Review – Great John Maclean Has Come Home to the Clyde by Donald Robertson

It is just over a hundred years since the death of Scotland's best-known revolutionary Marxist, John Maclean. In the intervening century, Maclean's standing and reputation has waxed and waned, often reflecting the prominence of the national question in Scotland, an issue with which Maclean is understandably – if sometimes one-sidedly – identified. Over the years, there have been a number of important biographies of Maclean; most notably perhaps, that of his daughter, Nan Milton, in 1973, and, more recently, a well-received account of Maclean's life and politics by Henry Bell which came out in 2018. In addition, there have been numerous smaller studies of Maclean, highlighting, for example, the influence of Irish Republicanism on the evolution of Maclean's politics, his attitude to the formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain, and his advocacy of Scottish Republicanism (and flirtation with 'Celtic Communism'). Decades after his premature death – accelerated by the brutality he experienced during his frequent imprisonments for antiwar agitation – Maclean's legacy remains complex and contested.

Donald's Robertson's new biography, *Great John Maclean Has Come Home to the Clyde – The Life and Times of Scotland's Greatest Socialist,* is a welcome addition to the literature on Maclean which adds to our understanding of his life and politics in important ways. First it is a substantial work, which not only takes us through the events in Maclean's life, but also outlines the political and social context in a clear and detailed way. Readers unfamiliar with the events in Glasgow in the first decades of the 20th century are treated to an extensive account of 'Red Clydeside' and of the struggles in the community (most notably the Rent Strikes of

1915) and at the point of production (in particular, against 'dilution' and for the 40-hour week) which characterised the period, and in which Maclean played a key role. The main aspects of Maclean's political life are also brought out clearly. His focus on working-class political education, including his long-term project to establish an independent *Labour College for Scotland* and his legendary lectures in Marxist economics, conducted for well over a decade, where *hundreds* of working-class Scots were introduced to the foundational concepts of Marx's *Capital.* Equally, Maclean's phenomenal workload, his appearance at meetings and events throughout Britain, educating, agitating, and organising tirelessly against the bosses and their system, is outlined in detail. Above all, Maclean's internationalism (and international reputation), expressed most powerfully in his courageous opposition to the First World War and in his support for Irish Independence, and for which he paid such an enormous price in terms of his health and personal life, is highlighted.

Largely devoted to directly recounting Maclean's life and times, Robertson's biography avoids the controversies about Maclean which have tended to preoccupy the left (e.g. was Maclean's Scottish Republicanism a pragmatic response to the ebbing of the post-war upsurge or did it represent a prescient grasp of the importance of the national question? Was Maclean's advocacy of a distinct Scottish Communist Party the basis of his hostility to the nascent Communist Party of Great Britain or was it the other way around?). But if the author does not weigh in on these perennial debates, the book does bring out new material on Maclean's life which more than justifies its publication. First, Robertson has made skilful use of the newspaper archives of the time – and particularly that of the 'Glasgow Herald' – which are now available. This allows him to describe in detail the contemporary impact of Maclean, and more specifically detail the trials for sedition and under the 'Defence of the Realm Act' to which he was

repeatedly subjected. The best known quote from Maclean comes from one such trial, his famous 'Speech from the Dock', delivered at the High Court in Edinburgh in May 1918, with its immortal line *"I am not here … as the accused; I am here as the accuser of capitalism dripping with blood from head to foot",* but Robertson's research also sets out the 'evidence' laid against Maclean and highlights the lengths and means by which the authorities attempted to silence him and curb his influence.

Similarly, Robertson's access to the 'National Archives' for the relevant period throws new light on Maclean's significance and just how seriously the establishment took him and the movement he epitomised. In one of the most fascinating sections of the book, Robertson recounts the proceedings of the 'Imperial War Cabinet' held shortly after the armistice of 11th November 1918. The cabinet, which was chaired by Lloyd George, was made of Ministers from the UK, Canada, Australia, and South Africa as well as other leading officials. There were three items on its agenda on the 28th of November 1918; first, was it possible to prosecute the German Kaiser for war crimes? Second, what arrangements should be made to supply food to the war-torn continent? And third, what should be done about John Maclean, currently serving a term of hard labour in Peterhead Prison, and, more specifically, would it be prudent to release him? A debate ensued in which the pros and cons of releasing Maclean were considered. George Barnes, the Labour Party's representative in the War Cabinet, supported his release, highlighting that *"[t]he continued agitation about John Maclean constitutes a serious danger for the government. Mass meetings have been held in many places, including London, and resolutions continue to pour in demanding his release"* while others took the view that he should remain in prison. Of particular concern to the cabinet was the potential impact of releasing Maclean on the political situation in Ireland, and on the continued detention of leading members of Sinn Fein

such as Eamon de Valera. As it happened, the Irish authorities expressed no opposition to Maclean's release, and he was freed on Monday 2nd December. On his return to Glasgow, thousands of his supporters turned out to see him, his subsequent journey through the Glasgow city centre immortalised in Hamish Henderson's famous song "*The John Maclean March*".

Overall, *Great John Maclean Has Come Home to the Clyde* is a thorough and valuable addition to the literature on John Maclean. It reminds us of an important period when 'the Clyde ran Red' and highlights the mass appeal of Maclean's revolutionary message. While there are no easy answers for contemporary socialists in Maclean's story, his emphasis on popular socialist education; on the importance of internationalism and anti-imperialism; on relating to the actual struggles of working class people both in and outwith the workplace; and, finally, his personal example of courage in the face of repression and adversity are all things we can and should learn from. Donald Robertson's new book should certainly help us do this.

Reviewed by Iain Gault, Donald Robertson's *Great John Maclean Has Come Home to the Clyde* is published by Resistance Books and is available here. A collection of Maclean's writings including this *Speech from the Dock* is available from the Marxist Internet Archive here.

Donald Robertson was born in Kinlochleven. He co-founded the Australian music and arts magazine *Roadrunner,* was the first editor of *Countdown* magazine, and is the author of books about rock music. He lives in Sydney and blogs at roadrunnertwice.com.au.