WILLIAM ALLAN NEILSON:  
“A KING O’ MEN [AND WOMEN, TOO!], FOR A’ THAT”

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O wad some Power the giftie ge us,  
To see oursels as ither see us.  
Robert Burns

In 2001, at a session of a conference dedicated to those who were key figures in the rescue of refugee intellectuals from Nazi-occupied Europe, I spoke of the very special role of William Allan Neilson. I began my talk with the quote and followed by saying: “One of Bobbie Burns' most loving interpreters, Smith College's Scottish-born third president, William Allan Neilson, had that gift.” I said that he was the perfect exemplar of the sort of person I once styled “an outsider-within,”

Reviewing his works and his legacy in preparation for this lecture tonight, I still think so.

President Neilson seemed to know and understand his adopted country, its noble ideals and its foibles in many ways better than many of its native sons. And he often acted on that knowledge. Over his long life, in addition to his primary work as a teacher, scholar, writer, and college administrator, he played a number of civic and political roles to help his fellow Americans enjoy their full measure of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." He was also one of the leading forces fighting to provide care, succor, assistance and shelter, mainly but not exclusively, to refugees.

I should pause to note that it was because of my own interest in American responses to fascism in the 1930s and in those who sought to raise awareness in this country of the threat posed by Nazism and try to rescue Hitler’s victims, that I came to study the attitudes and actions of President Neilson. In the course of my research, helped immeasurably by what I found digging into the rich trove of papers houses in Smith’s archives, interviews alumnae of the college during his long time here and with many who knew Neilson and his work with and for exiled intellectuals, including Bill Oram’s father, Harold Oram, , I also got to know the man.

A decade after conducting rather extensive research on the life and work of William Allan Neilson, focused mainly, if not exclusively on his extracurricular activities in civil liberties, civil rights, and, especially, the rescue and resettlement of scholars in exile, the members of the Committee celebrating the centennial of the establishment of the Smith Library asked me to speak, once again, on the man who was for so many both a model and a mentor. The invitation prompted me to go back to the drawing board, to my notes and to the archives which house his official and personal papers in an effort to learn more. My backing and filling revealed many things I had overlooked and many others I had left out.
of my previous lecture and the essay on Neilson that was published in the book, *The Dispossessed: An Anatomy of Exile*, a collaborative effort of those who participated in a year long Kahn Institute project on “The Anatomy of Exile” in 2005. But I have to say that, once again, a source I found most useful both in terms of what the author wrote and the leads she provided for further probing, was the book, *Neilson of Smith* by alumna, Margaret Farran Thorp.

In her biography, President Neilson, Thorp noted that

> A college ... must concern itself with the health of the body -- yet a college is not a gymnasium; it must be concerned for morals -- yet a college is not a church; it must help the student to social adjustment – yet a college is not a welfare agency, nor an employment bureau, nor a psychiatric clinic. From the point of view of the college, all the parts of the whole man are important, but all the other parts are secondary to the mind. It is the student's mind which the college is primarily committed to develop and train. When an institution begins to put too much emphasis on one of the secondary cares, its foundations tremble.

I hadn’t read Thorp’s book at the time but, in 1995, after serving for almost 12 months on the search committee for a new president to succeed Mary Maples Dunn, the night before her inauguration, on behalf of our committee, I tried to describe what we had been looking for -- and what Ruth Simmons was facing. I began by describing....

The contest for succession at The school we know so well. It wasn't such an on'rous task It only seemed like -- well... Like trying to find a needle In a haystack made of names Affixed to resumes proclaiming Matchless skills and fames. Of deeds achieved in ivied halls And other such venues, To dazzle even jaundiced eyes When asked about their views Of how to run a complex place And raise the needed money, And handle faculty and staff, And students and alum-ee, And be in town and far away At home and College Hall
Administrator, scholar, friend
A leader for us all.

At Smith, it seems, t’was always so!

Rereading Margaret Thorp’s book, I learned that William Allan Neilson was quoted as having said the same thing – and far more succinctly! "A president should be a scholar, teacher, organized, authority on education, administrator, financier, writer, orator, judge of men, leader, inspirer of youth, publicist, diplomatist, man of the world, [and] moral idealist." As I was to discover, Neilson himself was, as is said, “All of the above.” Surely some of it had to do with the way his twig was bent early on. Some had to do with serendipity and where he found himself. Much had to do with the times in which he lived. Let me say something about the background of this academic leader and very public man.

