THE RAMSAY MACDONALD PAPERS IN THE JOHN RYLANDS UNIVERSITY LIBRARY OF MANCHESTER: AN INITIAL DISCUSSION

DAVID HOWELL
DEPARTMENT OF GOVERNMENT, UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

The recent acquisition from Peter Eaton Booksellers of some Ramsay MacDonal Papers by the John Rylands University Library provides a significant addition to the Library’s holdings in the field of political history. Moreover, within a wider context it strengthens still further Manchester’s claim to be regarded as the leading centre for research in British labour history, a claim that can point to the holdings of the John Rylands University Library, the Central Reference Library’s Archive Department, the Working Class Movement Library, Salford and the recent transfer of the Labour Party Archive to the National Museum of Labour History.

The principal collection of MacDonald Papers was deposited in the Public Record Office by David Marquand following the completion of his major biography. Apparently the Manchester material became separated from the main body of papers, and perhaps as a result tends to include concentrations of material on specific topics. Most of it is correspondence to MacDonald supplemented by some replies usually on carbon but occasionally in a draft form. In addition there are some Cabinet Papers from the 1930s, MacDonald’s handwritten diary for the 1933 London World Economic Conference, many of his personal appointment diaries and a range of pamphlets, minutes and notes relating to specific organizations and issues.

MacDonald was a highly controversial figure who was central to the development of the British Left from the mid-1890s to the 1930s. As the first Secretary of the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) and subsequently the Labour Party, he did much of the spadework to establish the Party as a durable political organization. As Labour’s first Prime Minister in the 1920s he enjoyed a degree of support inside and outside the Labour Movement that subsequent detractors often preferred to forget. He was vilified for his critical and courageous stance during the 1914-18 war and again, more seriously for his reputation over his break with the Labour Party and his leadership of a National Government in the financial crisis of 1931. For many years, effectively until the publication of Marquand’s massive and scholarly biography in 1977, MacDonald was often dismissed as a traitor by the Left and
more generally as a limited and inadequate leader who typified the mediocrity of Britain’s inter-war politics.¹

The Manchester collection can make its contribution to the task of recovering MacDonald from the mythmakers and presenting him as a subject for critical scholarship. Moreover, MacDonald’s career inevitably sheds light on leading historiographical debates about the development of the British Left. This account attempts to place items from the collection within the contexts of MacDonald’s career and of the politics of the Labour Movement, and thereby to indicate something of their importance.

The first significant section of the collection illuminates the complexities of MacDonald’s shift from Radical Liberalism to Independent Labour Party (ILP) Socialism. He had grown up in a community which was firmly Liberal in its politics and this legacy left a significant mark on his political style and on some of his preferred policies. His Radical Liberalism soon became combined with interests of a socialist character. A brief period in Bristol in 1885 included a fleeting membership of the Marxist Social Democratic Federation (SDF). More significantly he became involved with the Fabians whilst his interest in ethical questions brought him into the Fellowship of the New Life. Such priorities and enthusiasm left unresolved the question of an effective political strategy. Between 1892 and the middle of 1894 MacDonald attempted to promote himself as a candidate with local Liberal support, first at Dover and then at Southampton. Finally in June 1894, when Sheffield Liberals refused to adopt a Liberal trade unionist for a by-election vacancy in a Liberal seat, MacDonald announced publicly his disenchantment with Liberalism and his new allegiance to the ILP.

The collection contains material on MacDonald’s activities in both Dover and Southampton. The former was a safely Conservative seat. Here MacDonald was nominated following the 1892 election by the local Labour Electoral Association, an organization which had been founded by the TUC in 1886, and which normally operated in reasonable harmony with the official Liberal machine. MacDonald’s correspondence chronicles his unsuccessful attempts to secure adoption by the Dover Liberal Association. A bleak rebuff late in 1893 produced a critical response from MacDonald in which he attempted

to discredit the leaders of Dover Liberalism: 'The framers and supporters of the motion . . . are those very gentlemen under whose guidance liberalism has become practically extinct in Dover, and who never lose an opportunity to patronise the Tory member in the most loathsome way.' This denunciation came in correspondence with the Secretary of the Home Counties Liberal Federation as he unsuccessfully attempted to win the favour of figures in the Liberal organization. In the end, the response from a Liberal organizer was predictable: 'we are not invested with a right to dictate to the Constituencies who shall be Parliamentary Candidates.'

Already late in 1893 MacDonald was pondering the choice that he would make seven months later. An unsent portion of a letter to the Home Counties Secretary declared: 'My greatest regret is that I am now driven to the conclusion of my friends of the Independent Labour Party. I have stuck to the opinion that Liberalism was a sufficient gospel for the Labour politicians until but a few days ago . . . I now change that opinion.'

In fact, the effective change required one more disillusion at the hands of a Liberal caucus. The correspondence contains detailed material on MacDonald's attempt to secure a Liberal candidacy at Southampton. Politically the prospect contrasted with that in Dover. In 1894 Southampton was a two-member constituency with one Liberal and one Conservative Member. The electorate contained a significant working-class section and a plausible case could be made for a balanced Liberal ticket that would include one candidate with a special interest in labour questions. The collection chronicles how the invitation came to MacDonald from sympathetic Southampton Liberals early in April 1894. The complexities of Progressive politics are captured in the involvement of Edward Pease of the Fabian Society. The resulting and abortive attempts to secure MacDonald as the second Liberal candidate are presented graphically. Curiously there is a draft of a reply to a Southampton Liberal critic in which MacDonald seemed to distance himself from the emerging leader of the ILP: 'All that you have to take care of is that the Labour candidate is not an extreme fool with no discretion who follows Keir Hardie's vagaries.'

