

John Murdoch: A Land and Labour Pioneer

James D. Young

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In his introductory piece – *Tir 'is Teanga*, which set the scene for Young's article, Ray Burnett the editor of *Calgacus*, made this insightful observation on the role of *land agitation* in shaping the agenda of the emergent Scottish labour movement.

“In the late 19th century things were very different. All over Scotland from Shetland to the Clyde valley land agitation played a major and often a key role in the development of the Scottish labour movement independent of Scottish Liberalism. What is more, in the Scottish towns and cities the minority socialist presence in the emergent labour movement was successfully able to use the ‘land question’ and the agitation for land nationalisation as a basic weapon in their armoury. Allied to the miners agitation against private ownership of mineral wealth it became a key factor in the heightening of class consciousness amongst working men.

The debt we owe to these early pioneers is inestimable. One of the most remarkable was John Murdoch ...”

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In 1925 the unpublished manuscript *Autobiography of John Murdoch* was deposited in the Mitchell Library, Glasgow, by Professor Magnus MacLean. This Autobiography was not entered in the manuscript catalogue, and Scottish historians have been hitherto unaware of its existence. I located it in the Mitchell Library after I had found a scrap of paper in the manuscript catalogue referring to a pamphlet by John Murdoch in the small safe.

John Murdoch, who was to play a key role in the [Highland land agitations](#) in the 1870s and 1880s, was born on 15 January 1818 at Lynemore, Ardoch, Nairnshire. He lived to be 86, and his life was filled with many-sided activity, whose significance has not received the attention it deserves. Moreover, there are aspects of his life and work which have a special interest for labour historians and sociologists.

His father was John Murdoch, and his mother was Mary Macpherson, the daughter of a sea captain: and both families had roots which stretched far back into Scottish history. In 1827 the family moved to the Island of Islay, and John Murdoch lived there until 1838. His '*agricultural education*' was inaugurated on '*the little farm which had been selected and conferred on my father*'. Moreover, he imbibed the rich folklore, customs and culture of the Highlanders among whom he lived and grew to manhood. In later life he was to become an associate of Michael Davitt, Henry George, Joseph Ashby, Patrick Ford, the editor of the New York *Irish World*, J. Shaw Maxwell, Keir Hardie, and other land and labour agitators.

Islay in the 1820s and 1830s was geographically remote and culturally alien from industrial society, with its rigid social stratification and class conflict, which had emerged in the Scottish Lowlands and the north of England. Murdoch's life in Islay was happy, exciting and satisfying: and the social structure and the wholeness of a common culture, shared by all '*classes*' from the Highland aristocrats down to the small farmers, had a profound influence on his subsequent social and political thought. His experiences there were in the fullness of time, to turn him into a left-wing radical rather than a class-conscious socialist; and his hatred of the squalor and ugliness of industrial society inhibited him from making common cause with the industrial workers before the early 1880s.

In 1838 he went to '*serve in the shop of Mr William Boyd, a grocer in the High Street, Paisley*'. Mr Boyd was '*an earnest and prominent Radical*'. But within six weeks of his arrival in Paisley '*there was a letter from my father stating that he had been favoured with an appointment for me in the Excise*'. He reluctantly decided to accept a job in the Excise service; and he began and completed his training in Edinburgh

under ‘an English gentleman who had strong Highland sentiments from his serving some time when a young man in Islay’. Then he worked in Kilsyth, where coal-mining was in its infancy, and in Middletown, Ireland, as an Excise officer. He was already very critical of the drink trade (his only real criticism of Islay was that the island’s prosperity depended on whisky); but he was not above taking the occasional glass of whisky.

In 1841 he was promoted to ‘a Ride’ in Shuttlesworth, Lancashire. He was appalled by the ‘comparative savages’ he saw in the factories, mills and places he visited. Here he came into contact with ‘the Mormons, the followers of Robert Owen, the Chartist and the Ant-Corn Law League agitators’. He also ‘met with the lowest class of Englishmen, and I cannot help repeating that they were a disgusting lot. Nor was their character improved by their surroundings. The Tom and Jerry shop was often no more than a kitchen with a scullery on the one side, and some sort of sleeping place on the other. In the kitchen, the water was boiled, the malt in a wash tub in the middle of the floor In this atmosphere ... the young “Lankie”, as the Lancashireman was often called, was brought up; and one can imagine the kind of education which girls received in such schools, the discourse over the pots of beer being in keeping with the rest.’ From then on he was a life-long advocate of temperance.

