standing for Lieutenant of the Royal Victorian Order. There were jobs between posts, detours, add-ons, and 'significant involvements', but, broadly, after 1978 Niven became the Director General of the Africa Centre in Covent Garden, then the Director of the Literature Section at the Arts Council and then the Director of the British Council, Principal of Cumberland Lodge in Windsor Great Park before becoming President of PEN.

Niven plays down the influence he has exerted in the posts he has held, but the names scattered through the text and occasional observations about funding should be noted. For example, writing of the visit of W G Sebald when he was at the Arts Council (1997-2001), Niven is able to wrap up the episode thus: '(h)e left my office that morning with a commitment of close to £100,000 to help set it up' the British Centre for Literary Translation.

The personal dimension guaranteed by the term 'memoir' means that the book repeatedly shows how Niven's professional, public life had an impact on his family or private life. One resonant anecdote comes from his time as at the British Council (1997-2001) following his Department's decision to commission Bryan Cheyette to write on Muriel Spark for the series Writers and their Work. In the committee-room where the pairing was made it might have seemed unexceptional. However, it had repercussions because Muriel Spark objected to the choice. In Niven's carefully composed account that effortlessly takes cognisance of Spark's religious preoccupations, we read that Cheyette was 'anathema' to her.

When she heard that Cheyette had been commissioned to write about her work, Muriel Spark, who had had various contacts with Niven over the years, rang his home number. Niven was out so Spark gave his school-age daughter, Isabella, a message. Spark's message was that she was going to 'have to sue (Niven) for heavy damages.' 'And', she continued: 'if I don't have satisfaction I may have to take my case to the European Court of Human Rights.'

In Niven's memoir, the episode is related in a paragraph that begins gently: 'One day when my daughter was sitting at home in Woburn Sands revising for her 'A' level by listening to Geraldine McEwan's recorded reading of one of her set texts, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, the telephone rang.' He rounds off his account of the irate novelist's threats by reflecting on the impact of the eruption of 'a work issue' on the domestic front: the tone is unruffled. We read: 'The serendipity of the two voices, Muriel's on the 'phone and Jean Brodie's on tape, did not faze Isabella, but it may have helped on her way to a good exam result.'

As with many other fascinating moments described in the memoir, the matter is left for the reader to ponder. It is good to hear that Isabella was unfazed by the encounter. Niven does not tie up the loose ends of the litigious threats, but he does pass on a comment about the bulkiness of Spark's file held by the Society of Authors. The message from this, and from much else in the memoir, is that the memorialist shares his experiences and leaves others who may wish to do so to follow them up.

The memoir handles the Spark episode with a lightness of touch, but Niven had weightier controversies to worry about. How could it be otherwise given the prominence and sensitivity of the positions he occupied during a period fraught with issues of, for example, race, decolonisation, gender, history, and sexuality? When he admits he 'had started to look under (his) car for suspect objects' we should make no mistake about the sensitivity of the work he was undertaking and the risks he (and his family) faced. The concern about his car came at the time when Salman Rushdie – and those associated with him – were under threat. Niven has written with wit, generosity of spirit, *sang froid*, and a light touch, but we should not fail to sense the weighty issues being contested in the world in which he moved.

In Glad or Sorry Hours is published by Starhaven. ISBN 0-936315-48-2. It is available on Amazon and as an ebook: https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/0936315482. £15.00.