But soon MacDonald and some of his Southampton supporters decided to separate themselves from the Liberal organization and to run on an ILP ticket. They faced one significant local problem that is hinted at in the correspondence. Elsewhere the ILP had often made headway by winning the support of the local Trades Council. Some Southampton supporters were pessimistic about achieving such backing. Its absence was one reason why the local Liberals could be

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2 Draft of letter from James Ramsay MacDonald [JRM] to W. Allard, 9 December 1893.
3 W. Allard to JRM, 4 January 1894.
4 Deleted section in JRM to Allard (draft), 9 December 1893.
5 Edward Pease to JRM, 3 April 1894; John Randolph to JRM, 5 April 1894.
6 JRM to Kiddle (draft), 16 May 1894.
inflexible and London Liberal organizers remained unimpressed: 'Our difficulty is to show that you have a real Labour party behind you. That I am afraid we cannot do.' An attempt to secure the support of the Trades Council President proved abortive: 'I saw Wilson J.P. and bearded him for his signature which I could not secure. But he thinks the object good... He frankly acknowledged that the Trades Council is not a political body.' When MacDonald addressed the Trades Council in September 1894, it produced no political benefits. Indeed, when the second Liberal candidacy fell vacant once again in 1895, the Southampton Liberals selected the Trades Council President, an adroit tactic that left MacDonald isolated and helped to produce a small poll for him in the 1895 election. His complex relationship with Liberalism remained. He gave evidence to a hearing into alleged corrupt practices by one of the successful Conservatives, the petition was successful, and then MacDonald responded favourably to Liberal requests that he not contest the by-election.

The complex path by which MacDonald came to the ILP is significant. It illustrates a key moment in the politics of the British Left and also the specific character of MacDonald's own politics. The next few years saw MacDonald emerging as a dominant figure in the ILP. He became one of a leadership group of four; he played a significant part in deciding that the ILP would not combine with the SDF in an explicitly Socialist Party. Instead, in 1900, the ILP formed an alliance with some major unions in the LRC and MacDonald became Secretary of the new organization. Three years later he negotiated a secret electoral deal with the Liberals, an arrangement perhaps facilitated by the willingness of unions to join the LRC and by the belief that their funds and organizational resources were electorally significant. The result was, in the 1906 election, the return of thirty Labour MPs, most benefiting from local Liberal benevolence. MacDonald was one of them, returned for Leicester. Rapidly the LRC becomes renamed as the Labour Party.

The collection's next strong point is a group of over eighty letters for 1907, a vital year in the development of Labour politics. The ties between the ILP leaders are evident in the letters from Keir Hardie, Philip Snowden and Bruce Glasier. Already some of the tensions in the strategy adopted by them are becoming evident. Glasier evinced discontent about the unadventurous politics of many Labour MPs:

The real seat of discontent in our movement re parliament is the fecklessness of the speeches which the majority of our MPs are giving in the constituencies. Many of them never mention the word socialism or any future change but drearily waddle back

7 Scullard, Randolph and Brown to JRM, 27 May 1894.
8 Randolph to JRM, 2 June 1894.
9 Crook to JRM, 17 September 1894.
10 See letters in collection 27, 28, 29 November 1895.
11 See Marquand, Ramsay MacDonald, 38-41.
and forward over the work of the last session and why they did or did not vote for certain small measures. They fall below the level of the ordinary lively Liberal.\textsuperscript{12}

The caution of many trade union MPs helped to swell criticism amongst ILP members. Glasier sympathized with their concern over 'the simply appalling inanity' of many speeches by Labour Members. But he was characteristically patronizing about many of the critics: '... we must not take our comrades too seriously on these matters. They are, as doubtless our own sweet bairns will one day be inclined to feel that they can do a little flirtation without meaning any affront to their parents ...'.\textsuperscript{13}

The focus for much rank-and-file discontent was the alternative of a Socialist Party, free from compromises with cautious trade unions. In the Summer of 1907, this option was given a dramatic although ambiguous lift by Victor Grayson's by-election victory in the Colne Valley. The collection includes material that offers a valuable supplement to papers available elsewhere.

Grayson's emergence as candidate was complicated by the fact that in the Colne Valley, the weakness of trade unionism had prevented the formation of a local LRC that could bring together trade unionists and ILP members. Instead he emerged as the nominee of the local ILP Branch (the Colne Valley Labour League) and was refused endorsement by the Labour Party nationally. The response of the ILP was also equivocal. The prospective candidate defended his position to MacDonald: 'During the last 15 months within the Division itself, every Democratic process of selection has been exhausted.'\textsuperscript{14} Whatever the irregularities, Grayson expressed confidence that he could unite the ILP and trade union elements.

Beyond the peculiarities of his nomination, many within the ILP, let alone the wider Labour Party, had reservations about Grayson. Some were perhaps fuelled by resentment at the rapid rise of a relatively inexperienced figure; others perhaps rested on a belief that he would become a symbol of growing discontent with the compromises of Labour politics. Moreover, Grayson's ILP experience was rooted in Manchester, a relative stronghold of support for the idea of an explicitly Socialist Party. Certainly the Labour Party's failure to support Grayson meant that his candidacy became of itself symbolic of activist discontent. A Yorkshire ILPer commented to MacDonald: 'we were compelled to say very little about Labour and talk about Socialism all the time.'\textsuperscript{15}

These circumstances meant that Grayson's victory had serious implications for arguments within the Labour Party. Philip Snowden

\textsuperscript{12} J. Bruce Glasier to JRM, 30 May 1907.
\textsuperscript{13} Glasier to JRM, 20 September 1907.
\textsuperscript{14} Victor Grayson to JRM, 25 June 1907
\textsuperscript{15} T. Russell Williams to JRM, 21 July 1907.
commented: 'What about Colne Valley? I told you the ILP and the Labour members were making a suicidal mistake in not making the best of the situation. The victory is not only the sign of revolt, but of a general running amok. What it portends Heaven only knows.' The success had strengthened rank-and-file intransigence in Colne Valley according to MacDonald's Yorkshire informant: 'they are all in a truculent mood . . . . They are literally drunk with the joy of their success and go out of their way to condemn the “whole pack of us”.'