John Murdoch’s experiences in Lancashire in the 1840s had a lasting influence on his thought. By 1843 the ‘very backward state of the land’ allied with the ‘periodical depressions of trade’ stimulated him towards formulating ideas which were to influence his thoughts and agitations for many years to come. He began to write about ‘the desirability of brining the land and labour together’; and his first article on the land appeared in ‘the **Bolton Free Press** about 1843’. He encountered ‘some of the Chartists’, but his ‘impression of them was not very good. I might have heard Fergus O’Connor, but did not. I am sorry I did not, for I sympathised with him when he was assailed on all sides for his attempt to plant land colonies on the land in England. I never met Ernest Jones, nor with Bronterre O’Brien, but I took in their teachings in regard to the land and see no ground today to reject it’.

In 1845 John Murdoch’s father was killed in a shooting accident, and ‘the factor’ took advantage of the situation to evict his mother and her children from their farm. He was not embittered by this experience. A short time later he returned to ‘a Ride’ in Islay, and he was soon involved with a group of fellow radicals in discussing ‘science, history, poetry, theology and politics’. Before long, however, he was destined for service in Dublin, Shetland and Inverness. While engaged in Dublin as an Excise officer, he was active in an agitation for improvements in the pay and conditions of his fellow officers. In Dublin, too, he contributed articles to such newspapers as the **Nation** on a wide variety of agricultural topics. He was a practical land improver as well as a political agitator. While working in Inverness in 1873 as an Excise officer, he announced his retirement. Then he became founder and editor of **The Highlander**.

The Highlander was published in Inverness between 1873 and 1882. It was a very radical paper in which Murdoch ‘advocated the cause of the people, and particularly the right of the Gaelic people to their native soil’. (Glasgow Weekly) Through **The Highlander** and Murdoch’s personal intervention in disputes between crofters and landlords the way was prepared for the successful speaking tours – and the rise of the

[Crofters Party](#) – of [Henry George](#) and Michael Davitt in the 1880s. (Lawrence, 1957, p17)

The American Land League was founded in 1879; Irish-Americans '*flocked to join it and to contribute money*'; and Patrick Ford '*pledged his paper to the cause*'. (Lawrence, 1957, p8) At the same time John Murdoch toured America, and Ford introduced him to Dr William Carroll. He accompanied Dr Carroll to Philadelphia, where Carroll and '*three other gentlemen*' gave him '*two thousand dollars*' to save ***The Highlander*** from going under. Patrick Ford was the link connecting John Murdoch with Michael Davitt and Henry George.

In the 1870s John Murdoch agitated through the columns of the ***The Highlander*** for the setting up of a royal commission on the Highlands. In 1883 he gave valuable evidence before the commission, of which Lord Napier was chairman. In 1884 Michael Davitt toured the Scottish coalfields advocating the nationalisation of the land and minerals. John Murdoch simultaneously made his first efforts to win support among the industrial workers for land reform. By this time he was living in the Scottish Lowlands; and there is evidence to suggest that he was still evolving towards the left. When the miners of Lanarkshire founded a Scottish Anti-Royalty and labour League, he tried to get them to affiliate to the Scottish Land Restoration League. In the general election of 1885 he was a parliamentary nominee of the Scottish Land Restoration League; and he stood as a Land and Labour candidate in the Patrick constituency of Glasgow.

During the by-election in Mid-Lanark in April 1888, John Murdoch, who was now seventy years old, campaigned on behalf of Keir Hardie. A few weeks later he took the lead, together with Hardie, in helping to initiate the Scottish Labour Party. This was probably the last major act of his political career, but he toured the southern counties of England with Joseph Ashby in 1891 on behalf of the English Land League. Then he settled down to complete the autobiography he had begun in 1889 and to observe in the Scottish Labour Party the alliance of Scottish land and labour reformers he had striven to create in 1884

John Murdoch's political evolution was unusual: in his sixty-sixth year, he moved left, not right. He was an active temperance reformer, a land reformer, a journalist, a champion of the Gaelic language, a collector of Highland folklore, and a foundation member of the Scottish Labour Party. The discovery of his autobiography has created an opportunity to rescue him, if I may borrow Edward Thompson's splendid phrase, '*from the enormous condescension of posterity.*' He was an internationalist, as well as a patriot who identified himself with the struggles of ordinary people. He deserves a permanent niche in British labour history.

References

Glasgow Weekly Mail, 7th February 1903

Lawrence, E.P (1957) *Henry George in the British Isles*, East Lancing, p17 & p8

Endnote

John Murdoch's autobiography was edited by the Highland historian Dr James Hunter and published in 1986 as a commemoration to both Murdoch and the wider Highland land agitation movement who struggle for many years to have the Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act of 1886 enacted.

For the People's Cause, John Murdoch (edited by J. Hunter), HMSO, Edinburgh, 1986

This article first appeared in the *Society for the Study of Labour History Bulletin* (Vol.xix), 1969. Dr James D Young was a labour historian and lecturer at the Department of History, University of Stirling.