

ACCUSER OF CAPITALISM

John Maclean's speech from
the dock, 9 May, 1918



*'I am not
here, then,
as the
accused. I
am here as
the accuser,
of capitalism
dripping with
blood from
head to foot'*

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Edited, with an Introduction and a new Afterword, by TERRY BROTHERSTONE¹

INTRODUCTION

On 9 May, 1918, John Maclean, former schoolteacher, and, since the previous January, consul at Glasgow to the revolutionary socialist regime in Russia, was brought to trial at the High Court of Justiciary in Edinburgh.² He was charged – under the Defence of the Realm Regulations – with having, on eleven occasions between 20 January and 4 April, 1918, addressed audiences in Glasgow, Lanarkshire and Fife, consisting in part of munitions workers, in terms likely to prejudice recruitment to His Majesty's armed forces and to cause mutiny, sedition and disaffection among the civilian population, thereby impeding the production, transport and repair of materials necessary for the prosecution of the war. Maclean chose to conduct his own case, and he refused to recognise the authority of the court by pleading either 'guilty' or 'not guilty'. The Lord Justice General, Lord Strathclyde, instructed that a plea of 'not guilty' be entered. Informed of his right to object to any of the men selected by ballot to serve on the jury, Maclean raised a laugh when he replied: 'I object to the whole of them.'³

The statements alleged to have been made by Maclean included: 'that the Clyde district had helped to win the Russian revolution'; that 'the revolutionary spirit on the Clyde was at present ten times as strong as it was two years ago'; that 'the workers on the Clyde should take

control of the City Chambers and retain hostages, and take control of the Post Offices and the banks'; that 'the present House of Commons should be superseded by a soviet, and that he did not care whether they met in the usual place or in Buckingham Palace'; and that 'the workers in the munition works should be advised to restrict their output'. He was also alleged to have suggested that the offices of the *Glasgow Herald* and other newspapers, and food stores, should be seized; and to have stated that he was prepared to run any risk if he could bring about a social revolution in Glasgow.

There were 28 prosecution witnesses, mainly policemen, special constables and shorthand writers employed by the police. Prosecuting counsel, led by Lord Advocate Clyde, took them through their evidence seeking to establish that the statements alleged had been made by Maclean, that the witnesses had either made notes at the time or soon afterwards, and that the meetings had been attended mainly by working people.

Maclean's principal 'defence' was to be an hour and a quarter-long speech, delivered from the dock; but in brief cross-examinations, he sought to query the credibility of some witness's memories on points of detail, and, especially, to establish that – where the remarks alleged had indeed been made – they had been in the context of a Marxist political analysis of capitalism and the war. For such an analysis, and for fighting for the principles on which it depended, he had no apology to make.

For example, Maclean cross-examined one witness, a businessman, on the issue of the restriction of output (go-slow, or, in the Scots term, 'ca'canny'). He was to deal with this at some length in his speech, but sought here to establish the context in which his remarks had been made. He had quoted the works magazine of the engineering firm Beardmore's to the effect that production had been increased three times, and had stated that wages had not increased by anything like as much. The witness agreed. So, said Maclean, his point

¹ Terry Brotherstone is an honorary research fellow at the University of Aberdeen, where he taught history for many years, and a former president of the University and College Union Scotland. This Introduction, and the notes, were first published in a pamphlet in 1986 (*Accuser of Capitalism: John Maclean's speech from the dock* (London, 1986)), of which this is a revised and updated edition.

² The account of the trial is largely taken from the pamphlet *Condemned From The Dock* (Clyde Workers' Propaganda Defence Committee, Glasgow, 1918), which contains what is apparently a near-verbatim account of Maclean's speech. This has been supplemented with reports from *The Scotsman*, *The Glasgow Herald* and *The Bulletin* (a heavily pictorial Glasgow daily, which would be a tabloid today), Friday 10 May, 1918; and the radical Glasgow-based weekly, *Forward*, Saturday 18 May, 1918. No official court record survives.

³ *Glasgow Herald*, 10 May, 1918.

had been ‘that the workers were being robbed the same as before the war’, and that they ‘would have to take steps to prevent this robbery’. ‘I remember you used the word “robbery”,’ said the witness. ‘And quite frequently too!’ rejoined Maclean.

A detective-sergeant gave evidence concerning a meeting in the Shettleston district of Glasgow, at which, he said, there were over a thousand present, including many munitions workers. He reported that the accused had called for an immediate peace, but ‘one with a revolution in it’. He had claimed that the Government’s only way of taming the workers was to starve them, and that, in the event of revolution, no one would starve as there was ‘plenty of food in Glasgow’. Maclean, said the officer, had contrasted ‘Russian freedom’ with ‘British slavery’; and recommended that the police should be put in the jails. Asked about the conduct of the doctors who had dealt with him in prison, Maclean had allegedly said that he wanted to take his own revenge on those ‘dirty devils’.

At a meeting of about five hundred in Cambuslang, a police witness with shorthand testified, Maclean had said that the ‘capitalist class don’t care how many women and children are destroyed as long as they belong to the working class’; and that women were dying of cold outside food shops, ‘not killed by Germans, but by your British government’. The USA, in entering the war, the accused had claimed, were out only for their own interests. The workers should force the government to join peace talks at Brest Litovsk or down tools if they refused. They should ‘profit by the experience of their Russian comrades.’ They should capture the City Chambers, the General Post Office, the police stations and cargo ships in the Clyde, and take over the food stores.⁴

A Fife police superintendent was forced to acknowledge that his evidence was based not on his own notes but on those of a press reporter, supplied to him after a meeting Maclean had addressed in the mining village of Bowhill. The accused took the superintendent through parts of the speech that had not appeared in the evidence he had given. ‘I spent a good deal of time on the economic question and the government’s issuing of paper money, and the government making it difficult for people to live?’



John Maclean with his wife Agnes and daughter Nan

‘Yes, you did,’ agreed the superintendent. ‘This is what I want to get at,’ insisted Maclean. ‘You take wee bits out of my speeches here and there.’ He went on to point out that he had argued that women and children in Fife were starving as a result of government policy, and that the main drift of the speech had been ‘to expose the trickery of the British government and the police and the lawyers and so on.’ The whole thing was designed to deploy this argument. ‘The consequence of any man’s speech is always based on what goes before, but what has been read out [in court] comes at the tail end, at the fourteenth page of those sixteen pages.’

‘Do you think it is a correct report of what I said at Harthill’, Maclean asked a witness to a meeting in Lanarkshire, ‘to say that I talked about bringing about a social revolution in Glasgow?’ The witness, a shorthand writer, insisted it was. ‘It seems to be a very bad slip,’ insisted Maclean, ‘because a social revolution cannot be brought about in a city. It is either a slip on your part or a slip on my part.’ The witness qualified his evidence. ‘You spoke about seizing the Municipal Buildings in Glasgow, and it seems to me that you meant that the revolution would have its beginning in Glasgow.’ ‘There is a difference’, concluded Maclean, ‘between a social revolution in Glasgow and *beginning* a social revolution in Glasgow’ (*editorial emphasis*).

⁴ These comments are most fully reported in *The Scotsman*, 10 May, 1918.

Maclean also sought to establish the proper context for alleged comments on the necessity of violent revolution. A mining inspector, who acknowledged that he had attended a meeting of Maclean's as a 'spy' for the Fife Coal Company, was asked: 'You are not aware that the land in the past has been violently seized from the people by force?' He replied that he might not approve of that, but the question at stake was one of method. Maclean had been asked at the meeting: 'Could we get these things by peaceful action?' He had replied: 'I am here to develop a revolution'. 'Do you infer that a revolution means violence?' asked Maclean. 'You could not put any other construction on your words after you had said that revolution here was to be on the same lines as in Russia', replied the Coal Company's employee. 'I understand that the Russian revolution was a violent revolution.' Maclean was to take up this theme later, but remarked here that the Bolshevik revolution 'is the most peaceful revolution the world has ever seen, and it is the biggest.' The capitalist war that had been killing millions since August 1914, on the other hand, 'was the most bloody that has ever taken place'.⁵

Re-examining the witness, junior counsel for the prosecution extracted from him the information that Maclean had called for the formation of miners' committees on the model of the soviets in Russia. The mining inspector was sure that this was liable to 'unsettle' the audience, the youth in particular, who might have got 'carried away'. But he later agreed with Maclean that Fife was a 'canny place', which would need a lot of 'working up' for revolution. He did not think very much harm had been done.

The authorities, however, had decided at the highest level to act against Maclean. His case had been discussed by the war cabinet on 12 March, 1918, and the Secretary for Scotland, Robert Munro, had reported that he and Lord Advocate Clyde had been reluctant to prosecute Maclean, preferring to regard him as 'more or less a lunatic'.⁶ Yet Munro's further remarks, and a background paper he circulated to the cabinet, make it clear that, despite this, he did think Maclean had to be taken seriously.

⁵ Deaths during and immediately after the October revolution were relatively small in number. The large numbers of casualties came later in the civil war of 1918-20. Estimates of deaths in, or as a result of action in, World War I vary, but they were in excess of ten million.

⁶ National Archives (NA), Kew: CAB 23/5 – WC/363(14) (12 March, 1918)

Maclean was already on a 'ticket-of-leave', having been conditionally released from the last year-and-a-half of a three-year sentence imposed in 1916, when the government's actions against the shop stewards' movement, co-ordinated by the shop stewards' Clyde Workers' Committee, were at their height.⁷ His release had been agreed following a wide campaign in his support, fuelled in part by reports of his mounting ill-health, induced by Scottish prison conditions, which one former prisoner compared unfavourably to those in Tsarist Russia.⁸ Munro acknowledged that a further spell in prison would make Maclean ill and would lead to a campaign for his release. He sought cabinet approval 'as political considerations might be involved'.

The Commander-in-Chief, Scottish Command, Lieutenant General Sir Spencer Ewart, had no hesitations proposing action, not only against Maclean, but against his colleagues James McDougall and Lewis Shammes as well.⁹ The Liberal President of the

⁷ The Clyde Workers' Committee (CWC), led by shop stewards from the principal Glasgow munitions factories, notably William Gallacher, David Kirkwood, Arthur Macmanus, John Muir and Jim Messer, was formed in 1915. It played a key role in what has been called the first shop stewards' movement. Its first period of activity ended in the spring of 1916 when it was broken up by the government as part of its campaign to enforce the 'dilution' of labour (that is, the replacement of skilled men by semi-skilled, and by women, in the munitions factories). See James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards' Movement* (London, 1973).

⁸ This was the view of the Russian revolutionary (later Stalin's envoy in China during the revolutionary years 1925-27) Michael Borodin: see Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-1921* (London, 1969), p. 360, note 136. Peter Petroff (1884-1947), an émigré member of the Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party, and a close friend of Maclean's expressed similar views. Maclean later revealed that Petroff – who had returned to Russia after the revolution and was, Maclean insisted, the only person in Moscow who had any real knowledge of the revolutionary movement in Britain – may have been responsible for his appointment as Soviet consul in Glasgow in 1918. His autobiography has recently come to light and is the subject of an article by Kevin Morgan, 'In and Out of the Swamp: the unpublished autobiography of Peter Petroff', *Scottish Labour History*, no. 48 (2013). See too Ted Crawford's usefully circumspect note, 'Peter Petroff (c. 1884-12 June 1947)', written in 2011 and accessible on the Marxist Internet Archive at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/petroff/biography.htm>>

⁹ James D. MacDougall (1891-1963) was the son of a former provost (mayor) of Pollokshaws and a close follower of Maclean. He was secretary of the Pollokshaws branch of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) when it was set up by Maclean in 1906. He was dismissed by Clydesdale Bank because of his outspoken socialist views, causing the Falkirk branch of the Ironmoulders' Union to withdraw its funds in protest. He remained an active socialist campaigner and educator alongside Maclean, and was imprisoned for anti-war speeches in 1916. He later worked, and was politically active, in the Lanarkshire coalfield. After Maclean's death, he Communist Party and later moved to the right politically. See William Knox (ed.), *Scottish Labour Leaders, 1918-1939*



John Maclean with some of his pupils, before the war.
Photo from the Scottish Republican Socialist Movement web site

Board of Education, the historian H.A.L. Fisher, chimed in to warn that he had heard of dangerous connections between ‘the more extreme leaders in Glasgow and similar labour leaders at St Etienne’ in France. The cabinet authorised the Scottish ministers to proceed as they saw fit.