A Worldly Philosopher

William Allan Neilson (known to his family as "Will") was born in Doune, Perthshire, Scotland on May 28, 1869. He attended Montrose Academy and the University of Edinburgh, spending some of his time during his student years working at a settlement house in Edinburgh. He received his M.A. in 1891, the year he and his family emigrated to Canada. Shortly after their arrival he obtained an appointment as Resident English Master of Upper Canada College in Toronto. Four years later he moved to the United States to study for a Ph.D. at Harvard. He received the degree in 1898; became an American citizen in 1905 and, the following year, married Elisabeth Muser of Offenburg, Germany. The Neilsons had two daughters, Margaret and Caroline, Bill’s mother, and a son, Allan, who died of rheumatic fever at the age of 17.

A new career as professor of English literature took Neilson to Bryn Mawr and Columbia and then back to Harvard, where he taught from 1906 to 1917, the year he came to Smith College.

Why, you might ask, did he leave fair Harvard for this outback of Massachusetts? Here is what I learned:

When President Burton was wooed away from Smith to serve as President of the University of Minnesota, Neilson was approached by the Smith Board of Trustees. Most of his Harvard friends -- including President Eliot -- and his colleagues, urged him not to take the position, arguing that he was now a well-established scholar and highly respected teacher, and said either that he was ill-suited to be an administrator or, if he succeeded, it would be the death of his scholarship.

He wavered for some time, frequently consulting with the stand-in “head” -- but, note, a woman who was never given the title, "Acting President" -- Dean Ada Comstock. Ada Comstock would soon be offered the presidency of Radcliffe -- and Neilson would be asked by her what he thought she should do! Remembering that he turned down the advice of his close friends and took the Smith job, he balked. But, speaking at her
inauguration in Cambridge, he said that, if she tired of Radcliffe, he would save a place for her at Smith!

Thorpe and others who have written of President Neilson’s early days, all noted that it was difficult for him -- and for his wife, Li, as he called her, to leave their lovely home on Kirkland Street, especially to move to a rather stodgy place that had been the resident of presidents Seelye and Burton. But they did. (One saving grace was the promise by the Board to build a new president's house on campus. They came through and the house was completed in 1920.)

Neilson arrived on campus in 1917 and, all the evidence we have indicates that, while Harvard colleagues concerns notwithstanding, he not only proved to be extremely well suited to administration but somehow managed to remain a dedicated and productive scholar.

President Neilson was the author of *The Origins and Sources of Courtly Love*, *The Essentials of Poetry*, *The Facts about Shakespeare*, *A History of English Literature*, editor of a volume entitled, *Roads to Knowledge*, and author of innumerable articles, essays, reports, letters to editors and letters to correspondents all over the world. He was also co-editor, with Harvard President Charles W. Eliot, of The Harvard Classics' "Five Foot Shelf" and writer of most of the notes and introductions in that 50 volume series. He was editor-in-chief of the second edition of *Webster’s New International Dictionary*. Most of these books and documents, including the letters are housed in this library.

Neilson was President of the Modern Language Association; Trustee of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Education; member of the Board of Overseers of Harvard, and the president of Smith from 1917-1939.

By all accounts, including those of alumnae and several faculty members I interviewed who were at Smith during his long reign, Neilson was a great teacher, an outstanding speaker, and a powerful presence. He was also a preacher of sorts – and a superb role player, too. One of his former students, whose words are quoted in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, described him as one who "could tease and cajole, scold, admonish and warn. Upon occasion he could be Moses, Jeremiah, or Isaiah, Lewis Carroll or W. S. Gilbert." She was not alone in that assessment.

I would add one more phrase to the many descriptors: William Allan Neilson was a mover and a shaker. Everything he did seemed marked by a special kind of informed engagement.

In his many years in the presidency of Smith, Neilson was a forceful advocate for the liberal arts and the broadening of traditional offerings. For him, such activity was necessary to achieve his academic goals but, truth to speak, it was hardly sufficient to satisfy his broader concerns. Neilson was also a political man, *par excellence*. And he had no hesitation to use his office as a bully pulpit to put forth his liberal agenda.

Though he was kind and generous -- some say he was generous to a fault, he didn't suffer fools. He had as little patience for narrow-minded politicians as he did for ill-informed
professors. He decried bigotry in its many guises and forcefully stood up against injustice. It was important, he told his friends and taught his students, to know facts and process them. But, it was also important to act. His idea of a citizen was one who was both informed and engaged.

Not surprisingly, Neilson’s advocacy made him quite controversial in some circles, especially when he would speak out on any number of issues far removed from his areas of acknowledged academic expertise. It didn't phase him. On the contrary, he was energized by those who opposed him.

President Neilson was among the very few academic leaders who spoke out against the imposition of ethnic quotas in universities, who upheld the rights of defenders of Sacco and Vanzetti and others accused of “political crimes,” who supported “suspect” groups like the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. During his tenure as President of Smith, Neilson testified in the Boston State House on many occasions, none more forcefully than in opposition to the Massachusetts Teachers' Oath Bill which required all teachers to swear fealty to Federal and State constitutions in order "to protect youth from subversive doctrine."

