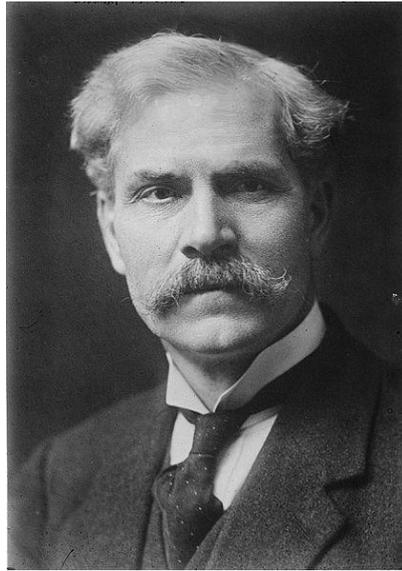


JAMES RAMSAY MACDONALD



A Tribute by Sir Hugh Stevenson Robertson in December, 1937

Born in poverty, reared in poverty, his mother having to work hard to maintain herself and her wee laddie, enjoying none of the fruits of life, but only a bare subsistence. What was in this boy, I ask you, that urged him to battle with circumstance, to beat circumstance, and to emerge as Prime Minister of this great country? It is a fairy-tale such as his old friend J. M. Barrie would have loved—the barefoot laddie scampering over the sand dunes at Lossiemouth, and then coming home from 10 Downing Street to meet his old friends, and to greet them by their Christian names and nicknames, the loons and the lassies.

MacDonald's life after his Lossiemouth days divides itself into three periods—

First, his early struggles in London, his finding a helpmate in Margaret Ethel Gladstone, and his life with her until she died in 1911, leaving him with a family of five young children. In that period we find MacDonald the zealous missionary of a new Jerusalem.

Backed by a woman of extraordinary insight and clarity of thought, MacDonald found himself. He had personality, an almost Puritan-like rectitude, a native dignity which never to the end of his days deserted him, and a mind enriched both by study and contemplation. Little wonder that he quickly stepped into a leading place in the young movement known as Socialism. Please note that at the period of which I speak, this was not the line of least resistance. Those were hard days. To be a Socialist was often to be a social outcast; to be spurned, derided, and what is more cruel, suspected. That was the way he chose.

The second period brings in the years of war, and, to me, this revealed the greatest MacDonald of all. Again he scorned the line of least resistance, listened not to the shoutings of the mob, but stood out (even when many of his friends of the Socialist party were deserting the flag) as "against the war". You people of this generation can hardly realise what this meant at the time. It was both social and political suicide. The general public, inflamed by war propaganda to a state of frenzy, was ready to rend any man or woman who dared to go against the popular will. MacDonald dared, Snowden dared, others too. Those days! I shall never forget them, and I shall never forget the men, the messengers, who in the welter and fury of war, continued week in, week out, to preach the gospel of peace. Not to preach it timidly or mildly, but to preach it passionately and uncompromisingly. Some day, when the world has forgotten the ways of war and its devilry, a great Valhalla of Peace may be erected, and the names inscribed there of those who fought in one war only, the war for peace. In that day, and in that place, these names will find honoured place. To-day Peace is almost a popular cry; in 1914-1918 anyone who dared utter the word was a traitor.

So we come, taking the story of his Labour Government Premiership as read, to the third period, that from 1931 to his death. What happened in 1931 is only dimly known to-day. History is certain to throw new light on the whole of that incident. It may be that MacDonald was right; it may be that he was wrong. Personally I suspend judgement, and have this only to say that I am certain MacDonald acted according to the dictates of his conscience.

And now, to deal for a moment or two with another aspect altogether of MacDonald's life, with the personal aspect, with the man as a man, with the man as a father, with the man as a friend. He was many-sided as you all know, a lover of things beautiful, of literature, of music, of art. He was companionable, he was loyal, he was a family man, and between himself and the members of his family there was unusual warmth and comradeship. He loved a fireside chat, and he loved that chat to be with old friends. He never forgot an old friend. I remember travelling part of Scotland with him as Prime Minister when he suddenly remembered an old Socialist who lived near to the place we were passing at the time. Although we were travelling on a time-table nothing would do but he must make a detour in order to shake hands with this old man; and he did it. This mindfulness was a delightful characteristic of his. He could be at the most important conference in the world, but he would always find time to send a postcard to his old friends, even when those old friends had ceased to agree with him politically. Another characteristic; he could never be induced, in private conversation, to take part in the maligning of people. He was entirely free from personal slander; this man who himself was so much slandered; and that, I feel, at the seat of mercy, must be counted unto him for grace. Another characteristic of his was that he was a worker. I have been host to him on many occasions and I have never known him to be without work, and this explains why he had so little room for the mere rhetorical politician. He had had to work hard all his life, and the habit never left him. He must verify his facts, and would go to endless trouble to verify them. As Prime Minister he was not a mere figure-head.

Work over, a pipe or cigarette—how happy he could be, how homely, how he loved the vernacular, how clean too in his talk, how wholesome in his social outlook, how respectful to institutions, even when he did not altogether agree with them. I do not suppose he subscribed to all the articles of faith, but I do know that he venerated the Kirk and what it stood for. He was the sort of man who would put on a lum hat at a funeral in Scotland simply because he remembered in the old days how they all wore lum hats at funerals in Lossiemouth.

We used to chip him about Lossiemouth. Dangerous ground I can assure you! For Ramsay Mac saw Lossie through rose-coloured glasses of his own memory. The Lake of the Woods (in Canada), he once told me, was the loveliest place in the world—excepting Lossiemouth. Who would grudge him the Lossie of his dreams?

I will permit myself only one close personal recollection, and that has reference to Ramsay's love of the Glasgow Orpheus Choir which I have the honour of conducting. That love goes back many years, to years long before he was the prominent man he afterwards became. Years ago, I remember him following us with boyish enthusiasm to various towns in the Borders where we were singing at the time. He was very much one of us. The old members he knew by their Christian names; Boyd Steven was Boydy; William Smith was Willie; and I was Hughie. And when Willie Smith died, and a memorial was set up for him on the shores of Loch Ard, it was MacDonald as Prime Minister who came north specially to dedicate it. A wonderful day on that hillside with Mac standing there, and the little flotilla of rowing boats with their occupants out on the loch, and the other folk clustered on the hill, all listening to that voice speaking so quietly and so touchingly of one whose only claim to greatness was that he sang his country's songs

At Lossiemouth

Invited by the MacDonald family to sing "for the last time" to their father, we went north to Lossiemouth on Saturday, 27th November, 1937. There we saw the last of our old friend. It was very touching, there in his home-town, at the house which he built for his mother, and at the picturesque little burying ground at Spynie.

We sang the tunes he loved—French, Crimond, Stracathro, Belmont. At the graveside we sang also “The Flowers o’ the Forest”, strangely appropriate when we remembered how he loved the Borders, and how, in the springtime of their lives, he and Margaret Ethel Gladstone (his one love) wandered hand in hand. And when they put the urn containing his ashes into the little vault we sang “Heraclitus”.

It was all very beautiful, and very much after his own heart, could he have spoken—the bleak countryside, that wee sheltered spot on the hill, the tang of the sea in the air, his ain folk gathered around, old and young, the bairns looking wonderingly on; and the auld tunes and the auld songs floating there, a kind of incense caught from loving hearts, and filling the air with such fragrance that the ground became holy ground, the tomb, an altar. Thus we laid him to rest.