CONCLUSION

JOHN MACLEAN: AN ASSESSMENT.

Historians on the whole have been unkind about John MacLean. None would deny the very positive contribution he made towards the welfare of the working class. None would deny his tremendous self-sacrifice, his reckless disregard for his own health and concern for others. This, however, is the limit of most historians' praise for the man. In any case it is usually offset by some negative statement, be it one regarding his supposed madness or lack of political judgement or lack of contact with the masses. A few examples will demonstrate my point. Iain MacLean sums him up thus:

"There is no doubt that MacLean's prison terms made him a martyr in the eyes of many Clydeside sympathisers. The press, although totally hostile to his views, gave ample evidence of his popularity; the tumultuous welcome he received on 3 December 1918, on his return from prison, was predominantly featured on the picture page of the leading popular daily..."

This is then outweighed by the following statement:

"...it is an exaggeration to claim that his agitation constituted the elemental driving force behind the revolutionary movement on the Clyde. A truer view of the relationship between the schoolteacher MacLean and his working-class audience is that of another middle-class Marxist, Walton Newbold, who said of him: That forceful exponent of a fanatic evangel of revolutionary purpose could never take kindly to the thought that his audiences were motivated by material conditions rather than by the logic of his personal appeal..."

Newbold was in fact a C.P.G.B. Member of Parliament. The C.P.G.B. were of course totally hostile to MacLean and it was in their best interests to play down his importance. It was Newbold in addition, who claimed that MacLean was somehow external to the working class by nature of his profession. He disregarded the fact that in 1915 MacLean had been sacked as a teacher for his anti-war activities. He was never reinstated, despite numerous requests for such. Between 1915 and 1923, therefore, he was to all intents and purposes a professional revolutionary. Although he was temporarily employed as a tutor by the Scottish Labour College, most of his income was derived from sales of pamphlets and collections at meetings. His income, in other words, came from the very working people from whom he was somehow distanced. The incident regarding Matthew Foy clearly illustrates the high regard felt for MacLean by the common people. Another such incident, related in George Lansbury's obituary on MacLean and quoted by Nan Milton is also worth mentioning. Lansbury recorded how

"Only a few days before his death, even when he himself was bodily sick, he went to a slum home to see a sick child whom he found without warmth or food or a doctor. He sent for all these, paying for them out of what he had in his pocket, afterwards going to the Labour rooms to borrow the money for the tram home."

MacLean's role is further belittled by Keeting and Bleiman who, like Iain McLean, pay handsome tribute before subtly playing him down:

"MacLean, a figure of legendary stature in Scottish socialist folklore, had gained

Graham Bain, John MacLean, His life and Work 1919-1923"
MacLean's refusal to participate in controversy at the time. MacLean stuck to Moscow. With the benefit of hindsight in the short term. It deprived him of a sense of his memory into their folklore. Many considered support for his stand against the war, which had cost him his job as a schoolteacher and several spells in prison. An increasingly isolated figure on the left, MacLean in his later career is of interest for his distinctive, though mistaken interpretation of Scottish politics.

I would argue that MacLean's later career is of interest for the very opposite reason: if any post-war figure had a firm grasp of Scottish (and world) politics, it was John MacLean. This is evident from his writings.

MacLean's extensive knowledge of economics and current affairs enabled him to foresee the inevitable post-war depression and Britain's loss of dominance as the leader of world capitalism. It was MacLean who confidently predicted the rise of America and Japan and of their rivalry in the Pacific. More remarkable still, MacLean realised the inevitability of another, more bloody world war if capitalism survived the post-war crisis. That war came, not within the fifteen years as he expected, but twenty-one years after the end of the first great war.

G. D. H. Cole discovered an easier remedy to the problem of chronicling MacLean: he ignored him altogether, for there is no mention of him at all in Cole's *Short History of the British Working Class Movement*.

A fair assessment of MacLean's influence is made by L. J. MacFarlane, who wrote thus of him in 1966:

> The Communist Party paid tribute to John MacLean as one of the most fearless and daunted champions of the working class movement, but politically his death was not without its advantages. His bitter personal attacks on the Communist Party, his influence over the unemployed workers, the memories of his past achievements had all made it difficult for the party to make headway among the Clyde militants. Now that influence was removed.

