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A Cape Breton Hampden

JAMES BRYSON MCLACHLAN was a courageous, loyal and stubborn man who lived his life outside metropolitan centres, never sought the spotlight that followed figures in national institutions, and attracted little attention when social historians turned to labour subjects in the 1960s. He is often not mentioned in the scholarship on labour radicalism.[1] Yet McLachlan was a central figure in the movements that shaped the Cape Breton coal industry and the Canadian left from the early years of the 20th century until the upheavals in the Communist Party in 1935-36. Fortunately, McLachlan found a fitting biographer, or his biographer found him, and since the early 1970s, David Frank has produced a steady stream of works on the man, the industry and the island.[2] His was not an easy task. He had to gather literally hundreds of fragments of information in interviews and stray documents in order to construct a coherent picture of J.B.'s life. He had then to assemble dozens of contextual notes to illuminate the events, themes, and characters encountered in the course of that story, from the Scottish Miners' Federation strike of 1894 to the emergence of the labour press to the character of John L. Lewis. The result, David Frank, *J.B. McLachlan: A Biography* (Toronto, James Lorimer and Company, 1999) is a wonderfully complete narrative that resounds with the noises of the meeting halls and mine shafts and courtrooms and royal commission hearings in which McLachlan left an indelible impression. This biography of a working-class leader is unequaled in Canadian labour history. Its greatest strength is that it consistently provides enough detail to satisfy one's need for context and yet not so much that one loses sight of McLachlan himself. And what a character he is.

McLachlan grew up in the Black Country of Lanarkshire, Scotland in a labourer's family, and after three or four years in school, he went down the mines at the age of ten. His job became a long-term sentence at hard labour. J.B., though writing for a quite different purpose, referred to "the deformed legs, the drawn-up shoulders, the fallen-in chest and the 'clanny blinks' on the workers. . . . [S]tand at a pit mouth and watch the men come up, and notice how very few are two-score and ten. . . . Before they reach that age they generally get a 'narrow place' in the graveyard. It is not steady work that causes such results, but oppressive work, filthy and abominable surrounding, vitiated air, and a continually long-drawn-out cannibalism that in the mad hunt for profits sucks the very life out of the mine worker" (p. 56). A central fact in Frank's story is that McLachlan spent 30 years down the mine.

This first lifetime tempered McLachlan's behaviour in his second career, also of nearly 30 years' duration, in Canadian unions and politics. J.B. and his family moved

1 For example, McLachlan is not mentioned in Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour, 1880-1930* (Kingston, 1963) and Irving Abella, *Nationalism, Communism and Canadian Labour: The CIO, the Communist Party, and the Canadian Congress of Labour, 1935-1956* (Toronto, 1973).

2 For instance, see "Industrial Democracy and Industrial Legality: The United Mine Workers of America in Nova Scotia, 1908-1927", in John H.M. Laslett, ed., *The United Mine Workers of America: A Model of Industrial Solidarity?* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1996), pp. 438-55 and "Working Class Politics: The Election of J.B. McLachlan, 1916-1935" in Ken Donovan, ed., *The Island: New Perspectives on Cape Breton History, 1713-1990* (Fredericton and Sydney, 1990), pp. 187-219.

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from Scotland to Cape Breton in 1902 in hopes of improving their circumstances. After 1909 he found a new and challenging outlet for his talents working as a union official and journalist while maintaining his family on the food and income derived from a small farm. He acquitted himself with honour in a long series of struggles with union opponents, mine owners and political party representatives, but one cannot claim that he won astonishing successes. In such matters he was utterly unsentimental, and he would have agreed that the miners of Cape Breton were no better off when he died in 1937 than they were in 1924 when he served a term in Dorchester Penitentiary for "seditious libel", or in 1909-10, when he first led his people in a long and costly strike. But McLachlan did influence the course of the workers' struggle. Together with dozens of other heroes of the labour movement, he established the foundation upon which workers built the edifice known as today's house of labour, including the benefits of union recognition, rules for collective bargaining and even, to a degree, the institutions of the Canadian welfare state.

The name of J.B. McLachlan has become a byword for commitment to the socialist cause in Canada in the past 30 years. And yet one is surprised by the absence of economic and political philosophy in his writings and speeches. He developed one effective means to publicize the working family's cause and stuck to it throughout his life. He called it "the wage question": calculate what it costs to house and clothe the miner's family, subtract it from the wage earned and then imagine the food budget. He reported in 1906 that, for each member of a Cape Breton mining household, this budget would permit "three meals a day at 3 1/2 cents apiece" (p. 58).

