

JAMES MAXTON

1885-1946—HIS LIFE AND WORK

JAMES MAXTON was born on June 22, 1885, in Pollokshaws, a suburb of Glasgow, on the south side of the Clyde. His father, who bore the same name, was a teacher in Pollokshaws Academy, and his mother had been a teacher before marriage. It was assumed that Jimmy, the eldest son, should also become a teacher.

He passed from elementary education at Grahamstown School, Barthead (of which his father was appointed headmaster in 1890), to secondary education at Hutchesons' Grammar School, Glasgow, and then to the Glasgow Pupil Teachers' Institute. On qualifying as a teacher, he took his first appointment at the Marys' Public School in Townhead, Glasgow. In 1902 he entered Glasgow University, graduating as Master of Arts.

Maxton later used to make a point of the fact that all the expenses of his education were borne by the community, first by free schooling, and then by scholarships. "I was fed and clothed in the same way," he said, "since my father's salary came direct from the community." Had he not then, an obligation to serve the community?

Both at school and university he gained a reputation as an athlete rather than as a scholar. He represented Glasgow in the inter-university sports as a half-miler.

Introduction to Politics

His introduction to politics was the University Electoral Election of 1903, when Mr. George Wyndham, Chief Secretary for Ireland, and Mr. John Morley were the Conservative and Liberal candidates. Young Maxton had not thought much about politics, and it was his love of sports and pranks which decided his party on this occasion rather than principles: the athletic group with which he was associated backed Mr. Wyndham—and so did he. The election was mostly a matter of free fights, with packets of pea-meal, eggs and fish-head of uncertain age, bags of soot and water hoses as ammunition, and there is a legend that in this fray James took a heroic part, resisting eight pugilistic Liberals until his clothes were torn off.

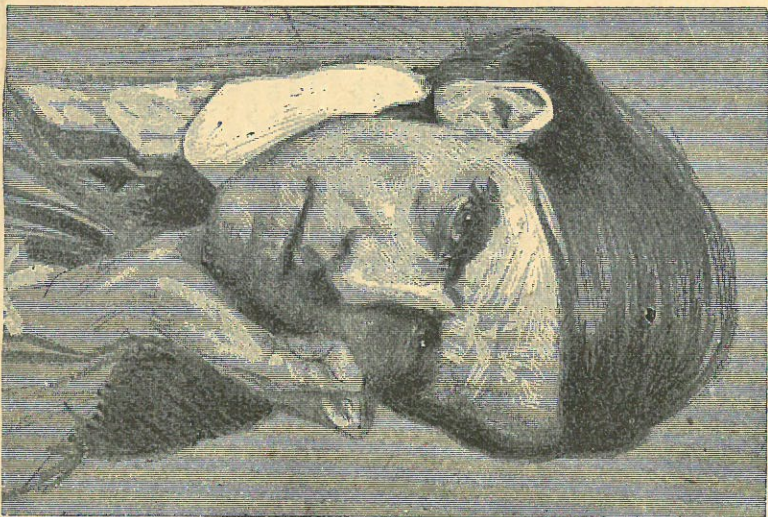
Conversion to Socialism

But even before the end of the Electoral Election (Wyndham won by 674 votes to 645), Maxton had come to have doubts about Conservatism. His conversion to Socialism was initiated by talks in the Union smoke-room with two students—George Fletcher, later a distinguished authority on tuberculosis, and Hugh Reyburn, afterwards Professor of Philosophy at Capetown University. They were both Kirkintilloch lads, and sometimes brought with them another young Kirkintilloch Socialist, Tom Johnston, who was to become a close political associate with Maxton. The four of them argued for hours.

James took an active part in the corporate life of the University. He was elected to the Students' Representative Council, which negotiated for the undergraduates with the Senatus, and was a member of the Editorial Committee of the University magazine.

When Maxton went on to the Glasgow United Free Church Training College to complete his course, he began to attend I.L.P. meetings addressed by Keir Hardie, Robert Smillie, Bruce Glasier, Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden. It was after hearing Snowden at the Paisley Hippodrome in 1904 that Maxton joined the I.L.P.

His first teaching post was at Sir John Maxwell's school in Pollokshaws. He succeeded L. MacNeill Weir, also to become a close colleague of Maxton, and James's conversion was completed by a study of the socialist papers, pamphlets and books which Weir left littered about his room. These included files of the *Clarion*, Blatchford's *Brian for the British*, and Kropotkin's *Fields, Factories and Workshops*.



James Maxton,
from a portrait by W. Y. Calder.

