

MEREDITH NICHOLSON: THE QUEST FOR A LITERARY IDEAL

By JUDITH LEAS EVERSON

MEREDITH NICHOLSON's literary career, which spanned forty years and won him the title "Dean of Hoosier Letters," suggests contrasts. A high school dropout at fifteen, he found time between odd jobs to write poetry which won praise from James Whitcomb Riley, Lew Wallace, and sister authors, Mary Hannah and Caroline Krout, from Nicholson's birthplace, Crawfordsville. Undaunted by the typical sales of his slim sheaf, between 1891 and 1929 Nicholson persisted to write nineteen novels, five collections of essays, two biographies, and a book of short stories. During thirteen of those years, 1903-16, eight of his titles graced national best-seller lists. Yet a generation later the "tall sycamore" of Indiana literature was out of print everywhere—the penalty, he supposed, for becoming "a classic" in his own time.

Like other neoromantic novelists, Nicholson had been warned by critics that pandering to popular taste would severely limit the worth of his work. Throughout his literary years, however, Nicholson wavered between viewing literature as a pleasant way to make money and considering it as a serious art. Admittedly fond of the tangible fruits of best-sellerism, he also longed for an artistic fulfillment which he associated with the realistic movement. The resulting confusion of goals is revealed not only in Nicholson's published work but to a significant degree in

his letters and other archival materials in the Bobbs-Merrill collection. Nicholson was a delightfully frank and engaging correspondent. His hundreds of letters in the Bobbs-Merrill collection contain fascinating references to literature, politics, history, and diplomacy. This paper proposes to trace the contrast between his literary goals, especially as this dualism influenced his "realistic" period.

I

From the beginning of his career as a professional writer, Nicholson remained uncertain about a proper literary direction. Aware of gaps in his self-education, he lacked that easy confidence which had prompted Riley to promise: "As to your appointed high place in the literary galaxy, you have but to go and occupy it" (*Letters of James Whitcomb Riley*, ed. William Lyon Phelps, p. 231). In one of his earliest poems, "Striving," Nicholson expressed, perhaps for the first time, his internal conflict between artistic vision and literary achievement, a dilemma which would distress him even more when he tapped the resources of the romantic novel during the golden age of Hoosier literature.

Neither his first novel (*The Main Chance*, 1903) nor his second (*Zelda Dameron*, 1904) prepared Nicholson for the resounding success of his third, a romantic mystery entitled *The House of a Thousand Candles*, published by Bobbs-Merrill in 1905. Freed from financial cares by a wealthy wife, spurred by the success of the popular *Prisoner of Zenda*, and convinced that romance could be transplanted profitably to Hoosier soil, Nicholson conceived the plot one evening while shaving and wrote the novel in seven months ("Secrets of Greatness of Two Indiana Authors," *Indian-*

apolis Star, December 6, 1908). This American best-selling mystery, later adapted to stage and screen, sold well over 250,000 copies in the United States and entertained readers in six foreign languages. But his sudden fame, however gratifying to Bobbs-Merrill, rather embarrassed Nicholson, who rationalized the novel's superficial melodrama by explaining ruefully that *Candles* was at least clean and cheerful. Most reviewers regretted that the book offered so little and predicted that such froth would never hold a place in literature. Try though he might to persuade the public that his "tallow-dripping saga" was not his only cultural contribution, Nicholson never surpassed *Candles* in sales and never outlived the best-seller notoriety it gave him.

Having learned that romances were easily written and were well received by women, the "great book buyers and book readers," Nicholson quickly composed three more, none so delightful to the public, but all as irritating to the critics, as *Candles*. Perhaps a sharp drop in sales combined with steadily negative reviews helped him begin to see best-sellerism as a "dark and unholy thing." At any rate, in 1909 he published in the *Atlantic Monthly* his anonymous apology for romance. Professing that better tales would require "harsher garb" and hopeful that he was ready to climb the less accessible literary slopes, Nicholson promised to join the realists in their attempt to serve the best literary interest of the time.

The same year he issued a first semirealistic novel, *The Lords of High Decision*, in which greed, poverty, pride, alcoholism, and divorce come to a happy ending in Pittsburgh. Although such "ignoble" material depressed the author's friend, George Edward Woodberry, others felt that

Nicholson had merely repeated his best-seller formula. Critics had expected more from his serious work and agreed that his talent still exceeded his discipline.

