

John Maclean

John Maclean

Hero of Red Clydeside

Henry Bell

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Out for Life and All That Life Can Give Us

John Maclean died on St Andrew's Day, 30 November 1923, at the age of just 44. Three days later, below the sandstone tenements of Eglinton Toll on the Southside of Glasgow, more than 5,000 people gathered to begin the three-mile march to Eastwood Cemetery where he would be laid to rest. The Clyde Workers' Band marched in front, playing socialist anthems, and Handel's 'March of Saul'.¹ Some of the most famous socialists, communists, Labour MPs, suffragettes and trade unionists Scotland and the wider British Isles have ever produced greeted each other in the cold, and followed the silver band across South Glasgow. Glasgow's many unemployed men and women, as well as miners, teachers and shipyard workers held up banners and marched in silence.² Only the sound of their feet striking cobbles and tram tracks, and the strains of the band, rang out across the city.

As they passed through the streets of Govanhill, Pollokshields and Pollokshaws, black and red flags flapped from tenement windows and the pavements heaved with Glaswegians paying their respects. By the time the procession reached Maclean's home in Auldhouse Road, some estimates put the crowd at 20,000.³ Along with the hearse and carriages, a horse-drawn cart carried a camera crew to capture the event. Soon the mass funeral march would be screened in cinemas across the west of Scotland, and shown on the anniversary of his death each year. To this day, the funeral of John Maclean, Britain's foremost Marxist revolutionary, remains the largest that Glasgow has ever seen. Tributes poured in from across the political spectrum. Obituaries were carried in Swedish, Russian and French, as well as British and Irish papers. Streets were named after him in Soviet

cities, and Maclean was memorialised as an icon of Communism in the USSR right up until its collapse.⁴ His coffin, draped in a red flag, was lowered into the ground as the huge crowd sang 'A Rebel Song' and 'The Internationale'.⁵

Despite the collective camaraderie of the marching men and women that day, divisions over Maclean's life were already long established. For the two years prior to his death, Maclean was disregarded by many as a political outsider; rejected by large parts of the Communist movement, estranged from his wife and family, and reported to be insane by both the secret police and those members of the left that rejected his increasingly Republican and Celtic Communist views. Over the coming century, Maclean would be alternately claimed and slandered by communists, liberals and nationalists – and charges of madness and foolish nationalism would come to stand alongside a mythology of John Maclean as a lost Scottish Lenin.

Without doubt, the punishment Maclean received in Scottish jails and his early death helped to enshrine him as a Marxist saint. He is remembered still as the revolutionary teacher whose vast classes, Labour College and speeches made sure that Marxist analysis took root in the slums of Glasgow and the coalfields of Fife and Lanarkshire – a man in many ways responsible for the self-conception of Glasgow, and by extension Scotland, as radical and 'red'. In the 18 years from Maclean joining the socialist movement to his release from jail at the end of the First World War, the Scottish Radical Left was transformed from the fringe eccentricity of a few hundred people, to a force that could muster 100,000 workers to cheer on the Russian, German and British Revolutions.

However, much of this internationalist outlook was overwritten in the century that followed. It was nation building, rather than Marxism, that emerged, perhaps, as the single most prominent cultural and political force in Scotland. Soon after his death, the poets of the Scottish Renaissance began to take up Maclean as a patron saint of their new Scotland. For left-nationalist intellectuals such as Sorley Maclean, Hugh MacDiarmid and Hamish Henderson, John Maclean became a key figure in the poetic re-imagining of the nation, even making it into the unofficial national anthem 'Freedom Come All Ye':

So come all ye at hame wi' Freedom,
Never heed whit the hoodies croak for doom.
In your hoose a' the bairns o' Adam
Can find breid, barley-bree and painted room.
When Maclean meets wi's freens in Springburn
A' the roses and geans will turn tae bloom,
And a black boy frae yont Nyanga
Dings the fell gallows o' the burghers doon.⁶

In a Scotland both synthetic and ancient, parochial and international, Maclean was the ideal cipher for that Caledonian Antisyzygy, those duelling Scottish polarities: a Highlander and a Lowlander, rural and urban, a Nationalist and an Internationalist, an atheist and a Calvinist, a moderniser and a voice from history. What the poet Edwin Muir once said of Burns can equally be applied to Maclean: 'to the respectable, a decent man; to the Rabelaisian, bawdy; to the sentimentalist, sentimental; to the socialist, a revolutionary; to the nationalist, a patriot; to the religious, pious; to the self-made man, self-made'.⁷

A fitting national icon for a changing people, who in his lifetime and after it, would be shaped by industrial revolutions, depressions, world wars and the welfare state, the story of Maclean and his legacy is a story of Scotland, its contradictory political identity, and its tremendous wealth and poverty.