His civic activities frequently invoked the wrath of those who saw him as a subversive himself, even "a communist agitator". Indeed, he gained a kind of notoriety -- his supporters would call it distinction -- by being included in Elizabeth Dilling's Red Network, where, according to biographer Hubert Herring, he was cited for having "trifled with Russia, blessed sundry organizations standing for civil liberties, and indulged in other 'communist' deeds. (Neilson is reported to have responded to the attack by Dillings, the DAR doyenne, by saying he felt "proud to have been honored with a place [on her list].")"

Smith’s third president was deeply concerned about racist and reactionary forces in this country and abroad. He rejected chauvinistic jingoism and nativist ideology, and he feared the consequences of American First isolationism. He was an outspoken anti-fascist who, early on, warned of the dangers being promulgated by Mussolini and Franco and Adolf Hitler and felt Americans had to wake up to evils their policies portended. They had to be educated.

Neilson was leading proponent of both the study and practice of internationalism on his campus and far beyond it. It was during his first three years in Northampton, 1917-1920, that he was proud to support the efforts of the Smith Relief Unit in France. The activities of the participants were reciprocated with the presentation of a replica of the gates of Grecourt that mark the principal entrance to the college and were to become its long familiar insignia.

In 1925 President Neilson established the second Junior Year Abroad program in the U.S. (The first had been started by the University of Delaware two years earlier.) Thirty-two carefully chosen Smith College students, all with sufficient French skills to function in Paris, were provided with the opportunity to study in France. "Neilson, ever the paterfamilias, worried about his charges, and made forceful statements about how they should behave. According to a report in The Smith College Weekly, published April 28, 1926, Neilson said,
You cannot turn a group of students loose without making rules for their conduct. They do not know the conventions of the country and they cannot learn them in three months. We try to make our students see that one of the things they went to Paris was to deepen their insight into another civilization and the way to do that is to live on the inside for a year.\textsuperscript{viii}

He argued that the Junior Year as he had conceived it was definitely not to be the old fashioned casual Grand Tour, "when the traveler remained a stranger." Writing in the journal \textit{Progressive Education} in 1930, President Neilson said his: "juniors [were to be] steeped for a year in an alien civilization."\textsuperscript{ix}

Neilson also established a German House on the Smith campus in 1935. A French House was founded several years later. To enrich the community and bring in different perspectives, the president facilitated the enrollment of a number of foreign students and the visits of many lecturers and professors from abroad.

In recognition of his contribution to enhancing the exchange of students between France and the United States, in 1935 President Neilson was inducted into the Legion of Honor from the French government. He accepted the honor "as the representative of the French teachers of the College who have earned what has come to me."\textsuperscript{x}

The French decoration was to be but one of many honors bestowed upon Neilson for his role in international understanding. A citation accompanying an honorary degree he received from Kenyon College in June, 1940, for example, included these words: "A liberal in public affairs as well as education, you have sponsored many good causes and insisted upon an enlightened view of foreign affairs."\textsuperscript{xi}

Neilson was (is) not without criticism. As described in the just-published book, \textit{The Third Reich in the Ivory Tower}, by Stephen H. Norwood,\textsuperscript{xii} the great advocator and supporter of JYA (Junior Year Abroad) programs, with other presidents of Seven Sister institutions, who had helped to found the Junior Year in Germany Program, based in Munich, and on whose board he sat, he maintained Smith College’s relationships with universities in Germany until 1939, despite the fact that they become dominated by the Nazis and had purged their faculties of all Jews. Smith College also kept its affiliation with the University of Florence, under fascist control, even after the Italian government had introduced a series of anti-Jewish laws in the fall of 1938, laws modeled on the notorious Nuremberg Laws of Nazi Germany. Norwood’s claims are corroborated by my own examination of JYA files in the Smith College archives. What is unclear is why President Neilson, one of the most outspoken anti-fascists among the ranks of the still very conservative cadre of university presidents -- many of whose presidents refused to raise their voices in protest against atrocities in Germany and crackdowns against human rights in Italy,\textsuperscript{xiii} didn’t break ranks with them and cancelled agreements relating to student exchanges in those two countries is hard to understand. Some say it was because he felt it might be useful for his students to see at first hand the menaces of the regimes under which the partner institutions were functioning. If that was the case, the
evidence, from letters of students still on file that mention how impressed the writers were by the “order and discipline” and by the “wonderful aura of national pride” they found under totalitarian rule, belied his prediction.