Munro’s report to the cabinet had been based on a lengthy memorandum by Clyde, the man who was to confront Maclean in the courtroom two months later. In May, he was to address to the jury the argument that Maclean had passed over the line at which ‘discussion of social questions’ turned into ‘the deliberate and persistent attempt . . . to plant the seeds of disunion, disaffection, sedition and mutiny among our people.’¹⁰ He concluded:

(Edinburgh, 1984), pp. 170-175. Lewis Shammes was a Russian refugee from tsarism who worked with Maclean at the Glasgow consulate and was later deported by the British authorities.

¹⁰ For Clyde’s report to the Cabinet, see NA: CAB 24/44 – G.T. 3838 (March 1918). More than a century earlier, in the 1790s, when the radical supporter of the French Revolution, Thomas Muir, was tried in the Scottish courts, the judge, Lord Braxfield, famously informed him that his crime was not to have been in possession of Tom Paine’s *Rights of Man*, which many men of learning had on their shelves, but rather that he had gone amongst the common people spreading its ideas.

If they were going to turn society upside down by means of a general refusal to work, if they were going to turn society upside down by violent efforts devoted to the ruin of the existing structure instead of its repair . . . there faced them at once in this country the same catastrophe – the same betrayal – as overtook Russia. They must protect themselves against that kind of thing.¹¹

Clyde’s

confidential report in March had claimed that a ‘small but active group of extreme revolutionary socialists’ had been actively intervening in industrial unrest associated with war-time conditions since 1915. The temporary ‘deportation’ of a group of leading shop stewards from the Glasgow area in 1916, and the imprisonment of John Maclean and others, had not ended the problem. Lieutenant-General Ewart had expressed the view that Maclean was ‘a man of considerable influence among the malcontent population of Glasgow’, that he had ‘an influence in the mining districts of Lanarkshire and Fifeshire’, and, he believed, was also ‘well-known in England.’ Clyde judged that, at times of working-class unrest, and particularly during the engineers’ agitation for a wage increase of twelve-and-a-half per cent and the opposition to the Man Power Bill in 1917, the speeches of the ‘extremist’ group ‘appeared to me worthy of consideration with a view to prosecution under the Defence of the Realm Regulations’.¹²

The hostile reception accorded Auckland Geddes, Minister for National Service, when he visited Glasgow increased the need for action, indicated Clyde, but also made the choosing of the right moment and selecting the right target for a successful prosecution all the more vital. A threatened food shortage promised fertile ground for the revolutionaries to increase their

¹¹ *Glasgow Herald*, May 10, 1918.

¹² NA: CAB 24/44 — G.T. 3838 (March, 1918).

influence.¹³ What singled out Maclean from the others was his appointment as Soviet consul in Glasgow, but this also raised the question of proceeding against him to a matter involving Government policy towards the Bolshevik regime. However (writing on 5 March, 1918), Clyde felt the moment had now arrived since his estimation of ‘public opinion’ on Clydeside was that it was then ‘in a sense generally adverse to the agitation recently conducted by the group, and the agitation itself has for the time being died down’.

When it came to the trial itself, following the evidence and examination of the witnesses, and an account by a senior Glasgow detective of how he had arrested Maclean at the office from which he had been operating as Soviet consul, Clyde had his opportunity to make publicly the case for the prosecution. No one, he stated, could ‘see into the dark recesses of the human heart.’ They could not know Maclean’s motives – the motives that could ‘tempt a man at home to destroy the liberty and freedom which were being defended abroad’. All the more reason, declared the Lord Advocate, to judge the man ‘by what he did’.

What the prisoner has done his best to do is to create sedition and disaffection amongst the civilian population. [In this situation] it becomes the duty of the state to protect ... brave young working men from such insidious teaching, although, for myself, I do not believe influences of

his kind are likely to smirch the honesty and integrity of our young men.¹⁴

The court, said Clyde:

had heard ... a good many references to socialism, social revolution and the like. However appropriate these subjects might be to the moment, there is nothing in this country, or in the law – even as that law has had to be framed to meet the emergency with which we are faced – to prevent any man ... talking about politics or about socialism. If the prisoner had been content to expound what he knew, or what he thought he knew, about socialistic theories, if he had been content to try to persuade other people of the soundness and expediency of the plans of socialistic reconstruction in which he believes, nobody could have laid a finger on him. But there comes a point at which discussion of socialistic questions, or discussion of any question, changes its character. At that point [comes] the deliberate and persistent attempt to plant seeds of disunion, disloyalty, sedition among the people. [We can not] afford, at the present time, to have the people incited to active ... rebellion, while the enemy is at our gates.

The case against the accused, claimed the Lord Advocate – fully confident of that the middle-class Edinburgh jurymen would regard his remarks as obvious common sense – was proved.¹⁵

Maclean, for his part, was content to take the Lord Advocate’s assertion of the ruling-class view of the war as his starting-point, his opportunity to act as spokesperson for the interests of the working class. He shared with his opponent the view that his special role – having been appointed a representative of the Bolshevik revolution – was as both a real and a symbolic link with the new government in Russia with its aspirations to act as the focus for the revival of international socialism. When, after the war finally ground to a halt some months later, the Bolsheviks issued their call for the founding congress of a Communist International (the Third International), Maclean was indeed the only activist in Britain to be invited by name.

Why republish John Maclean’s speech from the dock today? I return briefly to that question in an Afterword

¹³ Auckland Geddes (1879-1954), Director of Recruiting for the War Office (1916-17) and Minister of National Service (1917-19) got short shrift at a meeting with shop stewards about his measures to release additional manpower for the forces in Glasgow on 28 January, 1918. Late in 1916 and early in 1917 the government was attempting to increase the availability of military manpower by extending the dilution of labour from government-controlled factories to those privately run. The executive of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE), heavily compromised by its collaboration with the government’s wartime measures, was forced to oppose this. The measure was dropped when widespread engineering strikes took place in May 1917, which led to a series of government measures designed to quell unrest and diminish the influence of militants and revolutionaries. These included a bonus of twelve-and-a-half per cent to some skilled men which, however, served to promote unrest amongst other workers. On 3 December, 1917, Geddes warned the cabinet that the country was nearing ‘breaking point’ in the effort to meet the critical shortage of manpower. In January 1918, he pushed a Manpower bill through parliament, giving him power to cancel the two months’ grace previously granted to workers in formerly protected occupations, who had had their ‘exemption certificates’ withdrawn to enable them to be called up. When Geddes was convinced the ASE had so antagonised other unions that it would be isolated in any action it called for, he has passed a second, much stronger, Manpower Act in April 1918.

¹⁴ The *Glasgow Herald* report of this peroration has been slightly amended to make it in to direct speech.

¹⁵ The fullest account of Clyde’s address to the jury is in *The Scotsman*.

below. Suffice it to say here that it takes us back to a period when the labour movement produced men and women who stood firm for working-class principles and who were prepared to sacrifice themselves in the belief that leadership by example had a vital role to play in creating mass revolutionary consciousness. Nearly a century of betrayed hopes lies between Maclean's trial and the cynicism, or plain ignorance, with which labour leaders – and many 'revisionist' historians – treat his speech from the dock today. It fits ill with the historically absurd attempts of the former Education Secretary Michael Gove, and those who take him seriously, to portray World War I as a glorious national struggle for European freedom and democracy, subverted in the minds of modern youth only by over-studied and over-sensitive poets and by the ideologically suspect entertainers of the morally corrupted 1960s who gave us the musical play, *Oh What a Lovely War*, and those who later brought *Blackadder* to our TV screens.¹⁶

The afternoon before Maclean's trial, some fifty supporters set out from Glasgow to walk forty miles through the night to give him support. About thirty arrived in Edinburgh, having been bussed the last few miles. Only those who went straight to the court gained admittance. So high was demand, in the main from workers, that a queuing system was introduced – for the first time, one report claimed, in the court's history. A newspaper photograph shows a long line of flat-capped men with a group of women dressed to the nines for the occasion at its head. A substantial crowd gathered in the square outside throughout the day.¹⁷ Treated as mad, contemptible or just irrelevant by the political and intellectual Establishment, Maclean's name – and his speech on 9 May, 1918 – were to become part of a socialist history remembered in storytelling and pamphleteering – and, thanks to a handful of left-wing historians, never entirely excluded from Scottish history once it became a subject of serious scholarly study in the 1960s.¹⁸ Glasgow students, when they made their contribution to the international university occupation movement that followed the Paris 'events' of 1968 by taking possession of their institution's Adam Smith Building in the early 1970s, renamed it after John Maclean. The efforts of Maclean's indefatigable

¹⁶ For Gove's crassly 'patriotic' outburst against left-wing subversion of the just cause that he believes World War I to have been, see, in the first instance, *The Daily Mail*, 2 January, 2014. The revival of Joan Littlewood's *Oh What a Lovely War*, at its original home, the Theatre Royal, Stratford East (London) in 2014, raised one of its biggest laughs with an unflattering reference to Gove.

¹⁷ *The Bulletin*, 10 May, 1918; *Forward*, 18 May, 1914.

¹⁸ See Afterword below.

daughter, Nan Milton, resulted in the erection of a memorial cairn in Pollokshaws in 1973, and a Glasgow Civic Reception in honour of the centenary of his birth in 1979. The Lanarkshire branch of the teachers' union, the Educational Institute of Scotland sponsored a series of John Maclean lectures in the late 1980s. For many years a John Maclean Society held commemorative marches to his grave on the south side of Glasgow.

Today of course much more is needed. A working-class 'commemoration' of World War I simply counterposed against the orgy of the partisan establishment celebrations – that will be hard to avoid between 4 August, 2014 and 11 November, 2018 – might be instructive, but would miss the main point. There are few intellectual tasks more politically urgent than to rethink radically the history of the period that began when war was declared in August 1914 and the social-democratic Second International, in the main, abandoned its declared anti-war principles (proclaimed at its 1907 and 1912 congresses), and voted, in country after country, for war credits – in the name of *l'union sacrée* or national unity. It was Maclean's stand against that betrayal that brought him to the attention of Lenin, who followed as best he could the degree of support the Clydesider's revolutionary anti-war message was attracting in the working class.¹⁹ It is that stand that makes him one of those whose political actions should be remembered, not in a spirit of hero-worship, but as a spur to the rethinking that is needed about the significance of the world historical crisis, threatening the very survival of human society, that began in 1914 and entered a new – far more dangerous – stage in the last three decades of the last century.

When Maclean had finished his speech from the dock, the jury did not bother to retire to consider its verdict but pronounced him 'guilty' on the spot. 'I think I have said enough for one day', Maclean told Lord Strathclyde when asked if he had anything to say about the verdict. The judge called him 'a highly educated and intelligent man' who knew very well what he was doing, and sentenced him to five years penal servitude, of which, in the event, he was to serve only a few months. Turning to the public gallery, Maclean said firmly, 'Keep it going, boys, keep it going!'