A second essay at realism, *A Hoosier Chronicle* (1912), more clearly marked Nicholson's trial transition from frivolous entertainer to earnest artist. Although this regionalist description of political, social, and cultural Indiana became Nicholson's favorite among his own works, it enjoyed less popularity than his romances and failed of solid critical acclaim. Understandably disappointed, Nicholson scoffed at accusations that he had begun writing "problem novels" to make money. As he countered, the easiest way to win a fortune was to "do the Pollyanna stuff." Caught between a desire to join better literary company and a revulsion at what he considered realistic cynicism and sordidness, Nicholson eventually concluded: "I never had any business toying with realism. I should have remained among the romantics with one leg in the door of the whimsicals" (Nicholson to Chambers, May 4, 1935).

Indeed, when his serious fiction is compared to the variety of authentic realistic hues presented by Howells, Crane, Cather, and James, it is clear that Nicholson had never been truly affiliated with the literary movement he now rejected. His recurrent themes and techniques had been decidedly romantic: the sudden loss and miraculous recovery of fortunes, impossible coincidences, frequent use of aliases and disguises, black and white characterization, breezy style, the inevitable triumph of respectability, and the blatant idealization of the common man. Why had Nicholson been unable to join the realists he respected in the writing of serious fiction of which he could be proud?

II

Nicholson certainly possessed the knowledge of his region necessary to portray it realistically. Furthermore, he believed that the writer's prime obligation was to scrutinize the unique material in his environment. These two factors contributed to the best work Nicholson produced. Ironically, they also hindered his efforts as realist. Nicholson understood his region too well to separate himself from it emotionally. He loved Hoosiers too well to expose their frailties or "draw them in caricature." Freely admitting their peculiar faults—stubbornness, complacency, naiveté—he preferred to describe Hoosier virtues—curiosity, cheerfulness, common sense. In his sympathetic treatment of the farmer and his righteous defense of Main Street, Nicholson demonstrated the depth of his provincialism while he added to the literature of local color. Ever loyal to what he considered his duty—the defense of Hoosiers from smug cosmopolitans—Nicholson seldom took his neighbors for what they were. In print he glorified them. His most popular novel revolves around a grandfather who teaches his heir to appreciate the beauties of Indiana. And his most ambitious novel concludes with a hearty affirmation of his faith in the "folks": "It's all pretty comfortable and cheerful and busy in Indiana, with lots of old-fashioned kindness flowing 'round; and it's getting better all the time" (*A Hoosier Chronicle*, p. 606).

Unbridled optimism typified Nicholson's fiction. Even would-be realistic novels featured happy endings, often at odds with their content and development. And therein lay experience which had not re-enforced a shallow philosophy of life. His essays and correspondence reveal a mind deeply

concerned with cruelties, injustices, and inconsistencies, just as his civic activities demonstrated his determination to deal with "realities." Yet despite his awareness of hypocrisy, corruption, and stupidity around him, Nicholson seldom used the novel to protest. On more than one occasion he argued that the world suffered from too much criticism. He defended this outlook in a letter to David Laurance Chambers of Bobbs-Merrill: ". . . I don't see much use in Herrick or Dreiser. Awhile back some one writing of novels in the *Atlantic* called a bunch of us . . . sentimentalists. Well, I'd rather be just that than a writer of gory tales . . . whose whole attitude toward life is hard and cynical" (June 4, 1914). Rejecting the pessimism of more sober realists, Nicholson felt obligated to resolve happily the problems posed in his novels. This not only limited the topics he could treat but also the manner in which he could treat them.

Unlike many minor writers of the day, Nicholson never deceived himself about his work. Instead of veiling his insecurity with arrogance, he openly regretted that his style kept him from pleasing the "fit though few." Better than his harshest critics, Nicholson knew that the "books . . . read by everybody six months ago are read by nobody to-day" ("Current Fiction," *Indianapolis Journal*, April 23, 1899). For his novels' immediate popularity, he offered a timid explanation: "There are not enough novels of the first order." For their ultimate lack of value, he also knew the cause: ". . . my talent is so slender." Believing himself the "worst living author" and his books "poor candidates for oblivion," Nicholson was unable or afraid to improve his art by experiment and innovation. Although he tried

to "forge on into the seas where it is Art for all time," he recognized that most of his work had no lasting merit. His best-sellers cheered millions during the muckraking era, World War I, and the Red Scare; but their harmless escapism revealed an author unable to grapple successfully with the dilemmas of his day.