Maxton was made Literature Secretary of the Barthead I.L.P., and was soon chairing a street-door meeting. His first public speech, in 1904, was in a debate at Trinity College, George Dallas, the Secretary of the Scottish I.L.P., was present and realised that he had discovered a speaker of rare gifts. Dallas soon had James addressing meetings throughout Renfrewshire, and before long he was travelling all over Scotland at week-ends, as well as visiting nearby places three or four times a week.

Teacher and Socialist

James was active in his professional organisations. He was elected to the National Councils of both the Scottish Class Teachers' Association and the Educational Institute of Scotland. He was one of the founders of the Socialist Teachers' Society.

Maxton's experiences as a schoolteacher brought into his socialist propaganda the human note which was afterwards its most moving quality. He saw children coming to school hungry and bootless on winter mornings, and his denunciation of Capitalism, his appeal for Socialism, became impassioned by his indignation.

After three years at Pollokshaws Maxton went to St. James' School, Bridgeton, and so began an association with its people which continued until his death. He was outraged by the conditions of poverty and overcrowding in which the children existed. He regarded the schools as prisons, but holidays brought nothing better. "The children of the poorest parents," he wrote, "living in the most squalid districts will be driven out of the schools to spend their holidays between their filthy homes and the equally filthy streets, amidst unlovely ideas and unlovely sounds, which will sink into their consciousness and form part of an unlovely personality in the future." So he proposed to the Glasgow School Board that it should run summer schools in Rouken Glen, on Cathkin Braes and in similar places of space and beauty.

Maxton was not content to be a platform figure in the I.L.P.. He distributed leaflets, sold the *Labour Leader* in the streets, did the secretarial duties of his branch at Barthead and then of the Renfrewshire Federation. He became a member of the Scottish I.L.P. Council and its chairman: in 1912 he was elected as Scottish representative on the National Council of the Party. He found himself among the "giants"—Keir Hardie, Bruce Glasier, Philip Snowden, Margaret Bondfield, Ramsay MacDonald, Fred Jowett, but his personality was too strong to be submerged by them.

The First World War

Then came the first World War. Maxton threw himself into the Socialist campaign of opposition and resistance with a zeal which knew no limits. When Conscription was introduced, he had no hesitation in becoming a political conscientious objector. His case was heard by the Barthead Tribunal in March, 1916. He told how, as a member of the I.L.P., he had travelled far and wide, speaking against armaments, militarism, secret diplomacy and war.

"There comes a time when a man must judge what his duty as a citizen is and what it demands of him and what is demanded by his own conscience," he said. "I have made up my mind, and I would consider myself a shirker to my party, a shirker to the beliefs I have been promulgating for years, if I altered in the least the stand I have taken."

Maxton claimed absolute exemption. The Tribunal adjourned the case for a fortnight to enquire what their powers were. But before the fortnight had passed, something happened which made the Tribunal decision irrelevant.

Sentenced for Sedition

Glasgow engineers were in conflict with Mr. Lloyd George, the Minister of Munitions. They demanded higher wages, objected to dilution unless there was trade union control, and resisted a Regulation which prohibited them moving from one job to another. Through the Clyde Workers' Committee, which included such figures as William Gallacher, David Kirkwood, J. W. Muir, and Arthur McManus, a militant challenge was made to the Government.

Mr. Lloyd George travelled to Glasgow to bring the engineers to heel. Kirkwood was his chairman at the works' meeting, and introduced the Minister with great frankness. "This, fellow workers," he began, "is Mr. Lloyd George. I can assure him that every word he says will be carefully weighed. We regard him with suspicion, because every act associated with his name has the taint of slavery about it." Mr. Lloyd George's speech did not remove the suspicion, and the engineers still refused to accept dilutions unless they had a share of control.

The Minister of Munitions returned to London—and started an offensive against the workers. He seized all issues of the copy of *Forward*, which printed a verbatim report of the Lloyd George-Kirkwood debate. He suppressed the *Worker*, the organ of the Clyde Workers' Committee, and imprisoned Gallacher, the chairman, J. W. Muir, the editor, and Walter Bell, the publisher. Then on Saturday, March 25, 1916, the police arrested Kirkwood, McManus and four other members of the Committee and deported them from the West of Scotland.

At this point Maxton came on the scene. On the Sunday James McDougall and he were addressing an I.L.P. demonstration on Glasgow Green. Both urged the workers to strike against the deportations.

"It is now for the workers to take action," said Maxton, "and that action is to strike and down tools at once. Not a rivet should be struck on the Clyde until the deported engineers are restored to their families." He paused, and then said deliberately: "In case there are any plain-clothes detectives