Maclean belonged to a definite generation, a generation of international socialists, and was himself an international figure. It was a generation that produced,

¹⁹ V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works* (Moscow, 1960), XXVI, p. 74; Jane Degras (ed.), *The Communist International 1919-43: Documents* (London, 1956), I, p. 4. Lenin referred to Maclean many times during the war, as evidenced elsewhere in his *Collected Works*.

amongst many others, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, James Connolly and James Larkin, Eugene Debs and Daniel de Leon, Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky. It was a generation that faced – for the first time in history as a practical responsibility – the task of attempting to make the world socialist revolution. Consciousness of this responsibility, and of at least some of the problems and contradictions that it would involve, runs through Maclean’s speech from the dock. His voice deserves to be heard afresh as the centenary of his trial approaches and reactionary politicians try to force their one-sided, ideologically motivated interpretations of World War I into the minds of a generation deprived, as Paul Mason had recently argued, of the countervailing ideas about the realities of modern and contemporary history that used to be passed on, not so much in schoolroom or in the mainstream media, but rather by grandparents in working-class communities – communities that have now been largely destroyed.²⁰

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

John Maclean

Defendant and ‘accuser of capitalism’. Marxist and revolutionary internationalist. Born in Pollokshaws, now part of Glasgow on August 24, 1879, of parents evicted from the Scottish Highlands during the ‘clearances’. Second youngest of seven children, three of whom died in infancy. Father died when he was aged eight. Appointed a pupil-teacher, 1896. Graduated from the Free Church Teachers Training College, 1900. Graduated MA in Political Economy from Glasgow University in 1904. Joined Social Democratic Federation (SDF), probably in 1903 and the Glasgow Teachers’ Socialist Society in 1905. Had by then rejected his Calvinistic upbringing and thought of himself as a secularist, then as an atheist, before becoming a convinced Marxist. Later described Robert Blatchford’s popular *Merrie England* (first published as

articles in *The Clarion* newspaper and available from 1894 as a penny pamphlet) as his ‘primary school’ of socialism, and Marx’s *Capital* as his ‘university’. Opposed the sectarianism and jingoism of the SDF leadership, advocating affiliation to the Labour Party and internationalist opposition to war and colonialism. Active in the co-operative movement. Became famous for his public classes in Marxist economics, building some of them up to attendances of several hundred. An active propagandist in support of a number of industrial struggles on Clydeside, in Fife, Belfast and elsewhere prior to World War I. Led the internationalist wing of the British Socialist Party (formerly the SDF) when war was declared in August 1914. ‘Our chief business’, he wrote, in an echo of Karl Liebknecht’s ‘the chief enemy is at home’, ‘is to hate British capitalism’ (*Justice*, September 1914). Active in the foundation of the Scottish Labour College, 1916. Arrested for anti-war activity, September 1915 (fined £5 but chose to serve five days imprisonment). Subsequently dismissed by Govan School Board despite widespread protests. Attended and supported the Clyde Workers’ Committee (CWC) of shop stewards but later broke with it over its refusal to clarify its political stand on the war. Participated in the rent strike demonstrations of late 1915, which led to the historic Rent Restrictions Act – the first major government intervention in the free market in housing. Re-arrested under the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) during the government’s moves to break up the CWC early in 1916 and sentenced to three years’ penal servitude in April. Released in June 1917, during the period of mass demonstrations following the February revolution in Russia. Appointed an honorary president of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, along with figures such as Karl Liebknecht, following the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917. Made Russian consul in Glasgow in January 1918, but the consulate was never acknowledged by the authorities and closed following Maclean’s arrest in April.

James Avon Clyde

Leading counsel for the prosecution. Born 1863 (died 1944). Son of a schoolmaster. Tory. Solicitor General for Scotland, 1905. Lord Advocate (leading government law officer in Scotland) from 1916 to 1920. During 1918 much involved in representing the British South Africa Company in its claim before the Privy Council to unalienated land in what was then Southern Rhodesia. MP for Edinburgh West (later North) from 1909 to 1920. Was to succeed Lord Strathclyde as Lord

²⁰ Paul Mason, *Live Working or Die Fighting: how the working class went global* (London, 2007). For a comment on the significance of this book, see Terry Brotherstone, ‘Labour History Resurgent’, *Variante* (Glasgow), issue 33 (winter 2008).

Justice General (Scotland's most senior judge) in 1920. A keen fisherman, sketcher and rose grower.²¹

Lord Strathclyde

Presiding judge. Born Alexander Ure, 1853 (died 1928), son of a Helensburgh merchant and former Lord Provost of Glasgow. Gladstonian (and later Lloyd George) Liberal. MP for Linlithgowshire, 1895-1913. Solicitor General for Scotland, 1905-09. Lord Advocate, 1909-13. Leading prosecutor in the notorious Oscar Slater trial (1909), in which a German Jew was almost certainly framed by the Glasgow police for the murder of an elderly spinster, Marion Gilchrist. The case aroused widespread protests, not least in the Glasgow labour movement, but Slater's conviction was not quashed until 1928. Ure became Lord Justice General and Lord President of the Court of Session (Scotland's senior judge) in 1913; and was created Baron Strathclyde of Sandyford in 1914. A fellow lawyer wrote: 'Undoubtedly Ure was better as an advocate than as a judge, though in neither capacity was he learned in the technical sense.'²²

Dora

Ironically affectionate nickname for the Defence of the Realm Act, with its attendant Defence of the Realm Regulations, under which Maclean was charged both in 1916 and 1918. Originally passed, August 8, 1914, giving the government substantial – and, as subsequently amended, increasingly draconian – powers to direct society during the war.

²¹ *Who Was Who*, IV: 1941-1950 (London, 6th ed., 2012), p. 226.

²² *Dictionary of National Biography: twentieth century, 1922-30* (Oxford, 1937), p. 866.

JOHN MACLEAN'S ADDRESS TO THE JURY

Accuser of capitalism: integrity and class war

It has been said that they cannot fathom my motive. For the full period of my active life I have been a teacher of economics to the working classes, and my contention has always been that capitalism is rotten to its foundations, and must give place to a new society. I had a lecture, the principal heading of which was 'Thou shalt not steal; thou shalt not kill', and I pointed out that as a consequence of the robbery that goes on in all civilised countries that inevitably our armies must come to clash together. On that and on other grounds, I consider capitalism the most infamous, bloody and evil system that mankind has ever witnessed. My language is regarded as extravagant language, but the events of the past four years have proved my contention.

[The Lord Advocate] accused me of my motives. My motives are clean. My motives are genuine. If my motives were not clean and genuine, would I have made my statements while these shorthand reporters were present? I am out for the benefit of society, not for any individual human being, but I realise this that justice and freedom can only be obtained when society is placed on a sound economic basis. That sound economic basis is wanting today, and hence the bloodshed we are having. I have not tried to get young men particularly. The young men came to my meetings as well as the old men. I know quite well that in the reconstruction of society, the class interest of those who are on the top will resist the change, and the only factor in society that can make for a clean sweep in society is the working class. Hence the class war. The whole history of society has proved that society moves forward as a consequence of an underclass overcoming the resistance of a class on top of them. So much for that.



John Maclean speaking from the dock.

Photo from Glasgow Digital Library (gdl.cdli.strath.ac.uk)

I also wish to point out to you this, that when the late King Edward VII died, I took as the subject of one of my lectures 'Edward the Peacemaker'. I pointed out at the time that his *Entente Cordiale* with France, and his alliance with Russia, were for the purpose of encircling Germany as a result of the coming friction between Germany and this country because of commercial rivalry. I then denounced that title 'Edward the Peacemaker,' and said that it should be 'Edward the War-Maker'.²³ The events which have ensued prove my contention right up to the hilt. I am only proceeding along the lines upon which I have proceeded for many years. I have pointed out at my economics classes that, owing to the surplus created by the workers, it was necessary to create a market

²³ Edward VII (1841-1910), king from 1901, liked to be known as 'the Peacemaker' and to exaggerate his role in bringing about the Anglo-French entente, known as the *Entente Cordiale*. This accord, which can be dated back to the 1840s, was renewed in 1904, following the King's ceremonial visit to Paris in 1903. It was part of the system of international rivalries which culminated in World War I.

outside of this country, because of the inability of the workers to purchase the wealth they create. You must have markets abroad, and in order to have these markets you must have empire. I have also pointed out that the capitalist development of Germany since the Franco-Prussian War has forced upon that country the necessity for empire as well as this country – and in its search for empire there must be a clash between these two countries. I have been teaching that and what I have taught is coming perfectly true.

I wish no harm to any human being, but I, as one man, am going to exercise my freedom of speech. No human being on the face of the earth, no government is going to take from me my right to speak, my right to protest against wrong, my right to do everything that is for the benefit of mankind.

I am not here, then, as the accused; I am here as the accuser, of capitalism dripping with blood from head to foot.

Advocacy of ca'canny

In connection with the 'ca'canny'²⁴ at Parkhead Forge, I wish to take up some particular points first of all before I deal with the revolution. It is quite evident that it was in connection with a report in the *Forward* [newspaper] that reference was made to David Kirkwood. It was there reported that Kirkwood had made a record output. Now David Kirkwood, representing the Parkhead Forge workers, at the end of 1915, when the dilution of labour began, put forward a printed statement for the benefit of Mr Lloyd George and his colleagues, the first sentence of which in big type was – 'What you wish is greater output'. He said that the Parkhead Forge workers were then prepared to give a greater output and accept dilution if they, the workers, had some control over the conditions under which the greater output would accrue. That was his contention. Since he has got into position he seems to have boasted that he has got a record output. The question was put to me: was this consistent with the position and with the attitude of the working class? I said it was not consistent with the attitude and the position of the working class, that his business was to get back right down to the normal, to 'ca'canny' so far as the general output was concerned.²⁵

²⁴ 'Ca'canny' (call canny, get people to be cautious) is a Scots expression for restricting output, or adopting a policy of taking it easy.

²⁵ David Kirkwood (1872-1955) was the leading shop steward at Beardmore's Parkhead Forge in the east end of Glasgow. A key figure in the CWC, he was seen by some as being under the influence of the Catholic socialist, John Wheatley, and susceptible

The country has been exploited by the capitalists in every sphere, to get the toilers to work harder to bring victory. I said at the commencement of the war that while this was being done, and while assurances were being given that at the end of the war the people would get back to normal, I said that circumstances would make such a return impossible. Now I have ample evidence to support that belief – I have used it at my meetings at Weir's of Cathcart – that they were asking the workers to toil harder not only during the war, but after war, [that] they wish them to work harder and harder because there is going to be 'the war after the war' – the economic war which brought on this war.²⁶

You see therefore the workers are brought into a position where they are speeded up, and they are never allowed to go back again. They are speeded up again and again. What is the position of the worker? This country is not a free country. The worker is deprived of land or access to the land; he is deprived of workshops or access to the materials and tools of production; the worker has only one thing to do in the market, and that is to sell his labour power. The capitalist purchases that labour power, and when he gets the worker inside the workshop, his business is to extract as much of that labour out of him as possible. On the other hand, when it comes to wages, then the employer applies the principle of 'ca'canny'. 'Ca'canny' is quite justifiable when it comes to the employer giving wages to the workers, and we have seen it since the commencement of the war. Prices rose right away from the commencement of the war

to compromises with the employers that divided and weakened the CWC. He was one of those deported from Glasgow in March 1916. When re-arrested in 1917, after breaking the conditions on which he had been allowed to attend the Labour Party conference, he spent some time as one of the last prisoners ever to be held in the military surroundings of Edinburgh Castle. On his return to Glasgow, he was increasingly open in his support for maximising war production. In 1951, he was elevated to the peerage as first Baron Kirkwood of Bearsden. The reformist left-wing weekly, the *Forward*, had been founded in 1906 by the Independent Labour Party member Tom Johnston. It achieved a great boost to its popularity and circulation through being suppressed by the government for a month at the beginning of 1916 for reporting a meeting at which the audience gave the then Munitions Minister, David Lloyd George, a torrid reception. Johnston served as Secretary of State for Scotland in Churchill's World War II coalition, and later was Chancellor of Aberdeen University.

²⁶ Weir's of Cathcart, like Parkhead Forge, was one of the munitions works where the CWC had influence. Jim Messer, secretary to the CWC, worked there. William Weir (1877-1959) had been director since 1902 and managing director since 1912, of the company built by his father. He was determined to break the resistance of the workers, and of some cautious spirits amongst his fellow-employers, in order to increase production by breaking down craft restrictions. He was appointed Director of Munitions for Scotland in 1915 and knighted two years later.

while the workers' wages were kept at the old normal. Their wages were kept low. The purchasing power of the workers' wages was therefore diminished. They were therefore robbed to that extent. At the same time the workers were asked in the name of the country to work harder, 'but', said the employers, 'we will not give you any more money, although the money you are getting is purchasing less in the way of food, etc'. That is the position.

The employers are changing their opinions now as a result of experience, but in the past they considered it in their economic interest to pay as low a wage as possible. On the other hand the position of the workers is to give as little of their energy as they possibly can and to demand the highest wage possible. If it is right for the employer to get the maximum of energy and pay the minimum of wage, then it is equally right for the worker to give the minimum of his energy and demand the maximum of wage.

What is right for the one is equally right for the other, although the interests of the two classes are diametrically opposed. That is the position, and in view of that fact that many of the workers have overworked themselves and have had to lie off through overstrain and considering the treatment they get when thrown out on the scrapheap – kicked out like dogs when they are no longer useful – they are compelled to look after their own welfare. The worker has therefore in the past adopted the policy of 'ca'canny', and I have in the interests of the working class advocated the policy of 'ca'canny', not because I am against the war, but, knowing that after the war the worker will have the new conditions imposed upon him, I hold still to the principle of 'ca'canny'. I accede to that.²⁷

So far as Parkhead Forge is concerned, I also pointed out that none of the great big guns had been made for some time prior to the great offensive. When the offensive came, Gough, the friend of Sir Edward Carson, the man who before the war was going to cut down the Irishmen, he retreated and lost so many guns, and then the Glasgow workers had to give over their Easter holiday in order to make those guns.²⁸ We have,

²⁷ The Amalgamated Society of Engineers, and other unions, had in part justified their concessions to the employers and the government over working practices, with the assurance that the government had guaranteed the restoration of pre-war practices after the war. Workers were justly sceptical about the likelihood of this happening.

