

ROBERT NIVISON

When I first visited Scotland with my wife and my sons and daughters in July, 1973, I had two overriding objectives: to walk about in Guardbridge where my father was born and in the mill where he had been an apprentice engineer, and to stand before my grandfather's grave in the churchyard of St. Athernase, Leuchars. My father, William Nivison, had been dead almost thirty years and had told me little. I knew that my grandfather was Robert Nivison, that he and my grandmother Maggie were buried in the Leuchars churchyard, that he had been "superintendent" of the Guard Bridge mill, and that the mill workers had placed a memorial tablet at the foot of the gravestone.^(a) I had no idea where he came from, and I expected to find no living Nivison relatives in Scotland or England. I could visualize the old church from a picture painted from memory by my late Aunt Helen; and I had in my bank box a family treasure, a photograph (here reproduced) of Robert Nivison's surviving five sons and two daughters -- all now gone away -- taken in their Guardbridge house probably in 1903, just after his death and just before most of them left for the United States.

The July visit was primarily a family holiday and had to be kept short. But it was long enough for me to discover that I had an aunt, Mary Galloway Nivison, widow of my father's brother James, in good health and living in Glenrothes. I also called on Dr. John Thompson, Headmaster of Madras College in St. Andrews which my father had attended briefly, and got from him some information, and valuable advice for finding out more about my grandfather and his family. I resolved to come back when I could, and the opportunity came in early September, after my family had returned to California and before I settled in for a term of work at Oxford. I was able to spend several days in Edinburgh, looking up records in the New Register House, and several days more in Guardbridge and St. Andrews. This time I visited the mill and introduced myself to the managing director, Mr. Hance Fullerton, and to the production manager, Mr. Johnstone King, who immediately gave me assistance I had not known I could hope for. An office was provided. and I was allowed to read as I liked in company records from the company's founding in 1873. From all these researches, discovery followed upon discovery: in time, I even found more than a dozen cousins in England

and Scotland; but that, though gratifying, is not my story here.

When the new "Guard Bridge Paper Company" began, it drew its personnel from other papermaking communities in Fife and the Lothians, especially from Penicuik, where the paper company of Alec Cowan & Son had begun by converting a textile mill in 1779.^(c) There were Nivisons in the Penicuik area in the late eighteenth century, and the beginning of detailed census records in 1841 and 1851 and later show several related Nivison families in Penicuik employed in papermaking.^(c) One of these was the household of Robert Nivison (1824-1902), father of the Robert Nivison who later went to Guardbridge. The younger Robert, my grandfather, was born in 1852 or 1853, and at some time between 1855 and 1858 the family moved to Balerno farther west, on the other side of the Pentland Hills, where Robert senior eventually became foreman (or "chief papermaker") in one of the local mills. Here his son Robert, fourth in a family of ten, in due course went to work in the mill, and probably it was here that he served as apprentice and journeyman.

The younger Robert took employment in the Guardbridge mill probably at the end of 1875.^(d) George Porteous had just succeeded the first foreman, Adam Tait (both men were from Penicuik), and shortly before this John Galloway had succeeded J. A. Weir as managing director. At some time within a year Robert Nivison became night foreman, and retained that position for the next four years. When Mr. Porteous accepted an offer of a position elsewhere in late 1880, the Board of Directors entrusted to Galloway the selection of his successor. At the board meeting of Jan. 19, 1881, Mr. Galloway announced his choice of Robert Nivison.^(e) After two foremen of brief tenure, his term was to be a long one: he held the position until his sudden premature death (aged 49) early in 1902. He was succeeded by Alexander Smith, who in turn (after becoming managing director at Inverkeithing) was followed by Alexander Wilson.