In recently published paper on “The Reception of Refugee Scholars in America,” historian Marjorie Lamberti noted that, “President William Allan Neilson of Smith College was one of a relatively small number of academic leaders who spoke out forcefully as early as 1933-1934 against the racist ideology of the Nazi government, the imposition of these ideas on the German universities, and the discriminations against Jews.” This is one reason the JYA story, given William Allan Neilson’s record as an outspoken progressive and anti-fascist, remains, to me at least, a singular enigma.

For more than ten years, Neilson's compulsory Monday morning "chapel talks" were devoted to weekly reviews of current affairs, many of them based on what students were expected to keep up with the national and international news. To insure exposure, the president arranged to have copies of both the daily New York Times and Herald Tribune delivered to every house on campus and urged his students to read these papers.

No Summer Soldier

No summer soldier, William Allan Neilson's deeds were as important as his words. And perhaps his greatest effect outside of this community was to help insure the civil rights of all Americans, including those long disenfranchised, and in establishing precedents for aiding the dispossessed. He played critical roles in many agencies concerned with these matters, including in which he was the Legal Defense and Education Fund of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Emergency Rescue Committee, both of which he helped to establish.

In the first case, Neilson, who on the Board of Directors of the NAACP from 1930 to 1946, was the a key organizer and the first chair of the “Committee of 100,” a group of civil rights advocates who established and found financial support for the Legal Defense and Education Fund of the NAACP in 1943, the year of the worst race riots since World War I. With Thurgood Marshall as its lead lawyer, the LDEF was to fight and win many battles in the courts, including the Supreme Court of the United States. Its most significant victory was the famous school decision case in 1954, Brown v. the Board of Education in Topeka, Kansas, in which the Supreme Court ruled, unanimously, that "separate could never be equal."

Responding to the series of violations of human rights that were spreading across Europe, in 1933 President Neilson became an active member of the "EC," the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced German [later changed to Foreign] Scholars. The members of this committee, differing somewhat in their approaches to aiding refugee scholars than those who founded the University in Exile at the New School for Social Research in New York and the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. They were not so much concerned with establishing special sanctuaries for refugee scholars as they were in paving the way for such exiles to find positions in traditional institutions. Smith College was one of the few places where, led by Neilson, the plan was put into action. In fact, when the W. A. Neilson Chair of Research was established in his honor it expressly provided the College with the "opportunity
of inviting outstanding scholars to come into residence in the college without prescribing for them particular duties of any kind," the President used its flexible mandate to bring European scholars to the campus, a number of whom were political refugees. Among those given the special title of Neilson Professor was the psychologist Kurt Koffka, who had come to Smith in 1927. The literary scholar and author of *Goliath*, G. A. Borgese, was here from 1932-1935. The music critic Alfred Einstein, came in 1939; Carl Becker in 1941, and the art historian, Edgar Wind, served as Neilson Professor from 1944-1948. In addition to the “Neilson Professors,” through the president’s efforts -- and those of his successor, Herbert Davis, many anti-Fascists found a home at Smith and in the surrounding area. Some were from Italy; many more were from Nazi-dominated lands. Included in the first group were the likes of Michele Cantarella who, with his wife, Helena, led an anti-Fascist campaign from Northampton. Their circle included Gaetano Salvemini (who was teaching at Harvard), G. A. Borgese, Renato Poggioli (father of that NPR correspondent with the great voice, Sylvia), and, after the war, Max Salvadori.

Among those many other who also taught at Smith was the Czech scholar, Hans Kohn (who first came in 1934 and stayed until 1950), German refugees Fritz Heider, Manfred Kridl, Anita Laurie Ascher, Walter Richter, Martin Sommerfeld, Suzanne Engelmann, Annelies Argandler Rose, Walter Richter and Walter Kotschnig. Those listed here represented a wide range of disciplines, history, psychology, language and literature.

In the 1940s Walter Kotschnig chaired a Neilson-inspired and Davis-supported Committee on Refugee Scholarships which helped bring children of German, Austrian, English and French exiles to Smith. Among those who benefited from one of the Committee’s scholarships was the Ukrainian-born Nelly Schargo, daughter of Simon Shargo, a prominent member of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee’s European campaign to aid refugees there. Another was Marianna Simmel, daughter of German physicians and grand daughter of the sociologist, Georg Simmel.

Oscar Seidlin was another German exile who found refuge and a job at Smith and who, before taking a two year leave of absence to serve in the U.S. Army, was, with Elisabeth Muser Neilson, a most active member of the Committee of Loyal Citizens of German birth, an organization made up mainly of German anti-Nazis living abroad.

The letters of many of the refugees Neilson brought to Smith (some of them in the College’s archives) acknowledge Neilson’s special role and the extent to which his college served as a model for what could be done throughout the land: welcoming those dispossessed and also benefitting from what they might bring to American educational institutions.