Critics who urged him to write for posterity dealt Nicholson's ego another blow. While churning out commercial novels, he appeared relatively oblivious to reviews. He did not take his first novels seriously and hardly expected that the critics would. When compared to Howells and Stevenson, he blushed, replying that false praise did more damage to writers than unjust criticism. But with his attempt to create lasting fiction, Nicholson developed a painful sensitivity to negative reviews, so much so that he once told a favorable critic: "It's a blamed pleasant experience . . . to be written of . . . as though you were not a common blackguard" (quoted in Robert C. Holliday's *Broome Street Straws*, 1919, p. 184). Further evidence of his disappointment at the cold response to his realism can be found in his letters to Maxwell Perkins of Scribner's: "I didn't quite understand the coldness of the critics [regarding *Broken Barriers* and/or *Hope of Happiness*]. . . . It is an idea of mine that America needs to know herself; and my picture was certainly honest" (March 24, 1923; Nicholson collection, Indiana State Library). Bewilderment changed to Hoosier defensiveness in a later letter: "Most of the newspaper criticism is influenced by . . . Bolsheviki, who see only the Sherwood Anderson School and knock everything that looks like cornbread American stuff" (to Perkins, November 17, 1923; Nicholson collection, Indiana State Library).

III

As negative reviews cut at his pride, the comparatively low sales of his realistic novels removed him from the best-seller lists only a decade after his reign there. Accustomed to a comfortably high standard of living, Nicholson found the cut in his royalties discouraging and, in view of earlier triumphs, insulting. In 1911 he temporarily left Bobbs-Merrill. Of his "realistic" works Doubleday published *Lords of High Decision*; Houghton-Mifflin handled *A Hoosier Chronicle*, *Otherwise Phyllis*, and *Proof of the Pudding*; and Scribner's released *Blacksheep! Blacksheep!*, *Broken Barriers*, *Hope of Happiness*, and *And They Lived Happily Ever After!* Although *Hoosier Chronicle* sold reasonably well for a while, none of these novels cleared much profit for the houses or the author. Correspondence between Nicholson and Perkins reveals the writer's attitude about the disappointing sales: ". . . it is with sincere regret that I . . . have decided to give this MS [*Cavalier of Tennessee*] to the Bobbs-Merrill Company. . . . I was not satisfied that your sales department did the best that could have been done with my later books" (October 8, 1927; Nicholson collection, Indiana State Library). Four months later he had decided that the unprofitable results of his realistic venture had been partly his own fault, for he sent Scribner's a \$500 check to cover the balance against him (Nicholson to Scribner's, February 23, 1928; Nicholson collection, Indiana State Library).

When he entered the diplomatic service in the deep depression year of 1933, Nicholson faced still more severe financial strains. As he confessed to Chambers: "I am in such straits that I would welcome an offer from you for

my rights in everything, including Eternal Salvation" (August 24, 1932). On another occasion he commented: "It is the prospect of a little mazuma that makes it possible for me to throw kisses to my creditors" (Nicholson to Chambers, 1932). Again in 1935 he admitted: ". . . The cost of living in this charming post is most altitudinous" (May 4, 1935).

Despite his sobering financial situation, Nicholson could not now respond to Chambers' repeated pleas that he do another book. Perhaps the death of his first wife, the rigors of diplomatic service in three countries, and a divorce from his second wife had eroded his literary impulse. But his self-doubts, regional loyalty, incurable optimism, and unclear understanding of realism, combined with negative reviews and low sales, had also been strong factors in limiting his effectiveness and in ending his literary life. He had won reputation and riches as a romanticist; but, "cursed with ambition," he had tried to write something of lasting merit (to Prof. Beers, May 23, 1906). Failure would have been less frustrating if he had not known earlier the thrill of success and if he had not seen clearly the gulf between his work and his vision.

JUDITH LEAS EVERSON is a graduate student in Speech and American Studies, Indiana University.