I see the appointment of Robert Nivison as coming at the close of a "shakedown" period for the new company. At the beginning the directors, wiser perhaps in finance than in the fitting together of pieces of machinery, may have been too dependent on Adam Tait, giving him a three-year contract and much independence in the handling of funds. In the fall of 1875, well before the end of his term, the directors found

it advisable to make a settlement with Mr. Tait.^(f) The appointment of Mr. Porteous was still partly a board action; but after five more years, during which the able and forceful John Galloway took a firmer and firmer hold on the detail of the company's development, the next appointment could be left to him. A comparison of the terms of employment of the first three foremen reflects what was happening. Mr. Tait had a three-year appointment starting at £160. Mr. Porteous, with previous experience, started at £200 with "free house and coals", but could be dismissed on two months notice. Mr. Nivison started at "£3 per week, monthly engagement" (presumably also with "free house and coals"; in any case a foreman's house was provided later).^(g) But it is trust, not terms, that secures a position like this, and later testimony indicates that Mr. Nivison enjoyed the full confidence of both the managing director and the workmen. Certainly he knew his job well. The family has preserved his working notebook of this time, opening in December, 1877. These notes include figures for 1881, his first year as foreman, detailing a 30%-decrease in average costs together with an increase in production from under 50 tons a week to nearly sixty.

Mr. Galloway remained as managing director until well after Mr. Nivison's death, and the company obviously owes him a very large debt for its prosperity. But the foreman's office was more important than the term may now suggest. The title "chief papermaker", colloquial among the workers, better expresses Robert Nivison's role: he was the one man charged with the satisfactory operation of the entire plant at all times, as well as with details of supply, equipment and maintenance, and was apparently directly responsible to Mr. Galloway. At the same level of responsibility, with different functions, was James Hodge, "clerk" for the mill. Minutes of the Directors' meeting in August of 1881 record that "in Mr. Galloway's absence

on account of illness Mr. Hodge and Mr. Nivison attended and gave explanations concerning the working of the departments under their care." Fifteen years later, in January of 1896, "the Manager reported that Mr. Hodge and Mr. Nivison had given faithful service for over twenty years, and he recommended that some consideration should be given to them, and also to both London agents, and the Board agreed to give each a bonus of £100."⁽¹⁾ In March, 1900, Mr. Hodge was made "interim director" -- Mr. Galloway, getting older, apparently was needing more help. In 1904, two years after Robert Nivison's death, Mr. Hodge became co-manager, succeeding Mr. Galloway at the latter's death in 1914.⁽²⁾

Only twenty-eight when he became "chief papermaker" in 1881, Robert Nivison had married two years earlier the former Margaret Boe of North Leith. A large family came quickly. The sixth child died in infancy, and with the eighth (the fifth son) in April, 1888, "Maggie" passed away. Robert needed a mother for his houseful of small children, and married again the next year, taking as wife Rachel Thompson (née Graham) of St. Andrews. The second wife died in 1898, and in 1899 he married Jessie Fraser of Dundee. The third wife survived him. A few years later she followed her step-children to the United States, subsequently living with her own relatives in Canada. There were no offspring of either later marriage.

What kind of man was Robert Nivison? Emotionally reserved but gentle and thoughtful, I would guess, like his sons as I remember them -- and the few recollections of others that have been preserved seem to confirm this impression. The one letter in his hand I have -- to my father, on a brief visit to his aged grandparents in Colinton in March of 1901 -- seems to show this: a bit of news of the younger set; a suggestion that "Grandfather will be quite pleased to have you for a game of dominoes"; a pound note to slip into Grandmother's hand; formal expression of affection, but no outpouring. A photograph that several of us have, probably taken soon after Maggie's death,

shows Robert Nivison seated, with his young children around him (except infant James, who was brought up by a friend). He holds baby Annie in his arms and is looking upward and outward -- a deeply moving picture of fatherly love and sadness. The Rev. Robert Johnstone, in a memorial address in Jubilee Hall, Sunday Feb. 23, 1902, speaks of his "faithfulness and ungrudging devotion to duty," and describes him as one whose relations with others were always smooth and who always had their respect. He "loved well the Church of Scotland -- the Church of his fathers," and apparently joined the Leuchars congregation of St. Athernase immediately on coming to Guardbridge, "a regular worshipper, leading his children with him." The family still has a silver tray with the inscription "Presented to Mr. Robert Nivison by the U. P. Church Musical Association in recognition of his services as conductor," dated April 13, 1884. In fact he had joined the United Presbyterian Church in Guardbridge too, renting a pew "to help out," as his daughter Helen later recalled, and it was in the nearer church, after its founding in 1882, that family members usually sang in the choir. It was a musical family: Mr. Nivison played the piano and the organ; my father (and, I am told, my Aunt Annie) had beautiful trained singing voices and sang in church after coming to Maine, and my uncles Robert and John both played the cello. James was an organist and pianist, and his organ is now in the St. Athernase church.