²⁸ General Sir Hubert de la Poer Gough, GCB, GCMG, KCVO (1870-1963), a senior officer in World War I, was a favourite of British Commander-in-Chief, Sir Douglas Haig, and commanded the Fifth Army, 1916-1918. Edward Carson (1854-1935), a Dublin-born lawyer, had in the

therefore, Beardmore and others responsible for shortage of certain material, and we know from further disclosures that millions of shells have been useless, and perhaps that has been due to the fact of over-speeding, so that even over-speeding may do nothing for the advancement of the war. Furthermore, if big reserves of material are going to be built up, and the Germans are to be allowed to get them, that is going to be to the advantage of the Germans, and not to the advantage of the British.

The call to 'down tools'

With regard to the next point, 'down tools', so far as Glasgow is concerned, I do not think I told the workers to 'down tools'. I am of the opinion that I said: 'Now you are determined to "down tools", it is of no use standing idle; you must do something for yourselves.' As a matter of fact my statement was based on a resolution that had been passed by the ASE [Amalgamated Society of Engineers] in the Clyde area, the official Engineers' Committee. It met and it determined to down tools against the introduction of the Man Power Bill.

At the same time that was supplemented by official effort at [Auckland] Geddes's meeting²⁹ in the City Hall. There a resolution was put up by the workers and carried virtually unanimously, that if the Man Power Bill was put into operation, the Clyde district workers would 'down tools'. It was unnecessary for me, therefore, in light of these official and unofficial statements, to urge the 'down tools' policy. As a matter of fact, we were told that the government had dismissed many munition girls just immediately prior to the great offensive, so that if the workers are guilty of stoppage of output of munitions, the government is likewise responsible in the dismissal of those thousands of girls.

The seizure of food supplies and press property

Now then, food and farms. I pointed out to the workers that what was necessary if they stopped work was the

early 1890s destroyed his former university friend, Oscar Wilde, when he defended the Marquis of Queensbury in Wilde's ill-fated libel action. In the pre-war years Carson played a key role in establishing the Ulster Volunteer Force, running guns to Ulster protestants fighting Irish nationalism. He was Attorney General in the first wartime coalition, formed by Prime Minister H. H. Asquith in 1915, and, a year later, was made First Lord of the Admiralty by Asquith's successor, Lloyd George.

²⁹ Auckland Geddes was Director of Recruiting for the War Office (1916-17) and Minister of National Service (1917-19). See Introduction, note 13.

getting of food. There had been a shortage; the Government had held up the supplies, for several reasons probably – perhaps to get this rationing passed, in order to have a tight hold on food, and also lest the people get out of hand in reference to this Man Power Bill. I knew that there was plenty of food in stores in Glasgow, and that the farmers had food stored up in their farms. The farmers have used the war in order to make huge profit for themselves, and then the Government assisted them in connection with the potato regulations; and latterly, in the last year, the Corn Production Act was passed, not in the interests of the farm labourers, but in the interests of the farmers.

When the demand for more food production was made, the farmers said they would do their best, and the government refused to give the farm labourers a minimum wage of twenty-five to thirty shillings a week – twenty-five shillings at that time being equivalent to ten shillings in normal times. The farmers were going to get extra as a consequence of the Corn Production Act.³⁰ I therefore pointed out that if the workers went to the farmers and did not get the food stored up in the farms, they should burn the farms. We as socialists have no interest in destroying any property. We want property to be kept because we want that property to be used for housing accommodation or other reasons, but I specially emphasised about the farmers for the purpose of drawing attention to this particular point.

In the same way, when it came to the question of seizing the press, I suggested that when the *Daily Record* was seized, the plant should be broken up. I did not say that in connection with the *Glasgow Herald*. I said so in connection with the *Record*, not that it is a good thing to break up printing plant, but in order to draw attention to the Harmsworth family and to the Rothermeres and so on, and their vile press, which seems to be an index of the culture of Britain.³¹ I mention that particularly here, that I said the *Record* plant should be broken up, in order to emphasise the

³⁰ The Corn Production Act of April 1917 guaranteed prices to farmers and a minimum wage to agricultural workers, in an attempt to boost food production. It also increased the interventionist powers of the Board of Agriculture.

³¹ Alfred Harmsworth (1865-1922), Viscount Northcliffe, was owner of the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Mirror* and *The Times*, and a leading exponent of imperialistic jingoism. Harold Harmsworth (1868-1940), Viscount Rothermere, his younger brother, was more interested in the financial than the editorial side of the newspapers. He founded the *Glasgow Daily Record* in 1910; and controlled Associated Newspapers after Northcliffe's death. Described as a shy man, in the 1920s and 1930s he greatly admired Mussolini and Hitler.

disgust of the organised workers with regard to that particular family of newspapers.

So far as Ireland and America are concerned, that was mentioned particularly for the purpose of getting food from the St Lawrence [waterway in north America], food from the United States, and food from Argentina. What was needed was food in order to hold our own, for, as the *Glasgow Herald* pointed out, when the Bolsheviks first came into power, Britain was withholding food from Russia, in the expectation that frost and famine would overthrow the Bolsheviks. That is to say, they were anxious to murder women and children inside Russia, as well as men. The suggestion I made was in order to draw the attention of the workers to the need of having plenty of food stuffs to keep them going.

The murder of women and children

So far as the Government's responsibility for the murder of women and children is concerned, the reason for my statement is perfectly obvious. They have been accusing the Germans of killing women and children in this country. Perfectly true. Of course bombs dropped in Germany have not killed women and children, marvellous to say! But that apart, we had the government getting hold of the food supplies immediately prior to, and immediately after the New Year, and creating a shortage. I pointed out that it was an artificial shortage. The government was therefore responsible for the queues.

Women were standing in queues in the cold, and women had died of what they had contracted during their standing in the queues. The women had died therefore in consequence of the action of the Government, and I threw the responsibility upon the government – and I do so still.

We know that women and children – human material – have been used up inside the factories, and the housing of the working class in this country has been so bad, and is so bad to-day, that the women and children of the working class die in greater proportion than the women and children of the better-to-do classes. I have always pointed out that the death rate among the working classes has always exceeded that in the better-to-do districts.

I also pointed out that the British government had sent Russian subjects back to Russia to fight, and had given their wives twelve shillings and sixpence a week and two and sixpence for each child. Now when I was functioning as Russian consul, two deputations of

Russian women came to me and they told me sorrowful tales of depression, disease, and death in consequence of the fact that they had received twelve and sixpence a week and two and six for each child. I wrote to the Secretary for Scotland in regard to that and I received no reply. The children ought not to suffer because their fathers have been taken, but those children have suffered. There is not a Lithuanian family in the West of Scotland but has trouble today as a consequence of the starving of these people.³²

These women and children of the Russian community have died as a consequence of the meagre supplies given to them by the British government, and I seize this opportunity for the purpose of making my statement public, in connection with these women, in the hope that the public in general will press the government to see that these women and children are attended to at least on the same scale as the wives and dependants of British soldiers.

American ‘independence’ and pan-Germanism

With regard to the Yankees, I said, and I say to-day, that the Yankees are out for themselves. The British press – the British capitalist press – sneered and jeered at the Americans before the Americans came in, and pointed out how the Americans were making piles of profit out of the war, but were not participating in this fight for so-called freedom. Those insults were offered to America, and when Mr Woodrow Wilson said that America was too proud to fight, then that was used venomously. Therefore, if I erred, I erred on the same side as the capitalist class of this country. I made the statement on American authority, not off my own bat. My authority is Professor Roland G. Usher, Professor of History at Washington University. I think his statement in *Pan-Germanism* is one of the finest, showing the moves throughout the world leading up to this war, and Usher has his bias in favour of Britain.³³

What I wish to particularly refer to are his two books *Pan-Germanism* and *The Challenge of the Future*. In *Pan-Germanism*, he surveys North and South and Central America. He takes the Atlantic first, and explains what will be the consequence of the war as

³² On the substantial Lithuanian community that had settled in Lanarkshire in the latter part of the nineteenth century, see T.C. Smout, *A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950* (Edinburgh, 1986), p. 248.

³³ Roland G. Usher, *Pan-Germanism* (London and Boston, 1913) and *Challenge of the Future: a study of American foreign policy* (London and Boston, 1916). Also the author of *Pan-Americanism: a forecast of the inevitable clash between the United States and Europe's victor* (London, 1915).

regards South and Central America whichever side wins, and then he takes the Pacific. He works it out from a material and economic point of view, his purpose being to get Central and South America to work in with the United States. In his later book he modifies that position – that is to say in *The Challenge of the Future*. He points out that America is still today economically dependent, that is to say, she has got to pay interest to financiers in France, in Britain, and therefore America cannot afford to carry out the bold schemes referred to in his book, *Pan-Germanism*.

I may now state that today the business men of this country know perfectly well that the Yankees are boasting of their independence. Therefore when you see references to American independence, that means that she no longer needs to pay interest to investors from outside, and that her policy will be modified in consequence of that new phase. This gentleman points out that as a consequence of American dependence she must say which side she will take. This book was printed prior to America entering the war. Woodrow Wilson's policy works in admirably with the suggestions in that book of Professor Usher, *The Challenge of the Future*.

US policy since the Bolshevik revolution

We know quite well too that the United States of America prevented Japan in 1915 getting economic and political control over North China. Twenty-one articles were imposed on China after the Japanese had released their grip of the Germans there. America, alive to her own interests, getting to know of these twenty-one points, forced Japan to withdraw. America was there working in her own interests.

Japan has been, I think, incited to land at Vladivostok in consequence of the Russian Revolution, and in order to crush the Bolsheviks. The allies on both sides are united to crush the Bolsheviks. America did not take that course. America, early on, began to back up the Bolsheviks because America was afraid that if Japan got half Siberian Russia that would give her a strategic control of Siberia, and it would mean a closed door to American contact across the Pacific with Russia proper. America therefore has been looking to her own interests, and for that reason I contend that the Yankees, who have been the worshippers of the mighty dollar, are looking after their own interests in the present war; and as to the great boast they have been making about what they are going to do, and their inadequate returns – that, I think, shows that America has not been over-anxious to plunge right away into this war and make all the sacrifices she has said. I

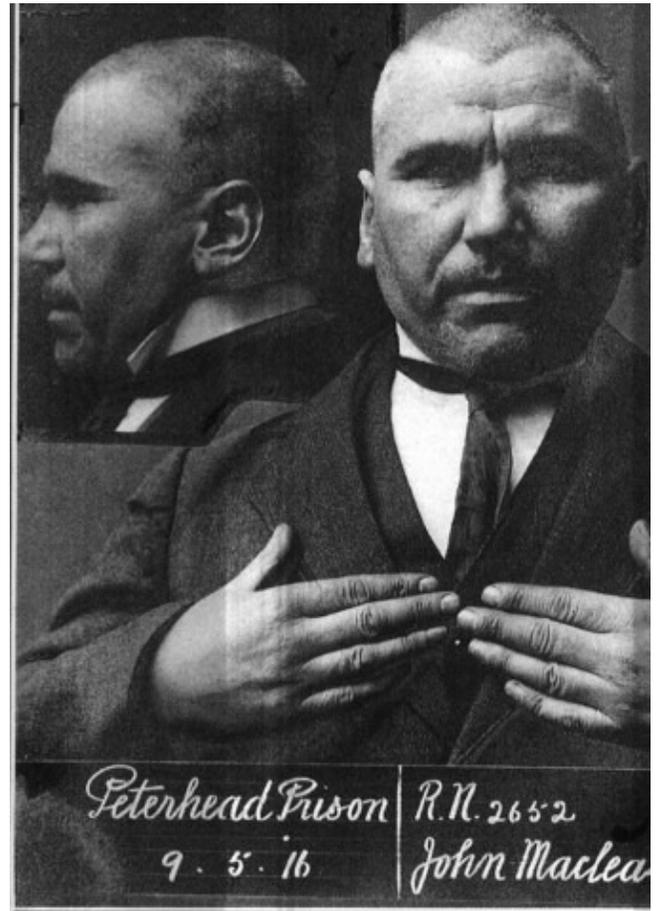
know, of course, that America has had her own troubles at home, racial troubles, and also troubles with the workers. Numerous strikes have taken place in America since the commencement of the war, not only in consequence of the war, but also in connection with the economic position.³⁴

Prison treatment – a British atrocity

Now then, I come to the doctors. The doctors I referred to were the prison doctors. When I was in Peterhead it was plain sailing until the middle of December, and then the trouble began. I was fevered up, and being able to combat that, I was then chilled down. Two men came to see me at the end of December, a prominent lecturer in this country, and Mr Sutherland, MP, and to them I protested that my food was being drugged. I said that there was alcohol in the food lowering my temperature. I know that potassium bromide is given to people in order to lower their temperature. It may have been potassium bromide that was used in order to lower my temperature. I was aware of what was taking place in Peterhead from hints and statements by other prisoners there; that from January to March, the so-called winter period, the doctor is busy getting the people into the hospital, there breaking up their organs and their systems.