MacFarlane then makes a mistaken assessment, however, of MacLean's personal qualities and his motives for refusing to obey the will of Moscow:

> Even if MacLean had been inclined to join the British Communist Party, it is difficult to believe that he would have remained a member for long. For all his qualities, he was not an easy man to work with. He would not have submitted to the strict discipline which the Communist Party began to impose on its members. Still less would he have been prepared to accept the discipline imposed by the Communist International on its constituent parties. He was a revolutionary teacher and fighter, not a revolutionary party leader.

To accept this argument is to forget that from January 1921 to November 1922 MacLean was a member of the S.L.P. During this time he was unable to advocate Scottish self-determination because the S.L.P. was opposed to such a party. In other words he had to submit to party discipline. MacLean was never a slave to dogmatism, for he recognised the pitfalls involved.

MacFarlane's other argument - that MacLean was not an easy man to work with - is refuted by the account related by Nan Milton who cites the example of one of MacLean's followers, John Mitchell, first secretary of the Townhead S.W.R.P.

> Shortly before he died, he wrote out his recollections of this short experience with MacLean, whom he admired and revered all his life. What impressed him most was MacLean's warmth and simplicity and lack of condescension towards these raw, young recruits. They called him 'John' and he was a friend to them all, encouraging them and pushing them on to get up on their feet and start expressing themselves, and he had them outside on the soap box as soon as they had gained sufficient confidence.
MacLean's refusal to participate in the foundation of the C.P.G.B. caused a great controversy at the time. MacLean struck out to form an independent Scottish Communist Party because he recognised the shortcomings of ideological and financial subordination to Moscow. With the benefit of hindsight, however, this appears to have been an error in the short term. It deprived him of a steady income and thus of an error in the short term. It deprived him of a steady income and thus of an earlier reunification with his wife and daughters, and alienated him from most of the revolutionary left in Britain. In a long term perspective, however, his principled stance was vindicated by the uncomplaining acceptance of Stalin's dictates which destroyed the integrity of the world communist movement; and played a not inconsiderable part in rendering impotent the opposition to Hitler in the years 1925-33. The suppression of risings in East Germany and Hungary, and of the liberal movement in Czechoslovakia all justify MacLean's insistence on independent communist parties. Russian intervention in the activities of European communist parties was extremely harmful. Kendall assesses it thus:

The effect of the Russian intervention in the British revolutionary movement was thus in a sense to turn it inside out, to switch its line of march by one hundred and eighty degrees and to send its members marching off in the opposite direction from before. The Revolutionaries had above all been rebels, reacting against an environment which they regarded as hostile and wrong. They became revolutionaries because they had been prepared to back their own judgement against those of society as a whole. Now, by virtue of their allegiance to the Communist International, all this was beginning to change. In 1921 the figures before us are those of real puppets striding obediently across a Comintern stage.

The most infamous charge levelled against MacLean is that of his supposed mental instability. Again I echo John Broom in saying that the onus is on MacLean's accusers to prove their case. There is no concrete evidence to show that he was at all unbalanced, and I regard such accusations as an attempt to undermine MacLean's reputation.

In the light of my material and the rather weak case of his opponents, MacLean stands revealed as a man wronged by historians and critics alike. Let it be said that no-one displayed the same energy, determination and courage in the British Communist movement as John MacLean. It was he who laid the foundations of effective Marxist Education in Britain; he who sacrificed more than anyone for the socialist cause. He served 38 months in prison as a consequence of his activities and died prematurely aged from exertions.

Yet for all this no-one else has been so derided or condemned.

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I have presented the facts in the hope that this tragic man may be recognised for his achievements. I believe that MacLean has been proved right by historical events. His former enemies now recognise their error, and the C.P.G.B. has made attempts to absorb his memory into their folklore. Many communists have laid claim to John MacLean as one of their ideological forebearers: one wonders if John MacLean would identify himself with any of them.

NOTES TO CONCLUSION

2. John MacLean p.295.
3. Labour and Scottish Nationalism p.66.
4. The British Communist Party p.44.
5. Allowing for his terms of imprisonment.
7. The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-21 pp 300-301.

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