McLachlan's socialism was founded, first and foremost, upon a belief in human dignity, not upon the writings of Marx. The rest of his partisan activity, whether to belong to a labour or social democratic or communist party or to reject them all as insufficiently radical, depended upon his own analysis of electoral circumstance and his political conscience. There are as many mentions of religion and church in this text as there are of socialism and communism. Frank argues, convincingly, that McLachlan, having entered the Canadian Communist Party shortly after its foundation in 1922, remained a "revolutionary socialist" to the end. But Frank also argues in his closing pages that British coal miners like McLachlan constituted a "special case" in modern labour history because they "attached great significance to such old-fashioned ideas as justice, fairness, and cooperation in human affairs and the priority of labour as a source of value. From this perspective, their history is not so much a reservoir of traditionalism and conservatism as an accumulated supply of stored cultural energy" (p. 534).[3]

J.B.'s grandson, who remembered him clearly and fondly, said he belonged to a long line of "'village Hampdens,' the men of local fame", a term immortalized in Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (p. 534). The choice of phrase is striking. Hampden would not pay a tax imposed merely by the king, rather than by the entire Parliament – a tax that he considered unlawful as a consequence – and thereby helped to establish a tradition of individual freedom within a community-approved framework of common and constitutional law. The poet's words, "village"

3 Frank's discussion here draws on E.P. Thompson, "A Special Case", in *Writing By Candlelight* (London, 1980). Such thoughts raise speculation about McLachlan's place, as well as those of the men and women he led, in Canadian history.

and "local fame", remind us that, during his decades in Canada, McLachlan had an impact upon Nova Scotia and particularly Cape Breton. And McLachlan, as a village Hampden, campaigned tirelessly against the received economic order and yet always within the institutions of law and with a profound respect for individual freedom. Interestingly, it would seem that news of his virtues has spread, in our own time, across the country. He is now being celebrated in this award-winning biography which, itself, is of national and international consequence. The sheer fact of his commemoration represents a transmission of stored cultural energy, to return to E.P. Thompson's words, and is another illustration of McLachlan's legacy. Village Hampdens do matter.

Why McLachlan and not some other labour leader? Part of the answer – and one illustration of the merits of Frank's narrative – probably lies in the particular moment of communication history that McLachlan occupied. This was a moment when print was the dominant medium of public communication in Canada. McLachlan rose to prominence just as small newspapers – typically weeklies – became sufficiently strong that they could establish alternative visions of community and rally readers to their side despite the emergence of the consumption-driven, advertising-studded civilization then being built by the dailies of the big cities. In one of the necessary brief digressions that establish context so effectively throughout his book, Frank sketches the background: "the working class required organizations and institutions of their own. Just as labour candidates could advance the workers' cause in politics, labour newspapers would report the activities of unions and champion the causes of labour, simultaneously educating supporters and informing public opinion" (p. 212). Frank then places McLachlan in a line of worker-journalists that stretches from Keir Hardie and William Cotton to the Maritime Provinces' own Colin McKay. McLachlan's *Maritime Labor Herald*, in his words "the child and champion of the workers" (p. 215), spoke only to northern Cape Breton, not some larger constituency, but it provided the raw material upon which to consolidate a local political movement in the short term. Seen from today's perspective, however, the *Herald* – and similar journals such as the *Nova Scotia Miner*, the *Eastern Labor News*, *The Worker* and the *Labor Leader* – had another role in a later generation: their very existence enabled Frank to rescue McLachlan from the amnesia of contemporary civilization. The conjunction of a favourable moment in communication history and a village Hampden armed with a newspaper helps to explain how this one man's life could inspire, in E.P. Thompson's words, such a transmission of cultural energy.

One of the greatest of this book's many virtues is that it permits – even encourages – contemplation of character. Throughout these pages Frank provides the appropriate amount of detail, and the right detail, to fill in a broader picture without slowing the development of the story or muddling the depiction of forces that drove this truly exceptional man. And, though it is rarely front and centre in so many words, character is never out of sight. Every page offers powerful reasons for J.B.'s hardness, as well as his goodness and selflessness. This portrayal reminded me of a contemporary Scottish culture hero. In Ian Rankin's bestselling crime novels, detective John Rebus possesses "a deeply Scottish self-image" that sounds very like Frank's J.B. McLachlan: "Stubbornness is Rebus's most deep-seated characteristic. All the various ways in which he could improve the quality of his life – which boil down essentially to his being less impossible – are somehow unthinkable. He stands in everybody

else's way, but he stands in his own way too: difficult, determined, remorseless, honourable, honest, and proud of his lack of charm".[4] In the case of J.B. only the last phrase doesn't apply, for within his family and on a given day with his own people, the miners and their families, J.B. could be a charmer. But the rest of this description McLachlan would have contemplated with pleasure.

David Frank concludes his long and convincing biography with this observation: "In the world of the present it is often difficult to make out the record of perseverance, resourcefulness, and imagination that sustained those who went before us. But if the writers of history are at their work, those energies can be seen, burning still, and moments of cultural transmission and illumination will take place" (p. 535). Frank has been "at his work", attentive to history's demands and as tenacious as J.B. McLachlan himself in pulling together an illuminating story that will transmit cultural truths for years to come. Ordinary citizens everywhere – students, scholars, readers – are in his debt. That a village Hampden should find a Boswell – and one as constant as his subject, to judge from this labour of love – is satisfying to the reader both for the symmetry of the narrative it has produced and for the complementarity of author and subject.

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4 John Lanchester, "Rebusworld", *London Review of Books,* 27 April 2000, pp. 18-20. Recent titles in the Rebus series include *Rebus: The Early* Years (New York, 2000), *Dead Souls* (New York, 1999) and *The Hanging Garden* (New York, 1998).