I call that period the eye-squinting period, because the treatment then given puts the eyes out of view. Through numerous expedients I was able to hold my own. I saw these men round about me in a horrible plight. I have stated in public since that I would rather be immediately put to death than condemned to a life sentence in Peterhead. Attacks were made upon the organs of these men and also upon their nervous system, and we know from the conscientious objectors that the government have taken their percentage of these men – some have died, some have committed suicide, others have been knocked off their heads, and in this way got into asylums. The very same process has gone on there. Mrs Hobhouse has done a good service to mankind in registering the facts, but, unfortunately for Mrs Hobhouse, she does not know how the result has been obtained. I experienced part of

³⁴ Here, and in articles and a pamphlet on *The Coming War with America* (c. 1919), Maclean seems to be reworking some of Usher's analyses and speculations on a Marxist footing. In the early 1920s, Trotsky and others were to write about the way the growing contradictions between Europe and America threatened a new world war.



A prison photo of John Maclean taken in Peterhead during his first term of imprisonment in 1916

the process;³⁵ and I wish to emphasise the fact that this callous and cold system of destroying people is going on inside the prisons now.

Whatever is done to me now, I give notice that I take no food inside your prisons, absolutely no food; because of the treatment that was meted out to me. If food is forced upon me, and if I am forcibly fed, then my friends have got to bear in mind that if any evil happens to me, I am not responsible for the consequences, but the British government [is]. If anything had happened to me when I was last in prison, it would have been attributed to John Maclean, not to those who are working in the interests of the Government. I have been able to lay down my principle and policy, not from mere internal and personal experience, but from objective experience. I

³⁵ Emily Hobhouse (1860-1926). Cornish-born philanthropist and moderate women's-rights campaigner, whose many causes included the welfare of Cornish miners who had emigrated to the USA; child labour; the horrendous mistreatment of Boer women and children in the South African wars; the international women's movement for peace during World War I; and the conditions of detained refugees and prisoners of war. It is presumably her work on this that Maclean was particularly aware of.

studied the matter carefully, I combated the evils that were going to be perpetrated by the government by reducing my food to the minimum, and the present Secretary for Scotland knows that when I was in Perth I wrote to him asking for more food because of my reduced weight. I was about eight stones in weight at the time, and the doctor, after weighing me, had to grant me more food. The food, however, was of no use to me. I threw it into the pot. My position is, therefore, that I take no more government food, that I will not allow any food to be forced in upon me, and if any food is forced in upon me I am not responsible for it, but when the government can launch millions of men into the field of battle, then perhaps the mere disposal of one man is a mere bagatelle and a trifle.³⁶

Russia's fight for freedom

So far as Russian freedom and British slavery are concerned,³⁷ I wish to draw attention to the fact that an article appeared in the *Scotsman* the other day about Bolshevism, and I have a feeling that the article was written especially for this trial to create a feeling against Bolshevism. The statements in that article are a travesty.³⁸ Inside Russia, since Lenin and Trotsky and the Bolsheviks came into power, there have been fewer deaths than for the same period under any tsar for three hundred years. Capitalists have been killed

³⁶ The section of the speech devoted to prison conditions and the charge by Maclean that his food had been poisoned was sometimes cited as evidence of 'paranoia' and then conflated by political opponents with various unrelated episodes from the latter years of Maclean's life to create an impression of growing instability. Arguments of this sort served a turn for Communist Party members seeking non-political explanations for Maclean's refusal to join, and differences with, the CPGB. See, for example, Tom Bell, *John Maclean: Fighter for Freedom* (Glasgow, 1944) and William Gallacher, *Revolt on the Clyde* (London, 4th ed., 1978; first published 1936). An article by G. Rubin in the *Journal of the Scottish Labour History Society*, no. 14 (1980) examines the prison food issue more seriously. There is certainly no question that Maclean's experiences in prison, both in 1916-17, and after the 1918 trial, enormously damaged his health: see Nan Milton, *John Maclean* (London, 1973), pp 126-28, and 182; and – by someone who met Maclean after his incarceration – Dora Montefiore, *From a Victorian to a Modern* (London, 1927), p. 201.

³⁷ The Russian revolution was a beacon of hope for socialists of Maclean's generation. Good places to start reading about it are Rex Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge, 2005); Christopher Read, *From Tsar to Soviets: the Russian people and their revolution, 1917-21* (London, 1996) or S. A. Smith, *The Russian revolution: a very short introduction* (Oxford, 2002). As well as Maclean, prominent supporters of the revolution from the British isles included the journalists Morgan Phillips Price (see M. P. Price, *Dispatches from the Revolution: Russia 1916-18* (London, 1997)) and Arthur Ransome, whose book *Six Weeks in Russia* is available on line at <<https://archive.org/details/sixweeksinnussia00ransuoft>>

³⁸ *The Scotsman*, 4 May, 1918.

perhaps, officers have been killed perhaps, because they have not submitted to those who have come to the top – the majority of the people – in the name of Bolshevism. Some may have been put to death.

When there was a shortage and disorganisation of the food supplies before the Bolsheviks came into power, there may have been individuals who, in their scramble for food for themselves, have gone to excess, but the crimes of individuals cannot be charged to governments. No person would hold the government responsible for the action of those individuals. The Bolshevik government has not given orders to kill men. They have to imprison men until a complete reconstruction of society has come about. It may be news to some of you that the co-operative movement in Russia has grown more rapidly than in any other part of the world, and since the Bolsheviks have come into power, co-operation has been growing more and more rapidly. The universities have been used during the day, and in the evenings, to train the working classes in order that they may manage the affairs of their country in an intelligent manner. The schools have also been used in the evenings, the music halls have been used, and the theatres, and the picture houses, all have been used, not for the trivial trash which is given to the people of this country – but all for the purpose of organising the production of food and the work inside the workshops and factories.

We saw that prior to our comrades in Russia signing their treaty, when the Germans made their advance into Estonia, Lithuania, and so on – the border countries between Germany and Russia – the capitalist class in the respective towns had lists of men who were members of the soviets, and those members of the soviets were taken and put against a wall, and shot at the instigation of the propertied class of Russia. They have been responsible for more deaths than the soviets. Our Finnish comrades, the Red Guards, have pointed out that the ordinary procedure of war has not been acceded to them, that as soon as the White Guards, the capitalist class, take any of them prisoner, they immediately put them to death. It has been said that our comrades over there in Russia were working hand in hand with the Germans, and the proof of this was that the Germans allowed Lenin to pass through Austrian territory. Our comrades have stood up against Germany as best they could, and the capitalists – the so-called patriots of Russia – have been working hand-in-hand with Germany in order to crush the people of Russia. That has been done in the Ukraine. It has been done in the various states stolen by Germany from Russia.

A confrontation between classes and the fight for peace

The Lord Advocate pointed out here that I probably was a more dangerous enemy that you had got to face than in the Germans. The working class, when they rise for their own, are more dangerous to capitalists than even the German enemies at your gates. That has been repeatedly indicated in the press, and I have stated it as well. I am glad that you have made this statement at this, the most historic trial that has ever been held in Scotland, when the working class and the capitalist class meet face to face. The Bolsheviks got into power in October, and the people wished peace, and they were doing their best to get peace. The Bolsheviks wished peace throughout the world. They wished the war to cease in order that they might settle down to the real business of life, the economic reorganisation of the whole of Russia. They therefore got into negotiation with the Germans, and they and the Germans met at Brest Litovsk.

Towards the end of December there was a pause in the negotiations for ten days, in order to allow the British and their Allies to go to Brest Litovsk. An opportunity, therefore, was given to Great Britain to go to Brest Litovsk. Ten days were given. The last day was 4 January of this year. Great Britain paid no attention to this opportunity, but on 5 January Lloyd George, in one of his insidious speeches, seemed to climb down as it were. He was followed by Mr Woodrow Wilson. But a speech by Mr Lloyd George on the 5th was of no use. It was mere talk. It was mere camouflage, or, a better word still, bluff, pure bluff. Why did the government not accept the opportunity and go to Brest-Litovsk? If conditions absolutely favourable to Germany were proposed, then Britain could have stopped the negotiations and plunged once more into the war, and – I am confident of this – if Germany had not toed the line and come up square so far as peace negotiations were concerned, that the Russian workers would have taken the side of Britain, and – I am confident of this – that that the socialists in all the Allied countries would have backed up their governments in order to absolutely crush Germany, and we would at the same time have appealed to the socialists of Germany to overthrow their government.

Great Britain did not do so. On the other hand, they came on with their Man Power Bill, and also with their factor of short food. All these things must be considered in their ensemble before you can understand the position taken up by myself. When this universal peace meeting was held at Brest Litovsk, then Trotsky played a very, very bold game. He knew

the risks he ran. He and the Bolsheviks spread millions of leaflets amongst the workers of Germany in the trenches – the German soldiers – urging them to stop fighting and to overthrow the Kaiser, the Junkers, and the capitalist classes of Germany. They made a bold bid by trying to get the German workers on to their side. Great Britain has been doing the very same since the commencement of the war. Great Britain has been trying to bring about, and hoping and urging for a revolution in Germany, in the hope that the working class would overthrow the autocratic class there and give us peace.

From a British point of view, revolution inside Germany is good; revolution inside Britain is bad. So says this learned gentleman. He can square it if he can. I cannot square it. The conditions of Germany economically are the conditions of Britain, and there is only a very slight difference between the political structure of Germany and that of this country at the best. And so far as we workers are concerned, we are not concerned with the political superstructure; we are concerned with the economic foundation of society, and that determines our point of view in politics and industrial action. Our Russian comrades, therefore, did the very same as the British have been doing; they appealed to the German soldiers and workers to overthrow their Government.

Strikes broke forth in Italy. The strikes in January passed into Germany, more menacing strikes than have taken place inside the British Isles. An appeal was made from comrades to comrades. Many soldiers in Germany mutinied; many sailors of Germany mutinied, and these men are being shot down by their government. All hail to those working men of Germany who refused, at the bidding of the capitalist, to go on with this war. Their names will go down bright and shining where those of the capitalist of today and of the past will have been forgotten.

It would be a very bad thing for the workers of the world if a revolution were developed and carried through to success in Germany, and no similar efforts were made in this country. The German workers' enemy is the same as our enemy in this country – the landlords and the capitalists are our mutual enemy – and if it was their business and their right and their duty to overthrow their autocratic government, then it will be a duty on us not to allow these men to overthrow their Government, and then to allow France, Britain and Italy to march over them and make these German workers slaves at the dictates of the capitalists of the other parts of the world. There was the situation



John Maclean (in centre with hat) with supporters
 Photo from the Scottish Republican Socialist Movement web site

because my people were swept out of the Highlands, and it was only because of my own ability that I remained. I have remained true to my class, the working class, and whatever I do I think I am doing in the interests of my class of my country. I am no traitor to my country. I stand loyal to my country because I stand loyal to the class which creates the wealth throughout the whole of the world. We are out for life and all that life can give us.³⁹

from their point of view and from our point of view, too.

Revolution, class solidarity and ‘all that life can give us’

It has been pointed out that if we developed a revolution the German would come over and, instead of having liberty, we would be under the iron heel of the Kaiser. If I grant that that is true, it is equally true in the other case that the Allies would do in Germany what the German Kaiser with the capitalist class of Germany would do in this country. There can only be a revolution, when the workers of all the countries stand united and capitalism is crushed, and until then the war must go on incessantly and incessantly. It is not because I am against my own people. My own people are the workers here, and the workers in Germany and elsewhere. It was not the workers who instigated the war.