On January 3, 1936, the St. Louis *Globe Democrat* reported on an address William Allan Neilson gave to a convention of scientists gathered in St. Louis in which, “he appealed to an innate sense of freedom and justice felt by all Americans and also to common sense [and] urged that our hard and fast immigration laws be relaxed to permit the unhampered entry of intellectuals who have been driven from foreign lands because they are not in sympathy with dictatorships in power there.” His special reference was to Germany, Russia, and Italy. The writer then quoted from Neilson who had said
The prescribing of subjects of research by political authorities, the imposing of conclusions to be arrived at, the choice of teachers and directors on grounds of political docility, the stifling of free discussion, all these and many more poisonous procedures are already having their bane-full effect on the science and scholarship of nations that formerly were leaders in their fields. They are committing national suicide. xvii

Interestingly, in what was a news story, the writer editorialized to the extent that he stated "Dr. Neilson is quite right in urging that 'it would be a profound mistake for our intellectual future if we permit a temporary economic emergency or hampering immigration regulations to prevent us from offering a generous hospitality to men whose consciences forbid them to forswear their intellectual birthright and who come to us stript and ruined but with hands laden with inestimable riches of the spirit.'" xviii

Such an endorsement was not so common in those days of economic depression, growing xenophobia and widespread anti-Semitism in this country. Neilson knew it and did everything he could to alter the prevailing sentiments.

Worried about growing power of the anti-democratic forces and the scapegoating of Jews in Europe, especially in Germany, he was also quick to let his concerns be known. On learning about Kristallnacht, the rampage of anti-Semitic terror on November 9, 1938, Neilson immediately expressed his outrage. Speaking at a mass meeting in Northampton, Massachusetts, he stated unequivocally.

This is what we have to do. We have to say “I will not stand by and be silent before these terrible things. I will not forget my common humanity, the common element in the whole race. I cannot be contemporary with these events and have it said by my children that I lived through that and did nothing about it -- for no reason that I could honestly offer." xix

Neilson called for the immediate admission of at least 500,000 Jewish victims of Nazi persecution, but his impassioned pleas fell on deaf ears. No special accommodations were made until 1944 when, very reluctantly, the U.S. authorities allowed 1,000 refugees admitted on a temporary basis. All were brought to a former army post known as the Fort Ontario in Oswego, New York. Those refugees, escorted by another advocate and agitator for refugee admissions, the journalist and scholar, Ruth Gruber, were confined to the base and were to be there for the duration, of the war then then sent to back to Europe, though the repatriation order was later rescinded. xx

A New York Times article, published on January 11, 1939, was headed NORTHAMPTON READY TO CARE FOR 25 REFUGEE CHILDREN. A subhead stated
"Message From President Neilson, Mrs. Coolidge [wife of the late president who had returned to their home in Northampton] and Others Urges State Department and Congressmen to Find Means to Admit Them to This Country." In the text, datelined Northampton, Jan. 10, it was explained that, following a meeting of the Northampton refugee committee presided over by President Neilson, a motion put forth by Professor Seth Wakeman of Smith College, voted to send the following wire:

"Deeply moved by the plight of victims of religious and racial persecution in Germany, we have secured homes and funds in this community for at least 25 refugee children. Urge you to explore every possible means of admitting children to this country. Suggest possibility of admitting them at once on basis of quotas unfulfilled in past years, or by anticipating future quotas. We are confident you will share our concern."

Further along it was reported that Professor Otto Kraushaar of the Philosophy Department at Smith [later to become the president of Goucher College in Baltimore] had announced that Smith students had raised nearly $2000 to assist students fleeing Germany to attend the college.

Neilson continued to voice his concerns and to encourage action. He fired up his students, rallied the community and reached out to colleagues across the country. He did what he could to get his message of humanitarian intervention to the members of Congress -- and the American people. He tried to do this in a variety of ways: writing letters to key figures and to the editors of major newspapers, speaking out at meetings of learned societies, and working with others -- as he had earlier in his early involvement in the NAACP and various refugee-support committees -- in lobbying for immediate aid to victims and for longer run changes in policy and attitude on the part of influential Americans.

Addressing a broad spectrum of prominent figures and members of the public itself, he stated this in uncertain terms in a number of speeches and letters and newspaper articles.

In a typed note from a speech dated January 11, 1939, Neilson wrote specifically about the advantages of welcoming refugee intellectuals to the ranks of their faculties. “My theory is that the college executive should provide for his students the best teachers and scholars he can afford whether native or foreign.”