In the years immediately after the First World War, in penning his 'Open Letter to Lenin' and demanding a distinctively Scottish Communist Party, it was Maclean who helped open the rift between Scottish and British nationalisms that continues to divide the Scottish left, but it was also Maclean who formed the bridge between socialism and nationalism that influences the institutions that govern Scotland. Today, Maclean is celebrated by unionists and nationalists. Both the Radical Independence Campaign and the Labour Party are happy to march under his image. His stern-seeming face stares down from banners just the same whether he is placed next to Robert the Bruce, Keir Hardie, or Rosa Luxemburg. Maclean is a nationalist to nationalists, a democrat to democrats, and a revolutionary to revolutionaries.

His place at the epicentre of a decisive historical moment for the British Empire – in terms of the Great War and the Irish Struggle but also the very real potential of World Revolution – granted him a prime vantage point from which to witness the traumas and triumphs of twentieth-century politics. He may not have been the hero who delivered his people from capitalism or imperialism, but he was formed, destroyed and continues to be memorialised by those struggles.

Amongst the many competing views of Maclean, one uniting factor emerges: how exceptional the man was in his pursuit of his egalitarian values. He possessed a tenacity that distinguishes him from both comrades and enemies, as MacDiarmid acknowledged when he wrote: ‘of all Maclean’s foes not one was his peer.’⁸ In the popular conception of the Maclean myth, he appears Christ-like in his endurance, single-mindedness and determination to liberate the oppressed masses. Anarchist organiser Guy Aldred, writing for Bakunin Press in Glasgow in 1925, claimed that:

Scholars ... tell us that there were many Jesuses in the Jewish portion of the Roman Empire. Some time hence, we may suppose, other scholars will look back to our time, especially those who dwell in other lands, and learnedly dilate upon the fact that there were many John Macleans. Yet all Scotland, and all Labor, knows that there was and is only one — John Maclean, man and agitator, a martyr of the class struggle ... Apart from his class, he was nothing, because his class, its sorrows, its struggles, had become his life and being.⁹

Consumed by the struggle in his lifetime and afterwards, Maclean is a symbol of Scottish radicalism itself – an icon, divorced from his wit, his warmth and his human flaws. It is a curious irony that while his legacy has outlived the Communist Party of Great Britain, Maclean’s dramatic fall-out with its founders has become a fundamental part of his myth. His life opens revolutionary possibilities and potential in legend, even as it gained and lost them in real life. He cut the fork in the road where the Scottish Labour movement, had it not fallen under the influences of Moscow and/or London, may – or may not

– have transcended those leaders and made revolutionary upheaval possible. At the same time, he forged the closest links between Scotland and the Kremlin, only to hamstring those relationships with his own equally energetic stubbornness.

At the time of his death, Maclean may have been a household name; the nation's most famous revolutionary, but he was isolated as a husband, father and politician. The socialist and suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst focused on Maclean's loneliness in her obituary for him:

When we saw him a month ago he was holding great meetings and seemed stronger and more confident than ever. Yet he lived the bare lonely life of an ascetic. Parted from his wife and children he lived quite alone, doing his own cooking and housework ... declaring that 'pease brose' was one of his daily meals. His tone bespoke the cheerful frugality that was only too near to want.¹⁰

Yet the tragic solitude towards the end of his life belies the warmth and welcome that his home offered, and the love and hope included in all his letters to his wife and children – and indeed his final reconciliation with his family.