The workers have no economic interest to serve as a consequence of the war, and because of that, it is my appeal to my class that makes me a patriot so far as my class is concerned, and when I stand true to my class, the working class, in which I was born, it is

I therefore took

what action I did in the light of what was transpiring inside Russia, inside Austria, and inside Germany. You have got to bear that in mind when you wish to understand my remarks. I therefore urged the workers in this country that if they were going to strike, mere striking was useless, because they would be starved back into work again, and that if they were going to be against the Man Power Bill, it meant that they were out for peace. And as there were no signs on either side of coming to an amicable constitutional conclusion, then it was the business of the workers to take the whole matter in hand themselves.

Capitalism, war and the constitution

War was declared! No matter the motive, no matter the cause, all constitution and order was thrown aside, and in the prosecution of the war the British government found it necessary to throw aside every law in this

³⁹ Maclean’s references to the Highland clearances give his speech, and his self-perception of the historical role he was playing, added significance. The sweeping nineteenth-century ‘clearances’ of men and women from the great Highland estates, undoubtedly played – along with Irish immigration, especially after the great famine of the 1840s – a role in determining the subsequent bitterness and episodic militancy of the Scottish working class. Maclean must have found Marx’s lengthy section on the Clearances in his analysis of the ‘primitive accumulation’ of capital particularly powerful: see Karl Marx, *Capital* vol I, chap. XXVII.

country and to bring in the Defence of the Realm Act, which means the negation of all law in the country. I have repeatedly pointed out that if the government wishes to get a grip of any individual, they do so under the Defence of the Realm Act. The government have power to do anything they desire. That may be right, or it may be wrong, but the position is this, that the bringing in of the Defence of the Realm Act has thrown aside all law and order as we know it during normal periods.

In the plunge into the war we have the abolition of constitutional methods, and therefore I contended, and I contend to-day, that if it is right and proper on the part of the government to throw aside law and order – constitutional methods – and to adopt methods that mankind has never seen before, then it is equally right that the members of the working class, if the war is not going to cease in a reasonable time, should bring about a reasonable settlement, and a reasonable settlement to the workers is no victory to either side.

What the future holds

If one side or the other wins, then the revenge will come, as France today is selling revenge after the drubbing she got in 1871.⁴⁰ Realising that, we, as representatives of the workers of the world, do not wish one side or the other to be the victors. We wish the status quo prior to the war to be re-established. If the workers are going to do that, then it means that they have to adopt methods and tactics entirely different from the methods which would be adopted, or could be adopted under normal circumstances. Abnormal lines of action must be taken, and I urged abnormal lines of action to be taken, as our comrades in Russia took. The very circumstances of the war forced in upon the Russian workers' committees, and their national soviets the line of the action which they adopted, and the only way we could do it would be to adopt methods peculiar to the working class organisation in this country in the interests of the workers themselves.

The suggestions I made were intended only to develop revolutionary thought inside the minds of the workers. I pointed out at the meeting on the 20th that

⁴⁰ The Franco-Prussian (German) War, 1870-71. Decisive victory for Prussia in this conflict led to the establishment of the German nation on the basis of its pre-1914 frontiers, including Alsace-Lorraine, the annexation of which was a source of ongoing humiliation for the French. It was the capitulation of the French bourgeoisie in 1871 that led to the defence of Paris passing to the, the Paris Commune, of March-May 1871, seen by the Bolsheviks (and Maclean) as the first workers' government.

representatives of the police were present, and therefore if the workers were going to take action themselves, it would be absolutely foolish and stupid for them to adopt the suggestions I had given them. I only gave out these suggestions so that they might work out plans of their own if they thought fit to take action to bring about peace. I was convinced, and I am still convinced, that the working class, if they are going to take action, must not only go for peace but for revolution. I pointed out to the workers that, in order to solve the problems of capitalism, they would have to get the land and the means of production.

I pointed out to them that if capitalism lasted after the war, with the growing size of the trusts, with the great aggregations that were taking place, with the improved machinery inside the works, with the improved methods of speeding up the workers, with the development of research and experiment, that we were going to have the workers turning out three, four and five times as much wealth as they had done in the pre-war times, and a great problem would arise – a greater problem than ever before – would arise before this country of disposing of its surplus goods on the markets of the world, not only of getting markets for these surplus goods, but of getting the raw materials. We see today in the committees appointed by the government that they are anxious to get control of the markets of the world in order to exclude the Germans.

The rush for empire

Our government has already appointed a Land Organisation of the Board of Trade and of the Foreign Office whereby it is going to plant agents here and there throughout the world, so that in a scientific method British products may be thrown on to the markets of the world. This is scientific methods, applied to commerce internationally as well as nationally. These preparations are being made, it is being said, for the purpose of carrying on the war after the war. Nobody denies that there is going to be a war after the war, an economic war between the Germans and her friends, and the British and the Americans and their friends, and there is going to be a war between the nations, and the respective governments will take care that, as far as they can, their capital will be planted in areas over which they have control.⁴¹

You have, then, the rush for empire. We see that the Americans already have got one or two of the islands

⁴¹ For the development of Maclean's ideas on this theme, see John Maclean, *The War After the War in the Light of Working Class Economics* (Glasgow 1918).

in the West Indies, and I understand that America has also got hold of Dutch Guiana. It has also been suggested that Mexico be brought into the American States. Britain herself is looking after her own interests. She has taken the German colonies, she is also in Mesopotamia and in Palestine, going there for strategic reasons, but when Britain gets hold of Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Arabia, she will use them for her own ends, and I do not blame Britain for that. Britain has got many troubles.

We see Japan also on the outlook. Japan has been trying repeatedly to get control of northern China. She would also like to get a great big chunk of Siberia. Even today we see the tentacles being sent out, all anxious to grab more and more power. We know the secret treaties and disclosures made by our Bolshevik comrades. We know that these nations have been building up their plans so that when the Germans have been crushed they will get this territory, or that territory. They are all out for Empire. That was absolutely necessary for the commercial prosperity of the nations.

All the property destroyed during the war will be replaced. In the next five years there is going to be a great world trade depression and the respective governments, to stave off trouble, must rush more and more into the markets of the world to get rid of their produce, and in fifteen years' time from the close of this war – I have pointed this out at all my meetings – we are into the next war if capitalism lasts; we cannot escape it.

Britain had the wealth. Britain did everything she could to hold back the war. That necessarily had to be the attitude of Great Britain, but in spite of all Great Britain's skill or cunning, there has been war. I have heard it said that the Western civilisations are destroying themselves as the Eastern civilisations destroyed themselves. In fifteen years' time we may have the first great war breaking out in the Pacific-America [against] Japan, or even Japan and China [against] America. We have then the possibilities of another war, far greater and far more serious in its consequences than the present war. I have pointed that out to my audiences.

'Nothing to retract ... nothing to be ashamed of'

In view of the fact that the great powers are not prepared to stop the war until the one side or the other is broken down, it is our business as members of the working class to see that this war ceases today, not only to save the lives of the young men of the present,

but also to stave off the next great war. That has been my attitude and justifies my conduct in recent times. I am out for an absolute reconstruction of society, on a cooperative basis, throughout all the world; when we stop the need for armies and navies, we stop the need for wars.

I have taken up unconstitutional action at this time because of the abnormal circumstances, and because precedent has been given by the British government. I am a socialist, and have been fighting and will fight for an absolute reconstruction of society for the benefit of all. I am proud of my conduct. I have squared my conduct with my intellect, and if everyone had done so this war would not have taken place. I act square and clean for my principles. I have nothing to retract. I have nothing to be ashamed of. Your class position is against my class position. There are two classes of morality.⁴² There is the working class morality and there is the capitalist class morality. There is this antagonism as there is the antagonism between Germany and Britain. A victory for Germany is a defeat for Britain; a victory for Britain is a defeat for Germany. And it is exactly the same so far as our classes are concerned. What is moral for the one class is absolutely immoral for the other, and vice versa. No matter what your accusations against me may be; no matter what reservations you keep at the back of your head, my appeal is to the working class. I appeal exclusively to them because they and they only can bring about the time when the whole world will be in one brotherhood, on a sound economic foundation. That, and that alone, can be the means of bringing about a reorganisation of society. That can only be obtained when the people of the world get the world, and retain the world.

⁴² Earlier in the day, Maclean – explaining that his difficulty in operating as Russian consul had been compounded by the British authorities' confiscation from L. B. Kamenev, who landed at Aberdeen, of money for the Bolshevik representative in Britain, Maxim Litvinov – had observed: 'Quite a moral thing to do, from a capitalist point of view.'

AFTERWORD

On 9 May, 1918, John Maclean was sentenced to five years imprisonment with hard labour – of which he was to serve less than seven months. He won one victory – or thought he had as it proved short-lived – through his trial speech. He had seen Agnes, his wife, for a brief farewell after the verdict, and wrote to her next day to say that he had been taken to Edinburgh’s Haymarket station and from there north on the forty-mile journey to Perth prison. The next day:

After a talk ... with the doctor, an agreement was come to, and, with the formal consent of the Commissioners, I understand will be carried out; that you arrange in Perth for my meals to be made outside by some friends, these to be brought to the prison gates, and there handed to me personally in presence of a warder or other officer of the prison; and that I must not speak to the party delivering same.

He asked Agnes to make arrangements for this to happen, having been assured that the prison authorities would pay, and suggesting various ways of implementing the agreement. In the event, by the time the Glasgow *Forward* publicised this development a week later – the Perth branch of the Independent Labour Party had matters in hand.

Maclean thought, that is to say, that he was in effect to be treated as a political prisoner rather than a common criminal – contrary to official Government policy of denying any special status to those whose alleged offences were political. This ‘humane proposal’, commented *Forward*, for the first time demonstrated some sensitivity to ‘the psychology of the working class’ by the authorities. ‘The forcible feeding or slow starvation ... [of] John Maclean would not have contributed to industrial and political peace in Scotland’, and it might have had ‘its repercussions in Russia’.⁴³

As to this last point, Lenin several times since 1914 had cited Maclean’s stand – linking his opposition to the war with that of a handful of others such as Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg – as a signal example of internationalism in practice. Soon after the 1918 trial, he told a congress of trade unionists in Moscow that this latest imprisonment was ‘because [Maclean]

exposed the objects of the war and ... the criminal nature of British imperialism ... this time not as a Scottish school-teacher but ... as consul of the Federative Soviet Republic.’ He ‘acted openly as the representative of our government.’⁴⁴ But, since they had concluded the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty with Germany, any diplomatic leverage the Bolsheviks might have had on British policy had been minimised.⁴⁵

The agreement about eating arrangements did not long survive Maclean’s transfer to the notorious Peterhead jail, north of Aberdeen, which was well away from Scotland’s major working-class areas – particularly Glasgow – where there were regular protests against his imprisonment. When Agnes was next allowed to see him – in late October – the agreement over food had long broken down and she was shocked at his condition. She stepped up the campaign to publicise the situation in the socialist press, indicating in one letter, dated November 5, that, since July:

He found the food that was sent in unsatisfactory, and refused to take it or the prison food (which he believed to be drugged), requesting to be transferred to Glasgow, where he could have food prepared by myself sent in... [H]e tried to resist the forcible feeding by mouth tube, but two warders held him down, and ... never left him ... night and day, till he was forced to give in... [T]hese statements were ... made ... in the presence of the prison Doctor and two warders and ... evidence of their truth [was] supplied by his aged and haggard appearance [which] contradict[ed] entirely the assurances ... by the Authorities that he was in good health.

‘The only alternatives,’ Agnes Maclean believed, were ‘his death in prison, or his immediate release ...’⁴⁶

⁴⁴ V.I. Lenin, *British Labour and British Imperialism* (London, 1969), p. 201, and *Collected Works [LCW]* (Moscow, 1960-), XXVI, p. 74, XXVII, p. 483.

⁴⁵ The Brest-Litovsk treaty, signed on March 3, 1918, was the peace treaty between Bolshevik Russia and the central powers (Germany, Austro-Hungary, etc). Negotiations began on December 3, 1917. The Bolshevik delegation was led by Trotsky, who hoped, through delay, to encourage social revolution in Germany and the Hapsburg empire: see L. D. Trotsky, *My Life* (New York, 1980), pp. 362-94.

