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Obituary

Alastair Niven obituary

Scholar and literary administrator who nurtured the talent of many writers from Africa, Asia and the Commonwealth



📷 Alastair Niven at the English PEN Summer Party, 2006. Photograph: English PEN

Boyd Tonkin

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Alastair Niven, who has died aged 81, felt that he had spent his whole life “in one long conversation”. The settings changed, but the dialogue - and the connections it forged - went on. The foremost literary administrator and diplomat of his time, he opened up the Arts Council, the British Council and other bodies to the creative energies of Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and their diasporic communities in the UK. Later the principal of a royal foundation in Windsor, he could appear as a paladin of the establishment. But he was always more of a gate-opener - and pathfinder - than gatekeeper.

Ben Okri, one of many authors who valued his support, found in Niven a unique “bridge between cultures, between eras, and between different shores of the arts”. Bernardine Evaristo, another friend and colleague, knew not a colourless bureaucrat but a “fantastic advocate” for literature, “wise and compassionate, brilliantly knowledgeable and beautifully eloquent”. Few behind-the-scenes figures have done so much to nurture the stars of the show.

Niven felt himself to be “an institutional person” who thrived on running things. He did so, decisively, at the Arts Council. Between 1987 and 1997, he transformed its neglected literature department into a motor for cultural change. Black and Asian British writing became a priority for the first time - not without resistance. The poet Fiona Pitt-Kethley challenged the Arts Council in court over bursaries for minority ethnic authors. At [Ted Hughes](#)’s prompting, support also went to creative-writing courses at the Arvon Foundation.

Niven backed magazines that ranged from the London Review of Books to Wasafiri, the journal for international writing, with a remit that matched his passions, founded by Susheila Nasta. She found him “generous, astute, urbane, knowledgeable and wise” over many years. He also funded the new British Centre for Literary Translation in Norwich after “a kind of mad professor” solicited his aid. That was the great [WG \(Max\) Sebald](#), whose friendship became “one of the privileges” of Niven’s life.

Niven judged the Booker prize in 1994 (when James Kelman won) and created the biennial [David Cohen prize](#) to reward a British or Irish literary career. When he phoned [VS Naipaul](#), the first recipient, with the good news, the curmudgeonly author first snapped at Niven but, hearing of the £30,000 purse, apologised with the excuse that “I have one of my migraines today”. Niven judged many other awards, globe-trotted from conference to conference, and could look like a consummate insider-fixer. But his mission to secure the wellbeing of writers never wavered. Evaristo considered him equally effective “in the boardroom”, as a champion of once-marginalised literatures, or “at the bar”, telling tales.

Born in Edinburgh, Niven came from a Scottish family; one grandfather had been Edinburgh University’s professor of Greek, the other a leading engineer. His mother, Betty (nee Mair), and father, Harold Niven, had known each other from childhood but their fractious marriage (Niven later feared) was “doomed from the start”. At first a junior officer in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, Harold joined the City of London police. The family settled in

Denmark Hill, south London. Their father's frustrated anger and their mother's illness marked the frugal postwar upbringing of Alastair and his two brothers. Alastair did well at Dulwich college, where he developed talents for both acting and debating. In his alphabetically arranged class, for a while he sat next to and befriended Michael Ondaatje, the future author of *The English Patient*.

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At Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, he was taught by the poets [Donald Davie](#) and JH Prynne, and continued to act. Niven recalled a Sliding Doors moment, when his life changed course. In autumn 1965, he saw by chance on a college board a notice inviting applications for Commonwealth Scholarships in African countries. He applied, travelled to Ghana, and so inaugurated a lifelong commitment to African - and, later, other postcolonial - literatures and their authors.

At the University of Ghana's Legon campus outside Accra, where his MA led to a lectureship, he not only studied the new literature of Africa but got to know its makers. [Chinua Achebe](#), a giant of that generation, became a cherished friend. Niven met Helen Trow, then a VSO volunteer, in Ghana, and they married in 1970. He loved the country, and was even "enstooled" as a warrior sub-chief of the Osorase people.

But academic commitments (and a PhD project) led him to a lectureship at Leeds University and then, until 1978, in the innovative English department at Stirling. There he hosted African and Asian writers and fashioned pioneering courses in what was then known as Commonwealth literature. He wrote studies of DH Lawrence and the Indian novelists [Mulk Raj Anand](#) and [Raja Rao](#), both of whom he knew.

Anxious not to get stuck in an academic rut, Niven took a risk when he became director-general of the shakily funded Africa Centre in 1978. It paid off. In Covent Garden, he presided over a ferment of creativity and controversy. "Slightly sad" or tipsy exiles, often from South Africa or soon-to-be Zimbabwe, would plot their nations' transformations at the bar. The centre turned into a hub of talk, hope, art, poetry and dreams. Niven befriended writers, artists, activists; he thought that someone just like the visiting trade unionist Cyril Ramaphosa should lead South Africa. Today, Ramaphosa does. For Okri, one of many he assisted, Niven guided the centre through a "magic phase" as he made it "an oasis for the African diaspora" and "a place of reinvention for comrades and artists".

Tired but fulfilled, in 1984 Niven left for freelance endeavours, mostly with Commonwealth connections. He then assisted the head of the Association of Commonwealth Universities and held a fellowship at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies. He and Helen had two children, Isabella and Alex, and moved to Woburn Sands, near the headquarters of the Open University, where Helen held senior managerial posts.

■ A firm believer in monarchy as ‘the glue which binds British society’, Niven relished support from his royal patrons

After his change-making decade at the Arts Council, his next job, at the British Council, as director of literature from 1997 until 2001, felt like a “postscript”, and tested Niven’s loyalty to institutions. The organisation was battered by funding cuts and hamstrung by Foreign Office interference. He came across evidence of “casual racism” among staff, and weathered a major storm after a council officer’s wife racially insulted an eminent Black British author during a dinner in Frankfurt. After the Iranian fatwa, Niven had consented when the council removed Salman Rushdie from a display about modern British fiction he devised, in a version destined for Muslim countries. That made him feel “dishonourable”.

Cumberland Lodge, which he led from 2001 to 2013, proved far more congenial. Based at a 17th-century mansion in Windsor Great Park, the former King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Foundation of St Catharine owes its origin to the royal family’s interest in a 1943 book by Amy Buller about the reasons behind young Germans’ susceptibility to nazism. Ahead of its time in challenging extremism and polarisation, the foundation’s conference and education programme expanded under Niven’s energetic leadership.

The Lodge hosted sessions for UK and overseas students and gatherings of professionals, from chief constables to museum curators. A firm believer in monarchy as “the glue which binds British society”, Niven relished support from his royal patrons. In 2012, he became a lieutenant of the Royal Victorian Order - in the monarch’s gift - after his OBE in 2001.

Niven had a final, occasionally bruising, stint as literary diplomat while president of the faction-ridden writers’ organisation English PEN between 2003 and 2007. He kept up his varied roles as advocate, adviser and mentor in literature and education, from the Caine prize for African writing to the Commonwealth Scholarships scheme.

He and Helen returned to London, to a house in Kennington where the “occasional gunshot” among local drug-dealers failed to dent Niven’s pleasure in their family, in art and drama, and in foreign travel. His memoir *In Glad Or Sorry Hours*, published in 2021, illuminates not just a career but an age. In the same year the Royal Society of Literature awarded him its Benson medal for career achievement.

He is survived by Helen, Isabella and Alex.

Alastair Neil Robertson Niven, administrator, scholar and writer, born 25 February 1944; died 26 March 2025