Grayson's own response quickly hardened. An attempt by Snowden to mend fences was wholly unproductive: 'I found him in a far less tractable mood than at any previous time. He bluntly told me his intention was to force the rupture in the Labour Party . . . he was absolutely hopeless. He is gone off his head.' The example of Grayson encouraged critics in other Branches. Ben Turner, an ILP loyalist, wrote to MacDonald about SDF pressure in Dewsbury: 'It is an SDF move and is directed against the Labour Party, the ILP and MacDonald in general. They have got Victor Grayson down.'

The tensions revealed in this correspondence continued to affect the Edwardian Labour Party at least until the foundation of the British Socialist Party as the hoped-for but unsuccessful Socialist alternative in 1911, and the underlying issues had not been resolved when the War began in 1914. The Labour Party remained an uneasy coalition of socialists and trade unionists. Its relationship with the Liberals was still complex – a volatile blend of attraction and hostility, dependence and an insistence on independence.

War meant a radical shift in MacDonald's circumstances. His position was far from simple: he opposed the conduct and consequences of pre-war diplomacy; he was unhappy at the corrosive impact of militarism on British society but he was not opposed to a British victory. His stand led to vilification from the Right, strong emotional support from the Left and close involvement with a few prominent Radical Liberals who held similar views on the War.

This last aspect receives significant coverage within the correspondence and was of particular importance to MacDonald at a time when his views had distanced him from the majority of Labour MPs. One particularly prominent correspondent is Charles Trevelyan, the Liberal Member for Elland and until August 1914 a Junior Minister. He played a leading role in forming a critical grouping including Ponsonby, E.D. Morel, Phillip Morrell and MacDonald. This correspondence charts the early weeks of what became the Union of Democratic Control (UDC), the most significant organization opposed to the Government's wartime policy. One of the issues that divided the

16 Philip Snowden to JRM, 19 July 1907.
17 Russell Williams to JRM, 21 July 1907.
18 Snowden to JRM, 11 September 1907.
19 Ben Turner to JRM, September 1907.
small group of radicals concerned the extent to which they should launch a counter-attack against Government propaganda. Trevelyan informed MacDonald in September 1914 that he and Morel felt ‘there is a danger of opinion hardening from want of our case being stated.’ But against this, some Liberals including C.P. Scott of the Manchester Guardian urged caution. Morel at least suggested to MacDonald that Scott felt inhibited about taking criticism too far: ‘... I am not at all sure ... how far Scott would be prepared ultimately to bust up the Liberal Party as it now exists on a square foreign policy issue.’

Clearly wartime conditions raised prospects of political realignment. MacDonald scrawled retrospectively on a letter inviting him to a dinner with the Liberal critics in August 1914: ‘This Dinner for the purpose of considering joint action and the creation of a new Parliamentary Party which will take action immediately, more particularly after the war has spent itself a little and which may be a permanent combination. They ask me to lead it both in the House and the country.’ Although this grand design never happened the critics collaborated inside and outside the Commons. Moreover, they were brought closer by their experiences at the hands of the authorities and of patriotic mobs. The collection contains UDC material which demonstrates the gradual erosion of civil liberties and the splintering of Liberal solidarities. Thus in August 1915 Trevelyan wrote to the Home Secretary, Sir John Simon, about the seizure of UDC pamphlets:

You have not lifted a finger to suppress the intolerable campaign of exaggeration and hatred which is carried on every morning by the jingo press ... You remained in the Government because you thought that it would be well to have some Liberalism left in high places. Do you imagine that, if you start with this, you are going to be able to stop?

One legacy of the wartime association was that by 1922 Trevelyan, Ponsonby and Morel were all Labour MPs under MacDonald’s leadership. MacDonald himself, after being defeated heavily at Leicester in 1918, had been returned as MP for Aberavon in the November 1922 election. The Labour Party soon held minority office – a political shift more dramatic than any envisaged by a dinner-party of Radicals in August 1914. During the weeks when the prospect of a first Labour Government was being keenly discussed, Trevelyan wrote to MacDonald emphasizing the bond that had been forged: ‘Nothing

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20 Charles Trevelyan to JRM, 14 September 1914.
21 E.M. Morel to JRM, 9 September 1914.
22 See the annotation in MacDonald’s hand on Trevelyan to JRM, 7 August 1914.
23 The collection contains press cuttings, leaflets, details of prosecutions under DORA; material on assaults on UDC speakers in July 1915, some UDC executive minutes; also material on police seizure of material from Labour Leader offices in Manchester.
24 Trevelyan to Sir John Simon (copy), 22 August 1915; there is also similar correspondence between Trevelyan and Walter Runciman.
could shake our feeling which grew during the war years that there is no one except you who is big enough to give Europe the necessary lead.\textsuperscript{25}

The collection contains relatively little material for the immediate post-war decade but nevertheless there are significant insights into the pattern of Labour politics in the twenties. There are a number of important items on the crisis in the coal industry that had as its centrepiece the 1926 General Strike and the seven months’ mining lock-out. MacDonald was involved as a would-be peacemaker and this role is reflected in a number of printed documents and notes taken during negotiations. His general political perspective made him unsympathetic to the style of the left wing within the Miners’ Federation, especially to the image, if not always the actual position, of the Miners’ Secretary, Arthur Cook.