I have been told by Mr. James Leighton of Guardbridge that in 1887 my grandfather was one of the organizers and the first elected chairman of the Guardbridge Cooperative Society (Mr. Hodge being elected at the same time the Society's first secretary). In the community and in the mill he was clearly a man naturally looked up to with respect, and sure of himself. A contributor to the St. Andrews Citizen twenty years ago, who had been an office boy in the mill beginning in 1901, has recalled how Robert Nivison

had impressed him. Describing the foreman's office, he writes, "Here Mr. Nevison (sic) reigned supreme. He was my ideal of a mill manager. It was only on odd occasions that he relaxed and saw a joke, but he was a paper-maker who expected his foremen and machinemen to know their job. Even if a machine was shut down through the week for a wire or a felt he did not go out to see it put on. His foremen were there for that job and they could do it...." The writer speaks approvingly not only of this sureness that knew how to delegate responsibility but also of his "control over the men" -- and, less abstractly, of his careful daily scrutiny of paper samples. The assistant who brought them to his office was always much relieved when this business was finished, for "Mr. Nevison had a very high standard." A gentle man, but firm. My Aunt Helen, who became a typist in the company office in 1901, has recalled his careful formality whenever there was occasion to speak to her at work -- but also his walking with her in the garden at home to look at flowers.

Within half a year of this time Robert Nivison was dead. An illness of less than two weeks developed into cerebral meningitis. He passed away Saturday, Feb. 15, 1902, in the company foreman's house -- "Innerbridge Villa", now occupied by the company's chief electrical engineer -- in the row of stone buildings facing Motray Burn and the old bridge to Leuchars; it had been the family's home for over a dozen years. There followed the burial in Leuchars, as described by the Rev. Johnstone, "in the presence of a concourse of mourners such as was never witnessed in the parish before." The funeral included a parade of young boys.

But Robert Nivison, "Chief Papermaker", was gone, and his family must have faced a crisis. Robert, the eldest son, was at the end of his third year at St. Andrews University where he had specialized in color chemistry, preparing to follow his father's career. (The young Robert this same year

won first prize in a nationwide examination competition in papermaking.) He now went home to help in the emergency. John was already employed in the mill, and William was an apprentice in the machine shop. But the foreman's house had to be vacated, and the Company saw that help was needed. At the Directors' October Board meeting it was agreed "to set aside a sum of three hundred pounds for the benefit of the late Mr. Wivison's family, said sum to be administered by Messrs Galloway and Hodge as they may think best, during the next three years." David, the second son, had trained as an architect in St. Andrews, as apprentice with the firm of James Gillespie and Scott, and he now designed and built a new home for the family ("Westerton", occupied now by Mr. Johnstone King) on the other side of the present route A 91 from St. Andrews to Cupar, overlooking the River Eden.

The family did not remain there long. First John, then Robert, then (in the spring of 1905) David and William, sailing together, left for Maine in the United States, followed within a few years by their sisters Helen and Annie. John returned briefly in 1910 to marry Margaret Campbell of Leuchars, but Robert, David and William found wives in the United States. The paper-making men all took positions with Hollingsworth & Whitney, now a division of Scott Paper Company. Robert in 1904 had visited friends of his father's, the Luke family, owners of the West Virginia Pulp and Paper Company in Waterville, Maine (which was fast becoming a community of Scottish papermakers); Robert stayed on with the prestigious "H. & W.", declining other opportunities in India and Portugal. My father, William, told me that he had his choice of offers in Maine and in Norway. I have often wondered idly who I would be if he had chosen the latter.