In that same period, while the German juggernaut was rolling across Europe and one country after another was falling under Hitler’s hegemony, Neilson and others sought to turn those words – “offer a refuge to the persecuted” – into direct action. He was involved in the establishment of several organizations, most notably, the Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC), which was to focus on the rescue of anti-Nazi activists, fellow intellectuals, and

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1This was frequently recommended ploy, called "mortgaging." Some were saved by sympathetic consular officers, often in direct defiance of general policy.
Providing Home for the Dispossessed and Protecting the Rights of the Foreign Born

A few words about the ERC. In 1940 Neilson joined Paul Hagen, an exiled leader of the anti-Nazi group, *Neu Beginnen* and Reinhold Niebuhr, to help to found the Emergency Rescue Committee, or ERC. In addition to Hagen, Niebuhr and Neilson, other sponsors were Dorothy Thompson, a distinguished foreign correspondent, popular radio commentator Elmer Davis (who would soon head the Office of War Information), and five other college and university presidents – Charles Seymour of Yale, Robert Hutchins of Chicago, George Schuster of Hunter College, Alvin Johnson of the New School for Social Research, and Frank Kingdon, President of Newark University. Among the ERC’s most prominent early and longtime supporters were Max Ascoli, Thomas Mann, Jan Masaryk, Reinhold Niebuhr, Hendrik van Loon and the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt; among its most important staff members was a young lawyer named Harold Oram, an expert fund raiser and publicist who had already been involved in several political causes, including that of the Spanish Loyalists.

Oram had been a key figure in the American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. He left it owing to factional disputes and debates about the role of the Soviet Union in the campaign. xxii

Oram’s work with the Committee had included soliciting money for the Spanish Refugee Relief Campaign to aid the Republicans in exile. xxiii He was now prepared to play a similar role to rescue Hitler’s victims -- and did. His roster of contributors was central to assuring the underwriting of the activities of the Emergency Rescue Committee. xxiv (Oram would soon become Neilson's son-in-law, marrying his daughter, Caroline, in 1941.)

With the political support of the board and finances provided by Oram's efforts, the ERC's most successful endeavor was a clandestine operation carried out in Marseille, the most critical point of embarkation for those trying to escape from Europe in 1940. The operation was led by a young writer and editor named Varian Fry. Fry, a bookish, foppish Harvard graduate and magazine editor, seemed, despite his growing concern about the victims of the Nazis doubtlessly influenced by what he had witnessed on the streets of Berlin in 1935, a most unlikely secret agent. But that is precisely what he became. And he was most successful: a true American pimpernel. xxv

The rescue mission, initially operating out of the Hotel Splendide under the cover of a YMCA-endorsed legitimate relief organization, was staffed by an international cast of characters. Socialists, Social Democrats, and a few socialites, they were to be as varied in background and personality and temperament as the illustrious exiles they sought to spirit out of Vichy.

Fry had left New York with a list of 200 targeted for rescue. Yet, his group managed to facilitate the escape of nearly 2,000 foreigners and stateless persons (those, especially Jews,
who had been stripped of their citizenship by Nuremburg Laws and other edicts). Their ranks included such luminaries as Marc Chagall, Marcel Duchamp, Lion Feuchtwanger, Jacques Lipchitz, Wanda Landowska, Andre Masson, Ylla (the animal photographer), Lotte Leonard, Hannah Arendt, Andre Breton, Heinrich Mann (brother of Thomas), Golo Mann (Thomas's son), Walter Mehring, Franz Werfel and his wife, Alma Mahler Gropius Werfel, Otto Meyerhoff, Hans Sahl, Max Ernst, Guiseppe Modigliani, and Andre Masson. xxvi

One important member of Fry’s staff was Miriam Davenport. Contrary to how she is portrayed in a 2001 Showtime television movie, “Varian’s War,” Davenport did not go to Vassar. xxvii She was a Smith College graduate, class of 1937. She worked alongside Fry throughout in 1940 and into 1941, when the ERC operation in Marseille was forced to close down. Fry returned to the United States. Several years later he wrote Surrender on Demand, a memoir of his 13 months in Marseille. He dedicated the book, first published in 1945, to five colleagues, Anna Caples, Paul Hagen, Frank Kingdon, Ingrid Warburg and Harold Oram, "who made it possible" xxviii (Fry, iii.)

Not long after the Marseille operation ended, the International Relief Association, founded by Albert Einstein in 1933, merged with the Emergency Rescue Committee to form the International Rescue Committee to continue working to save those who, as their fund-raising flyers noted, were "WANTED BY THE GESTAPO."