This comes across in an exchange from the Summer of 1925. On 31 July the Baldwin Government reacted to the danger of sympathetic trade union action to protect miners’ wages by offering a nine months’ subsidy to the coal industry. The Labour Movement celebrated ‘Red Friday’ and the clash was postponed. MacDonald’s verdict was more ambiguous. Speaking at an ILP Summer School he claimed that the Government’s retreat ‘has handed over the appearance of victory to the very forces that sane, well-considered, well examined Socialism feels to be probably its greatest enemy.’\textsuperscript{26} The response from Cook was initially a brief telegram asking for clarification of MacDonald’s statement.\textsuperscript{27} There followed a letter that demonstrated the gulf between Labour’s parliamentary leader and a key trade union figure:

\begin{quote}
I think it is abominable that the leader of the Labour Party should attack trade union representatives who did nothing more than protect their members. The statement you have made reflects your point of view about the industrial movement and in my opinion is an insult to the Miners’ Executive and to the General Council of the TUC.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

MacDonald’s response avoided a thorough conflict: ‘it is only to abuse the English language and the accurate use of it to put upon my words the meaning which you say you see in them.’\textsuperscript{29}

The collection also contains two important letters written by miners’ leaders during the 1926 dispute and highlighting their reservations about the miners’ strategy. These pieces offer rare insights into divergent opinions within the Miners’ Federation. One came from Will Straker, the Northumberland miners’ leader; he felt free to unburden himself to MacDonald:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{25}Trevelyan to JRM, 6 January 1924.
\textsuperscript{26}Cited in Marquand, \textit{Ramsay MacDonald}, 424.
\textsuperscript{27}‘Is report of your speech in Times today correct. Kindly reply. Cook.’ Telegram, 4 August 1925.
\textsuperscript{28}A.J. Cook to JRM, 5 August 1925.
\textsuperscript{29}JRM to Cook, 6 August 1925.
\end{quote}
For some years I have been very dissatisfied with the leadership of the Miners' Federation, it is so different from what it used to be . . . and unworthy of a great Association. In its hands the Federation has gone back and back until among trade unions it occupies a very third rate place in all except members. The inefficiency in leadership has resulted in the present deplorable position in the mining industry.

Straker also demonstrated an understanding of MacDonald's attitude towards reasoned opposition and the proper use of Parliament — ' . . . you have my greatest sympathy and warmest admiration in the struggle to keep an unruly lot in order. Their actions in the House, it seems to me, leads [sic] to trouble and discredits [sic] Labour's cause. Moreover such conduct is an admission of inability to do anything else but make a noise.'

A second letter comes from Peter Lee of the Durham Miners' Association. This enclosed a draft written for the press but never sent. Its date of composition was soon after the collapse of the General Strike and indicated disquiet about the prospect of a long and isolated struggle: 'this policy of drift cannot help us out of this great danger and trouble.' He suggested that all parties to the dispute had made mistakes. The miners and their allies had indulged in easy sloganizing:

the miners adopted Mr Cook's slogan of 'not a cent off the pay, not a second on the day', and the Trades Union Congress at Scarborough in September last year took up the note, 'if Labour stands firm the Government must give way'. So all parties went on, each working on their lines until May, when the great trouble developed into a General Strike.

Lee saw the resulting immobility as disastrous: 'the three parties, Government, coalowners and miners stand each at a point of the angular wall each has helped to build . . .'. On the miners' side there was a need to acknowledge a settlement 'may need a reduction in some of our wages.'

The disastrous outcome of the 1926 dispute for the miners left its legacy for the second Labour Government. The correspondence contains two letters from the old ILPer Ben Turner, during his time as the Minister responsible for Mines in the second Labour Government. Turner, as TUC Chairman in 1927–28, had played a part in developing a dialogue with significant industrialists — the Mond–Turner talks. These were intended to usher in a new industrial spirit and were criticized vigorously by Arthur Cook. Soon after Turner became responsible for the coal industry, he suggested a similar approach:

. . . it is desirable that a New atmosphere should be created so that the two sides may face the question of wage agreements in a more helpful mood than occurred in 1926.

30 Will Straker to JRM, 5 July 1926.
31 The covering letter is from Peter Lee to JRM, 11 June 1926; the enclosure from which all the quotations are taken is marked 'Private and Confidential' and dated 22 May 1926.
This ‘New Atmosphere’ can be engendered best – as you suggested – if we get the two parties arguing in one room together and if the dogmatic spirit is less displayed by the chief parties in the coalfield.

The 1926 defeat had left a legacy of breakaway trade unionism in the Nottinghamshire coalfield – a remarkable anticipation of events almost sixty years later. Turner’s view was that the division could be attributed in large part to Cook’s tactics: ‘Cookism has made it very difficult to overcome the Notts trouble . . . Cook scared them so much that it takes some rubbing out.’

If one consequence of 1926 was demoralization, other miners shifted to the left and joined the Communist Party. From 1928 that Party moved into its ‘Class Against Class’ phase, separating itself from other organizations, attacking them as reformist, and anticipating a mass radicalization as capitalism deteriorated. The Durham coalfield remained generally unresponsive to such radicalism, despite its bleak situation, but in the Spring of 1929 a lock-out at the Dawdon Colliery attracted Communist support. During 1928 MacDonald had decided to change his parliamentary seat. In May 1929 he was returned as the Member for Seaham, the constituency that included Dawdon Colliery. The conjuncture helped to produce three significant items within the collection.