This biography seeks to view Maclean through all these prisms – as a nationalist and an internationalist, as a pacifist and a revolutionary, as a social democrat and a Bolshevik, as a father and a husband – and in those overlapping lights, shades and colours, to tell the story of a life devoted to revolution and popular struggle from Russia to Scotland, from Ireland to Egypt. It is not intended as an academic work, or a comprehensive history, but as a portrait of a great figure and the movement that surrounded him; subjective, but offering from its viewpoint a continuation of Maclean's lessons and legacy. His is a neglected but important chapter in Scotland's history, one which has more to say to us than William Wallace, Bonnie Prince Charlie, or many others in the pantheon of Scottish rebels. Maclean's life offers lasting lessons about how capitalist crises and war might be used to unite rather than to divide; how education can be a tool of liberation, not control; how Marxism may compete or combine with different nationalisms; and how physical and mental health, family life and comfort can be destroyed by oppression and resistance. Above all, it

Dispeller of Ignorance

John Maclean's story begins in the 1850s with a different march, one more ordinary, yet more remarkable. Maclean's mother Anne MacPhee was born in 1846 in Corpach, a small Highland town at the foot of Ben Nevis, where Loch Linnhe meets Loch Eil. Her family were crofters and Gaelic speakers, and in the middle of the century, like many Highlanders, they were cleared from their land. The arrival of the Cheviot, a hardy breed of sheep that could survive the Scottish winter and generate more income for the lairds than tenant farmers could, combined with the abrogation of the clan system and the violent destruction of many villages by landowners had led tens of thousands of Highlanders to flee. Anne's father, Donald MacPhee, went ahead of his family, leaving the Highlands to find work as a quarryman in the growing industrial heartland of Clydeside. Anne and her mother followed. They travelled from Corpach to Paisley with their belongings on their back. Driven from the lochs and mountains of the Gàidhealtachd,¹ they walked most of the hundred miles to start a new life amongst the industrial slums of Greater Glasgow. Anne MacPhee was not even ten years old. Both John Maclean's mother and his grandmother often told the story of their ordeal,² of the burnt crofts and police beatings meted out in the service of profit, and of the women who resisted.

When Maclean read *Capital* at the end of the century, less than fifty years after his mother's long walk to Scotland's Central Belt, Marx's lines about the clearances must have rung out:

... the 'clearing' made by the Duchess of Sutherland will suffice here. This person, well instructed in economy, resolved, on entering upon her government, to effect a radical cure, and to turn

the whole country, whose population had already been, by earlier processes of the like kind, reduced to 15,000, into a sheep-walk ... All their villages were destroyed and burnt, all their fields turned into pasturage. British soldiers enforced this eviction, and came to blows with the inhabitants. One old woman was burnt to death in the flames of the hut, which she refused to leave. Thus this fine lady appropriated 794,000 acres of land that had from time immemorial belonged to the clan.³

Maclean saw in this – the clear and contemporary relation of economic realities through stories that Scots knew first-hand – a way to explain class warfare to the masses. This would be his life's work, and the many new Glaswegians who arrived in Central Scotland fleeing violence, famine and aggressive landlordism in Ireland, the Scottish Highlands and Eastern Europe would be particularly receptive to it.

John's father, Daniel Maclean was also a victim of the clearances. Originally from the Isle of Mull, his family were cleared to Glasgow when he was a child. By the time he married Anne MacPhee in 1867, he was working as a potter, first in Bo'ness, and later at the Victoria Pottery in Pollokshaws. Like Paisley, where Anne had grown up, and Nitshill, where she married Daniel, Pollokshaws was a small industrial town on the outskirts of Glasgow, notable for a history of Chartism and militant miners and weavers.