Once again, William Allan Neilson, was there. He played a key role in shaping the new organization whose board included members of the old ERC council as well as such other movers and shakers as John Dewey, Robert Hutchins, Alvin Johnson, David Dubinsky and other well known religious and academic figures, journalists and labor leaders. xxix

From the start, the International Rescue Committee differed in certain critical ways from the majority of its sister refugee organizations. Unlike most of the others, which tended to be affiliated with Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish bodies, and were pridefully sectarian and publicly, at least, apolitical, IRC was intentionally neither! From its inception the organization, founded, endorsed and supported by a broad cross-section of private citizens, had a rather singular raison d'etre: to assist victims of totalitarianism -- whether the oppressors be "black" or "red"², in the old fashioned sense of those words.

Well over a half century after its founding, the International Rescue Committee remains one of principal non-sectarian refugee agencies in the United States. While the ERC’s focus was on refugee intellectuals, artists, and political activists, the IRC has long been

²To achieve its goals, the Committee has been willing, in some cases, eager to work with agencies of the US government. During the World War II its directorate and staff workers developed close relationships with clandestine organizations involved in the campaign to destroy the Third Reich. This pattern of cooperation continued into the Cold War when the CIA replaced the OSS. Some, including Eric Thomas Chester, suggest that these relationships represent a case study in cooption, yet much of their own analyses suggests that mutual accommodation might be a more accurate term. While often quite stormy, these were marriages of convenience. It was sometimes a bit incestuous. IRC’s board has long been quite diverse, including in its ranks, well-known; progressives as well as conservatives, socialists and bankers, Yankee patricians and Jewish radicals, many of whom also served in various capacities in the administrations of from FDR to George Bush.
involved in the rescue and resettlement of anyone forced to flee racial, religious and political oppression.

In 1940, the recently retired Smith College President helped to prepare the NRS handbook, *America Meets the Refugee*. It was a primer and guide for those, mainly volunteers, who were interested in becoming involved in aiding the “lucky few,” those who had managed to find asylum in America, in big cities like New York and Philadelphia and small ones like Northampton. Included in the text was a policy statement urging refugee workers to try to prevent “refugee ghettos” from forming in New York or anywhere else. The New York-based NRS encouraged its representatives to "send [the refugees] to the smaller cities and towns throughout the United States on a planned basis. . .send them to places where they have a better opportunity to find work, where they have an even chance to make friends, where the will meet Americans.”

In 1940, in a small book, *The City of Man: A Declaration on World Democracy*, prepared at the end of three-day conference of prominent figures in arts and letters on the problems of war and peace that had been chaired by Willam Allan Neilson, Herbert Agar, Lewis Mumford, G. A. Borgese and others argued that their "City of Man," their good society, rested on two fundamental elements: freedom and justice -- and an implicit world federalism. They wrote that,

> The City of Man must be much more than a League of Nations. . .It must be the Nation of Man embodied in the Universal State, the State of States. . .And the pluralistic system of the American Commonwealth, although prevented from reaching a complete expression. . .had shown its best age that the combination of local autonomy with unitary authority is. . .feasible on a continental scale, and therefore ultimately on a world-wide one.

Two years later, in an introduction to *We Escaped*, a volume consisting of twelve personal stories of flight to America, a few written by the refugees themselves and the majority based on interviews by Neilson’s daughter Caroline, Neilson wrote,

> Not only has there been little relaxation of the restrictions of our immigration laws to meet the emergency, but scores of measures to increase these restrictions and to rend the lot of the alien and the exile more difficult have been introduced into Congress. . .And the great mass of our people seem to look on without indignation.

On the next page he spoke out again in defense of the aliens who “ are infusing new life into many industries, into our universities, into our art and music. . .”

Neilson did what he could both to attempt to change the laws and to assist those who managed, somehow, to make to obtain scarce visas and make it to America. In addition to
extending his personal welcome to refugee scholars and teachers (including some of those mentioned in *We Escaped*) to his campus, he appealed to his professional colleagues, legislators, Northampton neighbors and students to do what *they* could to help the dispossessed.

In her biography, *Neilson of Smith*, Margaret Farrand Thorp, note that while he worked toward the future, Neilson felt impelled also to promote justice and freedom by some action that would produce immediate and concrete results. For the plight of refugee intellectuals he felt particular concern. He had appointed as many as he could to the Smith College faculty and he tirelessly wrote letters and talked with his administrative friends in the endeavor to find posts for others...With the ERC and the NRS Neilson worked both publicly and privately. Again and again he lent money from his personal funds or signed the affidavit guaranteeing financial support which made it possible for a German writer or teacher to gain entrance to the United States.xxxiv

Neilson was not only concerned with rescue and resettlement, he was pro-active in countering the still-extant anti-alien sentiment. In the same year he worked on the National Refugee Service handbook and chaired the Committee on the Study of the Organization of Peace 1940, he took on yet another task, serving as co-chair, with Ernest Hemingway, of another committee, the sponsors of a then-forthcoming conference of the American Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born at which President Roosevelt was to be the keynote speaker. In a Letter to the Editor to *The Nation* signed by Hemingway, the noted author invited the support of its readers for "work which I am certain will meet with their approval." He then explained,