The dispute left some Communist presence at Dawdon Colliery, sufficient at least to produce a pit paper. In March 1930, a correspondent wrote to MacDonald enclosing a copy. This of itself makes the item significant. Examples of Communist Party pit papers are very rare. This is one folded sheet entitled The Lamp, No. 8, 15 March and published by Dawdon Communist Pit Group. Its contents cover local pit questions, an attack on the Labour Government’s coal policy and a discussion of religion inside the Soviet Union. Yet the identity of the correspondent was particularly striking. The paper was supplied by Charles, Seventh Marquis of Londonderry, previously a Conservative Minister, and the owner of Dawdon. He characterized it as ‘a ridiculous production’ and suggested that on this at least there could be a degree of consensus: ‘I do feel that in opposition to Communism and everything else that this newspaper stands for, the Dawdon Lodge, yourself and myself, must be at one.’ His suggested remedy could be read as in one sense a harbinger for the National Government:

I am wondering if there is any possibility of our working together publicly as well as we seem to be able to work together privately, because I feel very strongly that as time goes on, if the management and the executive of the Dawdon Lodge are continually at loggerheads, that we shall entrench the Communists in a far stronger position than they are in at the present moment.

32 Ben Turner to JRM, 9 August 1929.
33 Lord Londonderry to JRM, 19 March 1930.
Earlier, Londonderry had written to MacDonald in terms which suggested that, while his distaste for Communist miners was particularly strong, it was supplemented by a more general contempt: ‘My family have done every single thing we have been able to do, but this class propaganda has beaten us. . . . The miners have been demoralised by politics ever since 1908 . . . [they were] a class of men who as a whole have lost all self-respect and do not mind exploiting the rest of the community.’

The traumas of 1931 also cast their shadows in some 1928 correspondence between MacDonald and Ernest Bevin of the Transport Workers. Bevin was very much a rising and somewhat unpredictable trade union leader. Naturally combative and suspicious he had quarrelled with MacDonald at the 1925 Labour Party Conference; in the aftermath of 1926, he began to question some aspects of Labour’s received economic wisdom. Philip Snowden, the Party’s financial expert, was a Free Trader of a devout and inflexible kind. Within the Party, his judgement was typically accepted but by 1928 Bevin, with steelworkers amongst his membership, was arguing the justification for an inquiry into safeguarding for steel. He was critical of Snowden and concerned not to damage the Party, but he insisted that economic conditions demanded some initiative. His argument contained a comparison that illuminated a tension within the trade union movement:

We feel that whilst so much is talked about mines and the field is being held by all the different conflicts in the mining industry, there has been a tendency to overlook the quiet, patient, loyal men in trades like steel, and because they do not threaten to disrupt and to take extreme steps, they do not receive the same consideration.

The miners might seek to mobilize solidaristic emotions but recession engendered sectionalism. Alongside Bevin’s anxiety for his members, there was articulated a deep concern for the unity of the Labour Movement. His explanation of his reluctance to communicate his views on safeguarding through the press was simple: ‘it would have been an act of disloyalty.’

MacDonald during the twenties had perhaps hardened in his own views towards the Left. This came out in his growing alienation from the ILP, as that organization came increasingly under the control of the Clydeside Left, particularly James Maxton and John Wheatley. Their rise meant the decline within the ILP of Clifford Allen, a pacifist whose wartime imprisonment had effectively broken his health. In the early twenties Allen was ILP Chairman, he personified the heroic

34 Londonderry to JRM, 22 July 1929. The reference to 1908 presumably refers to the Miners’ Federation decision to affiliate to the Labour Party.
35 Both quotations are from Ernest Bevin to JRM, 27 June 1928.
wartime age of the ILP; his network of friendships amongst middle-class sympathizers brought money to the ILP. Its paper renamed the *New Leader* became, under Brailsford’s editorship, a high point in Left journalism; the ILP established Study Groups to develop a coherent range of policies for the wider labour movement. Then in October 1925, despairing of his Left critics, Alien resigned the ILP Chairmanship. Allen’s political record and style placed him close to MacDonald; in 1931 he supported the formation of the National Government. Six years before, a report by him on the problems of the *Daily Herald* demonstrated some of the sentiments that would lead him out of the Labour Party: ‘It was and still is a semi-minority movement conspiracy, largely out of touch with the average opinion of the Labour Movement. It appeals far too much to a clique of disgruntled minority people. It fails to inspire because it is ungenerous and un-British.’

MacDonald unburdened himself to Alien about his assessment of the ILP in the wake of the latter’s resignation from the Chairmanship: ‘Somehow or other there has grown up inside the ILP especially amongst those who are in most prominent positions, a petty small-mindedness on personal matters and a cheap melodramatic appetite in propaganda.’ His response centred around a fundamental issue in the Labour politics of the twenties – the establishment of a clear role for the ILP. Prior to 1918, the Party had provided the principal channel by which individual Socialists could join the Labour Party. Then the reform of the Labour Party Constitution had removed this function by introducing individual membership at the level of the wider Labour Party. Under Alien’s Chairmanship the ILP moved towards an alternative role as a Socialist think-tank; with Alien’s resignation the ILP became increasingly a dissenting left-wing faction. MacDonald raised the question: ‘Has the Party work to do?’ His answer suggested a negative characterization of much trade union activity that had always been a motif in his thought and which became decisive in 1931: ‘All my desires are to save the Party because I feel how useful it can be and I am not at all certain that the Trade Union antagonism to capitalism may not deteriorate into an opposition which will mean social suicide.’ The ILP could preach the alternative – ‘the positive doctrines of Socialism’ – but MacDonald felt that the current leadership was entirely inappropriate: ‘if it is only going to run on the Wheatley and Maxton line of pose and drama, thinking of effect and

36 Memorandum by Clifford Alien on need to reform the *Daily Herald*, contained in a folder of material on the newspaper.
37 JRM to Alien (carbon), 27 November 1925.
not of truth, of heroism and not of wisdom, it has no useful purpose to serve.  