They settled in Gardiner and in the Waterville area, as the company had mills in both places. David, the architect, soon located in Boston, working for the Allen & Collins Company, and later in New York, where he died

soon after World War II. My father worked in Waterville to 1909, and after that in Gardiner, as master mechanic. Eventually, in 1934, he became superintendent of the Gardiner mill, and after its closing in 1940 (the year I went to college) he was transferred to the company's large new mill in Mobile, Alabama, as assistant manager. The company brought him back north to Maine in 1944, for the last few months of his life. John lived in Winslow, across the Kennebec River from Waterville and the actual location of the "Waterville" mill, of which he eventually became superintendent. But in 1905 Robert was made superintendent in Gardiner, staying there until 1916, when he returned to Waterville as Manager of Mills. He became a company director in 1931, and was elected to the executive committee of the Board of Directors in 1943, two years later becoming a vice president. Retiring in 1954, he died in 1960, two years before his brother John.⁽ⁿ⁾ Helen received nurse's training at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, served during the first world war as a nurse in France, and later became, for many years, superintendent of Griffin Hospital in Derby, Connecticut. Eventually retiring to Waterville, she lived until 1971. Neither of the sisters married. Annie died young, in 1923, the year I was born, and her name was added to those of her parents on the St. Athernase tombstone, although she is actually buried in Waterville. James, the youngest son, stayed in Scotland and worked in a bank in Kirkcaldy.

Neither James nor David had children. But Robert, John and William are survived by sons and daughters, followed by grandchildren and as many great grandchildren. We are now scattered from Maine to California, and only a few of us have continued the family trade. I myself am a mere paper user, not a "papermaker".

David Shepherd Nivison

April, 1975,

Los Altos, California

I am particularly indebted, in preparing this account, to Mr. James Leighton, retired, of Guard Bridge Mill, for many details. Various members of the Mivison family in the United States have added important information. I want to thank also Mr. James Beveridge, Guard Bridge company photographer, for his care with my photographs and for more recollections; also Mr. James Brown, retired, of Kirkcaldy, and Mrs. Lenais (Marjorie) Simpson of Leuchars. And I am very deeply indebted to the Directors of Guard Bridge Paper Company for graciously allowing me to read all of the minutes of the Board meetings and other archives in the mill. I alone, of course, am responsible for my use of these assistances. I would be very grateful for more information, if any who read this are able to give it to me.

Notes to biography of Robert Nivison

- (a) Weathering will soon have obliterated the text. It reads, "In Memoriam Robert Nivison, who died at Guardbridge 15th February 1902 -- a tribute of respect from the employees of the Guard Bridge Paper Works." (There is a distinction, not always observed, between Guardbridge, the village, and Guard Bridge, the company.)
- (b) Information given me by my third cousin Margaret Nivison of Penicuik, until recently herself employed by the Cowan Paper Company.
- (c) A document (a "call" to a new minister, the Rev. William MacEwen) with date 1796, preserved by the United Presbyterian Church in Howgate Village, is signed by over fifty church members, including a Thomas Nivison and a Robert Nivison. Mid-nineteenth-century census records and later death records show that three Nivison brothers were living in Penicuik: James (1813-86), Thomas (1822-1890), and Robert (1824-1902). These brothers were sons of a James Nivison (1784?-1827) and his wife Janet (Burns, of Peebles, 1782-1850), who lived at first in Peebles, later (about 1820) moving to Penicuik. This James, Robert's grandfather, is variously described as a "ploughman" or "woollen weaver" or "sheriff's officer".
- (d) Minutes of meetings of the Guard Bridge Paper Company's Board of Directors (hereafter "Minutes"), for 11 Jan. 1896 (p. 253) state that Robert Nivison had been an employee for over twenty years. The Rev. Robert Johnstone, in his memorial address for Robert Nivison in Jubilee Hall, Feb. 23, 1902, says that Mr. Nivison had been a member of his parish for twenty-six years.
- (e) See Minutes pp. 29-30, 43-44, 112.
- (f) Minutes pp. 9, 11, 34, 41-42.
- (g) Minutes pp. 9, 43-44, 112.
- (h) Minutes p. 117.
- (i) Minutes p. 253.