You must be aware that the existence of the war in Europe has intensified the efforts of demagogic alien-baiters who seek to destroy our rights as Americans behind the subterfuge of attacking the so-called alien. Because I am anxious to do my part in helping to defeat this attack upon American democracy, I have agreed to serve as co-chairman of the Committee of 100 Sponsors for the Fourth Annual Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born. Dr. William Neilson, president emeritus of Smith College, is serving with me. An important undertaking of the conference is to prevent the passage of any of the seventy 'anti-alien' bills in Congress. These undemocratic proposals for deportation of non-citizens, for concentration camps, for registration and finger-printing are a menace to the continued existence of American democracy.xxxv

The conference was held on schedule and widely reported and commented on. Here, for example, is how the small town paper, the *Binghamton New York Sun* handled the story
under its heading NEARLY 100 ANTI-ALIEN BILLS FACING CONGRESS. An article, written by Letty Lynn, begins with a lengthy quotation from President Roosevelt's speech.

“….we must be constantly vigilant against the attacks of intolerance and injustice. We must scrupulously guard the civil rights and civil liberties of all citizens, whatever their background. We must remember that any oppression, any injustice, any hatred, is a wedge designed to attack our civilization. If reason is to prevail against intolerance, we must always be on guard. We welcome therefore the work to maintain the rights of the foreign born.” xxxvi

The rest of the article was about a different president, President Neilson. Ms. Lynn wrote that

"The American Committee for Protection of the Foreign Born, by the way, is not a radical organization. Unfortunately, many of the nation's worthy movements have won undeserved black eyes because other organizations masquerading as ‘patriotic’ or ‘protective’ are really subversive. However, men like Dr. William Allan Neilson, president emeritus of Smith College, have lent themselves to the committee. President Neilson is deadly earnest about the bills now before Congress. He warns that more than 20 proposals directed against the 'alien' have been introduced since the opening of the Congress in January [1940] and that (now quoting Neilson) 'It is essential that the American people voice their opposition to these anti-alien proposals immediately.'

A Special Legacy

Almost ten years ago, I said that here is much more to say about that deadly earnest man but I must stop. But I felt too little time. I feel that way this afternoon. So I will close, but not without one repeating what I said about President Neilson’s special legacy.

Whether railing against anti-alien legislation or aiding the dispossessed -- as in everything else he considered important, William Allan Neilson, often described as a "Gladstonian liberal," and, sometimes as a "Jeremiah-with-a-brogue," was informed, outspoken and engaged. He thrived on diversity and on controversy long before the former became a buzz-word and the latter something to fear.

William Allan Neilson was back in Northampton in the winter of 1946, finishing his research on his History of Smith College, when he had a fatal heart attack. His memorial service was in John M. Greene Hall and he was buried on the hill behind the President's House in the gardens his wife, Elisabeth, had overseen for so many years. Among the honorary pallbearers were members of the Board of Trustees, Robert Bradford, Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts, and Walter White, Secretary of the NAACP. But those who actually carried his pall were those he had long seen as the backbone of this
College, known in his day and in our own, as "The King's Men," named for the then-head of Buildings and Grounds, Franklin King.

William Allen Neilson was a king, too. Indeed, he was the sort of person Bobbie Burn’s must have had in mind when he wrote,

“The honest man, though ne’er sae puir,
Is king o’men for a’ that”

NOTES


ii Margaret Farrand Thorp, Neilson of Smith. New York: Oxford University Press, 1956, 4

iii Thorp quoting a sentence in M.A. De W. Howe, Classic Shades, 1928, see Thorp, 5


v Thorp, 189-90.

vi Idem.


x Thorp, op.cit. 198.

xi Smith College Archives’ memo from G. B. Ford to Mr. Holding, January 23, 1946.


xvi St. Louis Globe Democrat, January 3, 1936.

xvii Idem.

xviii Idem.

xix William Allan Neilson, Smith College archives, Neilson papers, December 1, 1938.


xxiii Mary Jayne Gold, Crossroads Marseilles 1940, New York: 1940, xii.


xxvii See Peter I. Rose, “Debasing Good History with Bad Fiction,” loc. cit, 19.


xxi As quoted in Thorp, 347.


xxviii *ibid.*, vii.

xxiv Thorp, 348-349.

xxv Ernest Hemingway, *The Nation*, January 27, 1940.

xxvi Letty Lynn, “Nearly 100 Anti-Alien Bills Facing Congress,” *Binghamton New York Sun*, March 27, 1940.