Although the Labour politics of the twenties posed problems for MacDonald's leadership and some aspects anticipated the split of 1931, the strength of his position in 1929 comes over in the collection. Harold Laski, Professor of Government at the London School of Economics and prominent Labour Party activist, became bitterly dismissive of MacDonald's actions in 1931. But his earlier attitude was very different. The collection contains letters from Laski to MacDonal indicating a sympathy that tilted into sycophancy. Thus late in 1929:

I have just written a short book on freedom which (please between ourselves) [sic] to dedicate to you and Arthur Henderson as the two people in the movement for whom I care most . . . I think, if I may say so, that you are doing wonderfully. Of course one has doubts about minutiae, but the big thing is big. We feel proud.

And it was not just over a Professor of Government that MacDonald continued to cast a spell. Throughout the troubles of the second Labour Government, he retained the support of most Labour MPs. Thus Scott-Lindsay, the Secretary to the Parliamentary Labour Party, suggested that MPs would benefit from a Prime Ministerial rallying call: 'It is not expected or desired that you should make any confidential statements and run the risk of publicity, but the nice little rousing speech you can make so well would have a good effect on the Party.'

The collection is at its most detailed for the period of the second Labour Government. Much of the material covers peripheral topics - the minutiae of any prime-ministerial career. There is also documentation on some areas of policy which, although important, are not central to the administration's economic difficulties. Thus there is material on Palestine, including letters from the responsible Minister, Lord Passfield formerly Sidney Webb, and also some coverage of Indian affairs.

Within the economic field, there is evidence of MacDonald's early perplexity over the problem of unemployment. As early as August 1929, in response to a letter on Tyneside conditions, he noted: 'Thomas and his colleagues have been working literally twenty-four hours a day, and we have all been doing our best to stimulate industry generally, and yet there is practically nothing up to now to show for it. Results are slow in coming.'

38 All quotations from JRM to Alien (carbon), 3 November 1925.
39 Harold Laski to JRM, 1 December 1929. The most substantial letter from Laski is dated 19 May 1930 and describes a meeting with Dr Weizmann. Laski characterizes the latter as 'a man in despair' over the Government's Palestine policy.
40 Scott-Lindsay to JRM, 11 November 1930.
41 JRM to J.H. Palin (carbon), 14 August 1929.
existing unemployment figures was submerged beneath a greater tragedy as the level of unemployment rose inexorably throughout 1930. MacDonald’s response to the problem of provision for the unemployed brought out an austere side of his social views: ‘We shall now have to face a very severe winter. The mere voting of public money and the administration of charity gets more and more repulsive to me. It is degrading everyone and God knows what is going to happen.’\textsuperscript{42} Such sentiments were reinforced by those of orthodox economic opinion. A correspondent from within the Diplomatic Service presented the ‘common sense’ view:

\ldots it seems obvious that until something is done to reduce the cost of production – which I suppose means reduction of the standard of living all round – we can hardly hope to see material improvement \ldots the system of the dole is getting us into dangerous water and building up a body of professional unemployed of such numbers that they may even paralyse the Government of the country.\textsuperscript{43}

Such sentiments could perhaps find a receptive listener in MacDonald.

The Government’s first internal crisis over unemployment came in May 1930. Thomas was a disaster as Lord Privy Seal with a brief to reduce unemployment. His team of three junior Ministers became restive at the failure to produce a worthwhile programme. One of them was a relatively recent recruit to the Labour Party, Sir Oswald Mosley. His proposals for a more energetic and interventionist policy – the Mosley Memorandum – produced resentment from Thomas and thorough opposition from Snowden. Following their rejection by the Cabinet, Mosley resigned from the Government. Despite an appeal to a Parliamentary Party meeting he obtained little support from Labour MPs. He was seen in some quarters as a more radical successor to MacDonald but early in 1931 he quit Labour to form first the New Party and then the British Union of Fascists.

The reasons for Mosley’s failure within the Labour Party are complex – suspicion at an outsider, and Mosley’s insensitivity toward and impatience with Labour’s dominant sentiments were both relevant. The collection gives some insight into the manner in which Mosley’s resignation was managed within the Party. The relevant items are letters exchanged between MacDonald and George Lansbury. The latter, along with Tom Johnston and Mosley, had made up the trio who had suffered Thomas’ shortcomings. Lansbury had a long record of service to the Labour Movement: a well-merited reputation as an ethical socialist and a less justified reputation as a radical. MacDonald wrote to Lansbury, making an implicit comparison between Mosley and his two colleagues and appealing to Lansbury’s

\textsuperscript{42} JRM to Revd Morgan Jones (carbon), 18 November 1929.