⁴⁶ National Library of Scotland, Acc. 4251/3: Maclean Papers. The evidence about Maclean’s treatment during his various prison terms, and its subsequent effect on his state of mind is evaluated – in a

⁴³ *Forward*, 18 May, 1918.

The campaign to free Maclean, ruthlessly resisted by the British government as long as the war continued, bore fruit less than a month after – at eleven o'clock on the morning of 11 November – the Armistice was signed. Efforts by Labour MP Ramsay Macdonald and the remaining Labour cabinet minister in the Lloyd George coalition, G. N. Barnes, to have the terms of his imprisonment alleviated had, until then, been denied; and Secretary of State Munro, questioned by a Liberal MP in the Commons had refused to accept that 'there are thousands of men in Scotland who regard this man as a hero and a martyr' and had seen 'no reason ... why he should be released.'⁴⁷ But, on 3 December, Maclean – looking ill and exhausted in the photographs that exist – returned from prison to an unwanted but unavoidable triumphal procession through Glasgow streets lined with thousands of workers: 'Great John Maclean's coming back tae the Clyde', as Hamish Henderson's much later, but still popular, marching song has it.⁴⁸

He was soon offered a royal pardon, for the interesting reason that the Scottish Office was concerned that Maclean, now adopted as official Labour Party candidate for Glasgow Gorbals (unenthusiastically endorsed by Labour's national executive), might well win against Barnes, who was standing for 'Coalition Labour'. The constitutional issues that would have attended the election of a convict to parliament would

fairly balanced way – in B. J. Ripley and J. McHugh, *John Maclean* (Manchester, 1989), esp. pp. 96-103, 111-13.

⁴⁷ Nan Milton, *John Maclean* (London, 1973), pp. 178-9

⁴⁸ Henderson's 'John Maclean March' was written for a large memorial meeting at St. Andrew's Hall, Glasgow on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Maclean's death in 1948. Twelve years later, after the Sharpeville massacre, Henderson updated his heroic, internationalist image of Scotland's socialist martyr when he concluded his even better known folk anthem 'Freedom Come All Ye' with the lines: 'When Maclean meets wi's friends in Springburn / Aa thae roses and geans will turn tae blume / An yon black boy frae yont Nyanga / Ding the fell gallows o' the burghers doon.' (When Maclean is reunited with his friends in Springburn [North Glasgow], all the roses and wild cherries will bloom, and that black boy from beyond Nyanga will knock down the cruel gallows of the bourgeoisie). The song was richly rendered at the opening of 2014 Glasgow Commonwealth Games by the South African soprano, Pumeza Matshikiza, part of whose childhood was spent in Nyana. Scottish folksong is one arena in which Maclean has not been forgotten. Dick Gaughan, a singer at many trade union events, is an exponent of Matt McGinn's 'Ballad of John Maclean'. The lyric is accessible on the Marxist Internet Archive at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/maclean/index.htm>>: 'Tell me where ye're gaun, lad, and who ye're gaun to meet – / I'm headed for the station that's in Buchanan Street, / I'll join 200,000 that's there to meet the train / That's bringing back to Glasgow our own dear John Maclean.' The late Alastair Hullett's still available 'Red Clydeside' CD includes the songs 'When Johnny Came Hame tae Glesga' and 'John Maclean and Agnes Wood'.

have been an embarrassment too far in a situation in which the 'Bolshevik menace', and the internal as well as the external dangers it posed, had rapidly replaced the German 'enemy at our gates' on the political agenda. Maclean's refusal of the regal benevolence – 'I do not accept [the] assertion that "the King" has granted me a free pardon. Not "the King" ... but the fighting workers of Britain have regained me my freedom ...' – was ignored.⁴⁹

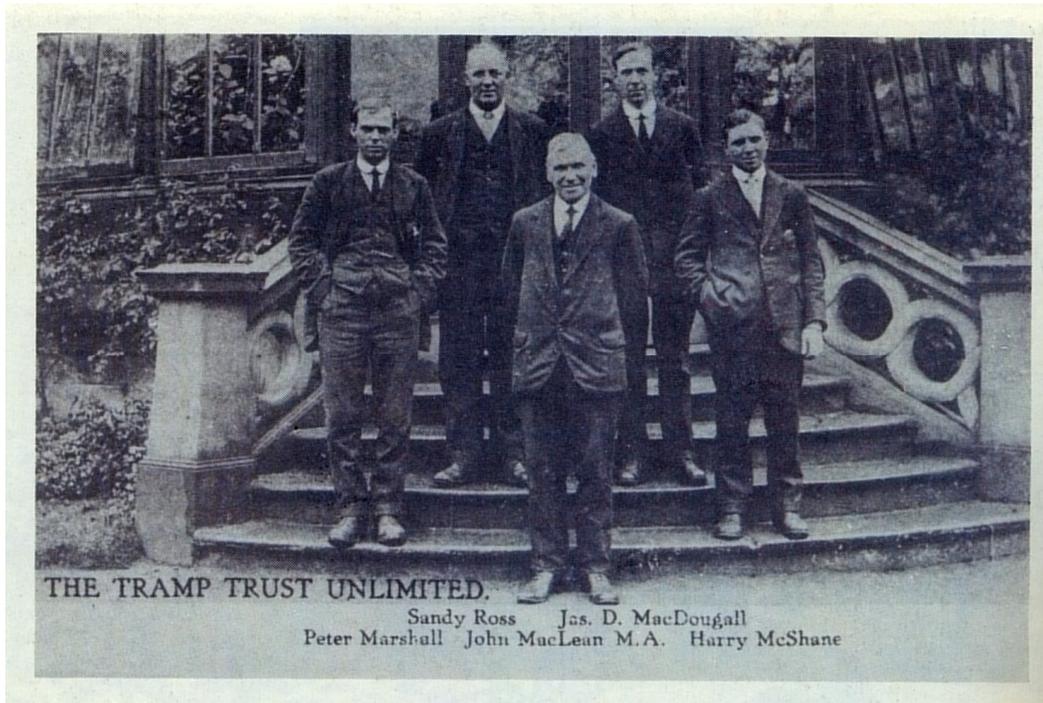
In the event the intriguing possibility that Maclean might become an MP was denied when Barnes was elected by 14,247 votes to Maclean's 7,436. It was a remarkable tally considering that this was a general election conducted in an atmosphere of hysterical post-war patriotism (with slogans like 'Hang the Kaiser' and 'Squeeze Germany till the pips squeak'); that, although the Labour Party made advances, it was not until 1922 that it achieved its major breakthrough in the West of Scotland, bringing 'Red Clydeside' into Westminster politics; and that the candidate had been too ill to campaign personally. He appeared only once, at an eve-of-poll rally on December 13, when – to the distress or annoyance of some of his supporters – he was evidently more concerned to expose capitalist barbarism than to demonstrate parliamentary credentials.⁵⁰

During 1919, a year of critical class struggle, Maclean devoted himself tirelessly to campaigning throughout Britain, and writing regularly, in support of what he was not alone – on either side of the class divide – in believing was a potentially revolutionary situation. Politically his commitment to the idea that a Marxist understanding of the crisis of capitalism that had plunged Europe into war was fundamental to the necessary development of mass revolutionary consciousness – and that no one had worked as he had to promote it – led him to move aside from the mainstream trajectory of revolutionary socialist politics, which led, in 1920-21, to the formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) as the British section of the Third (Communist) International.

In June 1919, he formed the Tramps Trust Unlimited – a propaganda group fighting for demands such as a minimum wage, a six-hour day, full wages for the unemployed and Irish Home Rule, but stressing the centrality of revolutionary Marxist education. Lacking intellectual respect for, and even distrusting, many of the personalities who formed the CPGB, he advocated the formation of a Scottish Communist Party affiliated

⁴⁹ Ripley and McHugh, *John Maclean*, pp. 110-1; Milton, *John Maclean*, 185.

⁵⁰ Ripley and McHugh, *John Maclean*, p. 113.



John Maclean with members of the Tramp Trust Unlimited. From the Hayes People's History site

to the Third International. He had been the only named individual in Britain invited to the founding congress of the International in 1919, but, in 1920, when others did find their way to the much fuller second congress in Moscow, he insisted, as a matter of principle, on demanding a visa, which – after considerable consultations involving security chiefs and civil servants – the British Government refused. He was never to meet the leaders of the new Soviet republic – as did, for example, the former shop steward and future Stalinist stalwart, William Gallacher. Gallacher – who had represented Maclean in the 1918 Gorbals election campaign but who, Maclean thought, was too ignorant of Marxism to be a serious revolutionary leader – was later to claim ownership of the story of ‘Red Clydeside’ through his autobiographical *Revolt on the Clyde* (which appeared first in 1936 and has several times been republished), with the effect of devaluing Maclean’s reputation.⁵¹

Maclean continued to base his political campaigning on Clydeside, fighting against unemployment and for free speech. He temporarily allied himself with a section of the Socialist Labour Party that had not joined the CPGB. He received further short, but debilitating, prison sentences; stood, primarily for propaganda purposes, in a number of local and parliamentary elections; and, in February 1923, founded, with his

⁵¹ See Gallacher, *Revolt on the Clyde*.

loyal supporters, a Scottish Workers’ Republican Party, which aroused some enthusiasm and survived him – but only for a few years. On 30 November, 1923, he died aged only 44, and was buried, following a funeral procession attended by thousands, at Eastwood cemetery on the south side of Glasgow. His reputation allowed for a fund to assist his family to raise over £2000 (estimated as the equivalent of over £100,000 today) from many different parts of the world.

Maclean’s political life from his triumphal return to Glasgow in December 1918 to his premature death – exhausted, with damaged health and deprived of a stable personal life – can be traced in four substantial biographies. These are: first, the passionately personal account, published in 1973 by his daughter, Nan Milton; second, in the same year, a similarly sourced book by John Broom, which took further Milton’s argument that her father could be seen as a forerunner of left-wing Scottish nationalism; third, a sober, academic, 1989 study, making good use of government papers, by B. J. Ripley and John McHugh, in Manchester University Press’s *Lives of the Left* series; and fourth, James D. Young’s *John Maclean: Clydeside socialist* (1992) – the culmination of the author’s honourable efforts to have Maclean remembered as a sympathetic personality, indefatigable educator of the working class and a humane socialist who ‘bequeath[ed] ... a rich [Scottish] tradition of extra-parliamentary struggle against unfairness and inequality.’⁵² Young, not always the easiest historian to read, had original things to say about the local context of Maclean’s political life, his place in an unorthodox, radical Scottish educational tradition and the often underestimated extent of his international reputation.

Maclean’s story reached into debates generated by the ‘new labour history’ of the 1960s with the publication at the end of the decade of Walter Kendall’s *The*

⁵² Milton, *John Maclean*; John Broom, *John Maclean* (Loanhead, 1973); Ripley and McHugh, *John Maclean*; James D. Young, *John Maclean: Clydeside socialist* (Glasgow, 1992), p. 253.



The crowd at John Maclean's funeral, outside his house in Pollokshaws. Photo from the Glasgow Digital Library

Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-21.⁵³ Later came substantial commentary in Raymond Challinor's *The Origins of British Bolshevism* (1977); an entry on Maclean in William Knox's 1984 *Dictionary of Scottish Labour Leaders, 1918-39*; and a long biographical essay by the mainstream labour historian, David Howell, who – in a spirit of nostalgic gloom in 'North-West England, in the sodden summer of 1985' where 'there is not much hope' – sought solace in a Celtic-focused scholarly triptych discussing the significance of James Connolly, John Maclean and the Catholic socialist and 1924 Labour cabinet minister, John Wheatley.⁵⁴ A useful – if not always altogether reliably edited – collection of many of Maclean's writings is *In the Rapids of Revolution*; and some of his articles and

⁵³ Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-21* (London, 1969).