Nan, John Maclean's daughter, gives the following account of Anne: 'a typical highland woman, stout and large-boned, with a rosy face and high cheekbones and twinkling blue eyes. She had more than her share of courage, determination, and independent honesty.'⁴

We know little else about her, other than that she worked variously as a weaver, a nurse and a newsagent. One photo of Anne survives, she is in Victorian dress – black cloth and white lace – and is broad-faced and stoic looking, with a strong family resemblance to her son. Maclean's friend Tom Anderson describes her: 'a woman with a great personality. As I see her now I see John – the same face, the same head, the same merry twinkle in the eye, the same quick impulse.'⁵

We know less still about John's father, Daniel – only that 'he had an active mind and was fond of discussion and argument'⁶ and that

he taught young men to read and write.⁷ He, like Anne, was a Gaelic speaker. But though Maclean adopted the pseudonym Gael, there is no evidence that his parents taught him their language.⁸

Both Daniel and Anne belonged to the Original Secession Church in Pollokshaws. This church forbade music and religious decoration and the Sabbath was strictly observed. It has been suggested that, though Maclean rejected religion in his late teens, this puritanical strand to his upbringing never left him. He never drank or smoked. There is identifiable in the image of Maclean a Scottish and radical Protestant Marxism, and certainly his dedication to universal education and democracy stem from some of the more positive attributes of the Scots Calvinist John Knox.

Daniel and Anne Maclean had seven children and of the four that survived, John Maclean was the youngest boy, born at 59 King Street – now Shawbridge Road – in Pollokshaws on 24 August 1879. At the time, 59 King Street housed 24 people living in nine rooms, just a few hundred yards from Cogan Street, where Daniel worked in the Pottery.

When John was very young, his father began to suffer from silicosis, or as it was known at the time, ‘potter’s rot’. This occupational disease caused by the inhalation of dust leads to shortness of breath, coughing fits, fevers, and blueish skin, and can eventually cause lung cancer and organ failure. The illness meant that Daniel Maclean was unable to work his trade and so had to accept lower earnings as a labourer. His death in 1888, at the age of 43, would accelerate the family’s slide into poverty.⁹

By 1891, Anne Maclean was a widow, and the head of a household at 84 King St, Pollokshaws, a three-room house in which she ran a newsagent. She lived with her four surviving children – Daniel, Margaret, John and Elizabeth – as well as her mother, Catherine MacPhee, and a boarder from Ireland. Besides Anne, only two members of the family were in work, Daniel as a teacher, and Margaret, aged 13, as a cotton factory worker. John and Elizabeth, the two youngest, were still at school.

Despite the tremendous hardship of bringing up the family as a single mother, Anne was committed to education and pushed her sons John and Daniel to stay in school beyond the normal leaving

age. John Maclean worked as a message boy before and after school, during the summer holidays he printed calico at the Thornliebank Printworks, and at Christmas he worked as a postman. On Saturdays he was a golf caddie, and the Sabbath was, of course, kept holy.¹⁰ By the time Maclean completed his education at Queen's Park School in South Glasgow, his brother Daniel, ten years his senior, had contracted tuberculosis. Daniel emigrated to South Africa in the hope that it would preserve his health. It did not. He died young, working all his short life as a teacher.

John Maclean, now a teenager, became the only surviving male member of his household.¹¹ But, despite the lack of money, in 1896 he became a pupil teaching assistant in Polmadie¹² before going on in 1898 to higher education at the Free Church Training College in the West End of Glasgow, where he was supervised by the great Scots educationalist Sir John Adams who – though they disagreed on social issues – John greatly admired.¹³

By the time Maclean began his journeys from his home in Pollokshaws to university in the West End, Glasgow was the fourth largest city in Europe and one of the world's great industrial centres. It had a vast modern transit system with more than a hundred train stations, and a subway system pre-dating those in Paris, Moscow and New York. Its unique position as a port city facing the new world, with just a short train and canal link to the ports of the East Coast and the old world, combined with large local coal fields, meant that Glasgow – and the whole Central Belt of Scotland – became industrialised and urbanised at a rate far outstripping the rest of Europe. This was met by a flow of cheap resources and labour from the Highlands, Ireland and the Colonies.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Glasgow had a population of more than 6,000 Muslims and 8,000 Jews, and languages such as Italian, Irish, Gaelic, Yiddish, Lithuanian, Chinese and Russian could be heard throughout the city. Within just a few generations, Glasgow had changed from a medium-sized town, rich from the proceeds of tobacco and slavery, to a major metropolis producing more than a quarter of the world's locomotives and nearly a fifth of all ships at sea. Glasgow was the Second City of the Empire, growing ever richer off industry and colonialism.¹⁴