\textsuperscript{43} Sir Miles Lampson to JRM, 6 September 1930.
sense of solidarity: 'I must say how very obliged I, and I am sure, all my colleagues are to you for the line you have taken in the Mosley affair. I think it is a most deplorable piece of bad judgement and of narrow views. It is not Mosley himself we have now to deal with but a very serious situation, not only for the Government but for the whole Party. 44 Lansbury's response was very much in the same vein: 'I hope that good will come out of apparent evil and that the movement we all love so much will speedily recover from its present discontents.' 45

Similar demonstrations of loyalty marked the resignation from the Cabinet of Sir Charles Trevelyan in February 1931. This episode is well covered in the collection and provides a significant addition to material available elsewhere. 46 Trevelyan resumed, in 1929, the post that he had held five years earlier at the Board of Education. By now he was sceptical about MacDonald as a leader and was particularly concerned about his lack of decisiveness. Trevelyan had the onerous task of preparing and promoting a bill to raise the school-leaving age. He met serious obstacles - the indifference of MacDonald, the hostility of Snowden to the financial implications and, more publicly, the denominational passions that the education issue inevitably provoked. The dependence of several Labour Members on Catholic electoral support proved to be a particularly difficult element in the bill's bleak prospects. Early in 1931, a hostile Labour amendment effectively damaged the bill in the Commons: the remains were destroyed in the Lords.

Trevelyan then resigned from the Government. His letter of resignation is in the collection: 'I felt it right to remain in the Government as long as there was any chance of carrying the great reform which the Party wanted. But under the present circumstances I do not feel that I can usefully remain your Minister of Education.' He then widened his grounds for resignation beyond the immediate issue: 'For some time I have realised that I am very much out of sympathy with the general method of Government policy. In the present disastrous condition of trade it seems to me that the crisis requires big socialist measures as the only hope rather than painful and ineffective economies.' Trevelyan acknowledged that the Government's minority position would mean that such a strategy would reduce the Government's life. His justification was that the most useful task the Government could carry through was propagandist: '... we ought to be occupied in demonstrating to the country the alternative to economy and protection. Our value as a government today should be to make people realise that Socialism is that alternative.' 47

44 JRM to George Lansbury (carbon), 21 May 1930.
45 Lansbury to JRM, 21 May 1930.
46 For an account of Trevelyan's ministerial activities and resignation, 1929-31, see A.J.A. Morris, C.P. Trevelyan, 1870-1958: Portrait of a Radical (Belfast, 1977), Ch. 9.
47 Trevelyan to JRM, 19 February 1931.
MacDonald’s initial – perhaps characteristic – response was to try and avoid a breach but Trevelyan soon insisted on a rapid decision: ‘I cannot now be responsible for decisions of policy and I do not propose to attend Cabinet meetings . . . ’ Moreover, he wished to make a statement at a Party meeting: his motivation was in part, he claimed, to distinguish his position from that of Mosley. In no sense did he wish ‘to justify or imitate the breakaway tactics which Mosley appears to be initiating. I differ with you on strategy. And while I can no longer serve as a Brigadier, I have no expectation of being other than a private soldier in the same ranks for the rest of my life.’

The collection then has copies of two separate letters from MacDonald to Trevelyan. One is a very formal acknowledgement thanking him for his services to both Labour Governments. The second marked ‘Private and Confidential’ is extremely critical. It notes that Trevelyan’s letter of resignation was ‘really an attack upon the Government itself’, and focuses on a perpetual dilemma for any resigning Minister: ‘It is a great pity that you should have sat with us, so long, almost a silent Member and never revealed your doubts nor exchanged your views with the Cabinet or with me privately.’ MacDonald’s attack extends to the character of Trevelyan’s criticism and indicates the extent to which, for the former, Socialist politics had become almost irrelevant: ‘You know perfectly well that to talk about the carrying out of Socialism and the lack of Socialistic effort and so on is mere words and is just the vague and adjectival confession of your failure to produce something of any value.’ Curiously, given the circumstances of their past association, MacDonald focused on Trevelyan’s recent entry to the Party: ‘it is very curious that our greatest troubles are coming from those who were the latest converts, whose study of Socialism is the least thorough and whose knowledge of the Movement is the least intimate.’ The contents of this second letter suggest a Prime Minister under increasing pressure. Yet when Trevelyan addressed Labour MPs his remarks were received in unfriendly silence.

The actual events that produced the downfall of the 1929 Government receive practically no attention in the collection. But late in June 1931, with funds leaving the City of London, MacDonald wrote to Stephenson of the Daily Herald:

. . . This country is now facing one of the most terrible problems it has had to meet, and it is all mixed up with economy, which means balancing of the Budget and confidence reposed abroad in the City. I do hope you will keep these things in mind

48 JRM to Trevelyan (copy), 20 February 1931.
49 Trevelyan to JRM, 23 February 1931.
50 JRM to Trevelyan, ink copy and carbon, both dated 28 February 1931.
51 Ink copy dated 28 February 1931, carbon copy 2 March 1931 – both JRM to Trevelyan. The earlier draft has material excluded from the carbon suggesting that Trevelyan was unpopular amongst some Labour MPs and had been defended by MacDonald.
when you scrutinise anything for publication in the Herald during the next fortnight or three weeks, because everything you say during that time will be seized upon by the people who wish to increase our embarrassment not only as a Government, but as a Nation, and will use them with deadly effect.⁵²

Quite what ‘embarrassment’ and ‘effect’ MacDonald could hardly have anticipated.