⁵⁴ Raymond Challinor, *The Origins of British Bolshevism* (London, 1977); W. Knox (ed.), *A Dictionary of Scottish Labour Leaders, 1918-39* (Edinburgh, 1984); David Howell, *A Lost Left* (Manchester, 1986): the main interest in this essay lies more in the fact that Howell – clearly convinced that, in the Thatcher decade, all was lost for 'the left' – decided to resurrect Maclean for a predominantly academic readership than in any particular insight.

speeches can be accessed on the Marxist Internet Archive.⁵⁵

An entry on Maclean – in which John McHugh summarised his co-authored biography – found its way into the updated, twenty-first-century version of the *Dictionary of National Biography*.⁵⁶ This semi-official recognition has not, however, influenced the curators of the much-vaunted new World War I gallery at London's Imperial War Museum (IWM). The story of the various oppositions to the war is in general

underrepresented – there is not too much interpretation that might ruffle the feathers of Michael Gove – but one striking omission is of any reference to Maclean. When, in the IWM, you come to an easily overlooked flip-file about anti-war figures – introduced in the context of the acknowledged war-weariness evident by 1917 – you find that the British oppositionists are a variety of liberal doubters like Ramsay Macdonald, E. D. Morel, Bertrand Russell and the poet Siegfried Sassoon. The consistently socialist position of those who had rejected the capitulation to nationalism in 1914 of the parties of the Second International is represented only by opponents of the *German* war effort – the Independent Social Democrats, Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg and Hugo Haase. *Britain's* revolutionary socialist, anti-war opposition, in which Maclean was pre-eminent, is ignored.

If there is any truth in Ripley and McHugh's assertion that 'Terry Brotherstone's article' on 'John Maclean and the Russian Revolution', published in 1988, 'is a piece that all interested in Maclean should read', it must

⁵⁵ John Maclean, *In the Rapids of Revolution: essays, articles and letters, 1902-23*, edited and with an introduction by Nan Milton (London, 1978). For the Marxist Internet Archive, see <http://www.marxists.org/archive/maclean/index.htm>

⁵⁶ John McHugh, 'John Maclean', in H. C. G. Mathew and Brian Harrison (eds.), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), vol. 35, pp. 767-70.

derive from the fact that, at the time, I was trying to rescue my own understanding of Maclean's significance from nearly two decades of writing about the Scottish revolutionary under the influence of the sectarian dictates of the particular form of Trotskyism that informed Gerry Healy's Socialist Labour League and Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP).⁵⁷ I joined the former in 1970, about the time I contributed a feature on Maclean, under a *nom de guerre*, in the League's broadsheet *Workers Press*; and was, with differing degrees of active commitment, a member of the latter from its formation in 1973 until its effective demise as a considerable (if deeply misguided) organisation – publishing the daily *NewsLine* – which came about through the overdue expulsion of its by then morally bankrupt and politically corrupt leader in 1985.⁵⁸

I allude to that only because it draws attention to how the way of looking at history that informed much of what I wrote about Maclean in those years – intended to draw attention to, and stimulate thinking about, his central importance in interpreting modern British history – came to contribute to the opposite outcome. From the 1960s on, the name of John Maclean was beginning to be recovered for history, but, until the efforts of Ripley and McHugh and of Howell, much of what was written about him only served what can now be seen as sectarian political ends. Far from drawing his story into a wider historical awareness, the tendency to claim it as endorsement of a particular organisation's place in a continuing revolutionary tradition, which stretched back to Marx, helped to imprison it in a perhaps sometimes necessary, but too often arcane, world of political polemic.

⁵⁷ For which, see the *Journal of the Scottish Labour History Society*, no. 23 (1988); and my 'Internationalism in the Twentieth Century: some comments on John Maclean' in Terry Brotherstone (ed.), *Covenant, Charter and Party: traditions of revolt and protest in modern Scottish history* (Aberdeen, 1989). I made a further effort some years later to go beyond sectarian criticism towards serious critique in a more general piece on the historiography of Red Clydeside, published in a volume dedicated to Maclean's sometime supporter, Harry McShane (1891-1988): see T. Brotherstone, 'Does Red Clydeside Really Matter Any More?', Robert Duncan and Arthur McIvor, *Militant Workers: labour and class conflict on the Clyde 1900-1950* (Edinburgh, 1992), esp. pp. 56-7, 60, 66, 72-3: but, more than two decades on, there is much more rethinking to be done.

⁵⁸ Political antiquarians will find my articles on Maclean in party publications such as *Workers Press* (first series, 1969-75), *NewsLine*, *Fourth International* and *Labour Review*. Some of the content of these pieces still bears *critical* scrutiny, but the general approach and routine political prescriptions may safely be left to what Engels, in a more exalted context, called 'the gnawing criticism of the mice'. My last such polemical pronouncement, I think, was T. Brotherstone, 'John Maclean 1879-1923', in *Labour Review*, VII, 5, Dec. 1983 – the cover story in that issue.

The first book-length biography of Maclean, by the prominent CPGB member, Tom Bell, whose line on controversial matters followed Gallacher's 1936 account of the wartime Clydeside 'revolt', set the example by being as much concerned to explain why Maclean had not joined the Party as to document the life of a courageous revolutionary.⁵⁹ The official Stalinist line was that Maclean had become unbalanced to the point of serious mental instability primarily as a result of his prison experiences and that this explained his failure to join the Party. It is a merit of the Ripley-McHugh book that it examines the undoubted nervous strain, even exhaustion, under which Maclean lived in the years after the war, without substituting this for a serious, if critical, discussion of his latter-day political positions.⁶⁰

The first challenge to the CP line came from left-wing Scottish nationalists, for whom Maclean's efforts, after he refused to join the CPGB, to form a separate Scottish organisation seemed to provide some historical authority for their conception that Scotland on its own could nurture a greater body of effective socialist opinion than England. Often detached from Maclean's impression – in the specific circumstances of the class struggle in the immediate post-World-War-I years – that there was a greater potential for *revolutionary* working-class militancy north of the border than there was in the south, this thinking has never entirely disappeared. As an aside, it found its way recently into the mainstream media in the very different circumstances of the debate about Scotland's

⁵⁹ Bell, *John Maclean*.

⁶⁰ This relatively minor episode in the CPGB's long-lasting evasion of serious analysis of its own history fed into some lazy thinking by historians trying to fit the story of Red Clydeside into an Establishment version of British history that allows little space for taking revolutionary challenges to the parliamentary tradition seriously. Iain S. McLean in his *The Legend of Red Clydeside* (Edinburgh, 1999, first published 1983), for example, finds comfort in Gallacher's account, taking it further with the extraordinary assertion that the 'speech from the dock ... shows that [Secretary of State for Scotland] Munro's assessment of Maclean as "more or less a lunatic", while exaggerated, was ... not merely a petulant reference to his political views', and going on to make much of his near namesake's alleged 'paranoia' about the activities of his perceived enemies, leading to the conclusion that John Maclean was remote from the working class, 'a True Believer [sic], who had found all the truth in one book [*Capital*]', which he could not even persuade his followers to read – putting him in a worse position than 'a Christian fundamentalist'. McLean (latterly an Oxford professor of politics whose own access to insights into working-class consciousness seems to derive largely from his acknowledged expertise in electoral statistics) reissued his 'revisionist' account of Red Clydeside as a paperback in the late 1990s perhaps in the hope that the Scots could at last be wooed away from their socialist 'legends' towards an embrace of the neoliberalism of 'New Labour'.

September 2014 independence referendum. In a BBC *Newsnight Scotland* interview, Unite the Union leader, Len McCluskey, proclaimed himself attracted to what his interrogator, Gordon Brewer, called ‘a sort of Maclean position’ on Scottish independence: that it could be supported not for nationalist reasons but because the Scots might provide ‘a radical vanguard for the rest of the UK’.⁶¹

For the Trotskyists, certainly those in the WRP of the 1970s and early 1980s, on the other hand, the priority was to reclaim a major revolutionary – endorsed by Lenin – for their own anti-Stalinist tradition. This meant placing him in a continuity that led from Marx’s (First) International of the 1860s; through the fight against the betrayal of its anti-war commitment by the Second International (founded in 1889) in 1914 and the congresses of the (Third) Communist International that took place before the enunciation of the Stalin’s policy of ‘socialism in a single country’ in 1924; and culminated in Trotsky’s fight for communist internationalism. Maclean fitted easily enough into this, but had to be chided for dropping out of the long march of history by not joining the CPGB. ‘Thus someone like Brotherstone,’ wrote Ripley and McHugh, ‘who recognised the importance of Maclean earlier than many socialist historians and has consistently shown sensitivity in approaching his legacy, has nonetheless criticised Maclean for his refusal to join the CPGB.’⁶²

The implied, if muted, critique of this way of writing history, is all the more relevant today. It can be sharpened by noting Ripley/McHugh’s further comment that ‘Maclean remained a neglected figure amongst revolutionary [s]ocialists until ... his apparent discovery by the Scottish New Left in ways which have obscured rather than clarified his position as a revolutionary Marxist.’ But this was not only a failing of what these authors call the Scottish New Left. Every attempt to shoehorn Maclean’s significance into some ongoing political tradition obscures his real historical importance. It makes it all the more appropriate to return to what he actually said when on trial in 1918 with his liberty at stake, and to think imaginatively about the circumstances that led him to speak as he did. By reliving, as best we can, that dramatic historical moment and trying to understand better how things were then, we can at least begin to grasp this history not as dead knowledge to be afforded meaning only if it can endorse some existing political line today, but as part of the real, contradictory yet forward-moving process of human struggle – a process that, in the greatly changed

and infinitely more challenging social and environmental crisis with which the ongoing hegemonic power of capital threatens humanity in the early twenty-first century, calls, not for a reiteration of old shibboleths, but for radically new thinking.

It is regrettable therefore to note that Dave Sherry, in recently reissuing his readable and, for the most part, serviceable booklet, *John Maclean: Red Clydesider*, should feel the need to contextualise the story with an introduction explaining Maclean’s relevance to the – to him apparently overridingly important – question of the Socialist Workers Party’s position on the Scottish Independence Referendum; and should repeat without reconsideration the line about how Maclean – seen as a kind of Bolshevik manqué – erred in isolating himself by failing to join the CPGB.⁶³ The relative isolation of the revolutionary movement, particularly in Britain, now needs to be discussed, not from the point of view of correcting a few subjective mistakes, but in the light of the need for a radical revision of the now clearly mistaken analysis of Lenin, Trotsky, Maclean and others that, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the conditions for socialist revolution had arrived and that resolving the crisis of leadership in the workers’ movement was all that was required to actualise it. Lenin and Trotsky particularly were right about many things, but not that.

Paul Mason (then BBC *Newsnight*’s economics editor, now with Channel 4) argued some years ago that, since World War II, and particularly between the 1960s and the Thatcherite 1980s, labour history became an academic discipline, adding greatly to knowledge but, in effect, complacently ‘rationalising the deal made in 1945 between employers and workers on both sides of the Iron Curtain’ – a deal that, at least in the major western countries, appeared to have delivered a partial solution to the massive social problems of the inter-war years and a potential platform for further advances. What was lost in this was a critical approach to the wider story, so that, when neoliberalism destroyed the welfare-statist consensus and the Stalinist system collapsed, little was left in the way of debate about ‘grand narratives’. The destruction of working-class communities moreover changed forever the world in which Mason had grown up, in which people like him learnt more about history from grandparents and community events than from books or the mainstream media. Today’s globalised workers, as they struggle to achieve and maintain the most basic conditions, Mason observes, have little access to the historical memory

⁶¹ BBC2, *Newsnight Scotland*, 10 October, 2013.

⁶² Ripley and McHugh, *John Maclean*, p. 172.

⁶³ Dave Sherry, *John Maclean: Red Clydesider* (London, 2014; first published in 1998), esp. pp. 7-14, 90-3.

that used to sustain strikes and other working-class protest actions in the past.⁶⁴

Recovering that historical memory matters and must surely be central to any meaningful revival of the labour history that was so optimistically embraced by socialist historians in the 1960s but which, by the 1980s, was being politically stifled in the embrace of the academy. And this should surely be the spirit in which to revisit the life of John Maclean. His ideas about revolutionary organisation must of course be understood within the context of his times. But in the new and threatening times in which we now live what resonates most from his speech from the dock is his commitment – however limited might be his ideas about how it could be achieved – to the development of mass revolutionary consciousness as the basis for the fundamental social change to which human society, if it is to survive, must aspire. A century of bitter experience forces us to think anew about the obstacles to its achievement and how they must be overcome. But what Maclean said and did stands out from the reactionary confusion from which, for the most part, the official World War I commemorations we can expect between August 2014 and November 2018 will be unlikely to extricate themselves. ‘I have squared my conduct with my intellect,’ and have nothing to apologise for, Maclean told the Scottish court. His words deserve to be listened to – and with fresh ears – again.

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⁶⁴ Mason, *Live Working or Die Fighting*, especially pp. 274-283; and see Brotherstone, ‘Labour History Resurgent?’.