One significant political relationship that was central for MacDonald for several years was that with Arthur Henderson, the Party’s organization man and Foreign Secretary in the 1929 Government. It was not an easy relationship; both men could be prickly and MacDonald could seem unappreciative of the solid organizational work done by the less spectacular Henderson. Ultimately the severing of the relationship was a key facet of the 1931 split. The collection contains a very few letters from Henderson to MacDonald including a significant one previously cited without any reference by Henderson’s first biographer, Mary Hamilton.⁵³

Henderson, speaking at the League of Nations in September 1929, welcomed the Convention for Financial Assistance to States in Danger of Aggression. He accepted the Foreign Office view that the proposal would involve no significant additional commitments for Britain. A section of the British press ‘discovered’ the Convention and criticized it as imposing an inappropriate burden. MacDonald wrote to Henderson suggesting there was concern in the Cabinet and indicating that one consideration must be to allow for the opposition that a hostile press could engender: ‘The press atmosphere is changing and we shall have to go a little cautiously or we shall unsettle opinion. We have done a tremendous lot of work and our public will have to be left to assimilate it now.’⁵⁴

Henderson’s reply was robust; he attacked Cabinet leaks, and the apparent pliability of the Government: ‘Surely we shall stultify our whole attitude if when on being confronted with the first issue which gives us an opportunity of giving some effect to our policy we turn back because a few hostile and ill-informed critics elect to make a fuss.’ But alongside the question of commitment to a declared policy, Henderson also suggested a personal tension: ‘I write strongly because as the result of my experience in 1924 and now as evinced in the Cabinet Minute, your letter and the telephone message from Number 10 there is not that confidence which when working in the international sphere one is entitled to expect.’⁵⁵ The causes of the 1931

⁵² JRM to Stephenson (carbon), 30 July 1931 marked ‘VERY PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL’.
⁵³ See Mary Agnes Hamilton, *Arthur Henderson* (London, 1938), 327–8. It seems unlikely that Mrs Hamilton had access to any of MacDonald’s papers: presumably she used a copy retained by Henderson.
⁵⁴ JRM to Arthur Henderson (copy), 10 September 1929.
⁵⁵ Henderson to JRM, 12 September 1929.
tragedy were many; the lack of sympathy between two leading Labour figures was perhaps both one contribution and also a reflection of the divergences in styles and priorities that helped to promote the rift.

The collection contains some worthwhile material on MacDonald's final period — the sad years of decline after the split of 1931. At the head of a predominantly Conservative National Government, MacDonald was reviled by his former Labour colleagues, most of whom had endorsed his policies until the crisis of August 1931. Amongst his new colleagues, he was a leader whose political value depreciated as his own capacities diminished and the distinctive circumstances that had produced the National Government were succeeded by an uneven economic recovery. MacDonald's political and personal isolation was perhaps compensated to some degree by his friendship with Lady Londonderry. Her husband, the Durham coalowner, held office in the National Government as Minister for Air; she held lavish receptions for notable political and cultural figures. MacDonald's friendship with her had begun before the 1931 split but became much closer following the creation of the National Government. To his detractors, it was damning evidence of MacDonald's betrayal of the Left. Hitherto Lady Londonderry's surviving letters to MacDonald have been thought to be few; this collection adds a further nineteen plus two telegrams. The material provides an insight into the self-consciously romantic world which they created. Lady Londonderry is always 'Circe' or 'C': MacDonald is 'Hamish', the Gaelic for 'James'.

There is also much material of a specifically political character. There is further correspondence from Lord Londonderry including a comment on the resignation of the Free Traders from the Cabinet in September 1932 — a significant erosion of any claim that the Government might make to be more than a largely Conservative administration: 'I am sorry at the development but I presume it was a foregone conclusion and there was nothing to be done. There are some advantages in losing Samuel, but I wish Snowden could have seen his way to remain.' The deterioration in the international situation is also well reflected in the collection. There is a diary kept by MacDonald during the abortive World Economic Conference held in London in June and July 1933. There are several Cabinet Papers from the later years of the National Government including documents on the Abyssinian crisis and the Anglo-German naval discussions. There are two letters from Sir Samuel Hoare, the Foreign Secretary, written

56 For a discussion see Marquand, Ramsay MacDonald, 687–92.
57 The letters are mostly dated only by day and month but generally belong to the early years of the National Government.
58 Lord Londonderry to JRM, 28 September 1932. Samuel was Liberal Member for Darwen and sat in the Cabinet as Home Secretary. Snowden had become a Viscount in 1931 and had been Privy Seal.
in August 1935 and commenting on the developing Abyssinian problem. A reference to Pierre Laval foreshadows the crisis that ended Hoare's short period at the Foreign Office.

MacDonald was by then no longer Prime Minister. He had given way to Stanley Baldwin in June 1935, in an exchange of offices whereby MacDonald became Lord President of the Council. The correspondence includes a letter written by MacDonald to Baldwin in August 1935 with the annotation 'Overlooked and not sent when Italian business became absorbing.' It offered an analysis of the factors seen by MacDonald as relevant for the timing of a General Election. On one of the most controversial issues of the thirties, unemployment benefit and the Means Test, MacDonald made two judgements. One highlighted the austere sentiments that had affected his actions during the 1929 Government: 'There are far too many people about now who are just out for a quiet living on income provided by the State, and one of these days some Government will have to put its foot down. If it does so reasonably and with energy, it will be supported . . .' His second emphasis accepted the need for a Means Test but expressed dismay at the method employed: 'To ask young men and women with the whole of their future before them, to surrender, if they stay at home, practically every penny that could be called savings is something we really cannot justify.' Inevitably a significant part of MacDonald's assessment concerned the electoral impact of the international situation. He was sceptical about the readiness with which the electorate would accept an expansion of armaments. On policy towards Italy, MacDonald sensed a political backlash against any firm British policy: 'I find a curious state of mind regarding this. If the Italian press had handled our public opinion more discreetly, I am sure there would have been already a big reaction against our pursuing Italy as though we were the leading Counsel against it . . .'60

MacDonald's advice was to delay an election: perhaps it was a response to the developing pressures within the Conservative Party for a dissolution. The demands for an early appeal to the country produced a successful outcome for the National Government in the General Election of November 1935. But for MacDonald, the contest was a disaster with his defeat at Seaham by a majority of over 20,000. His political career was effectively finished. He was returned as a Member for the Scottish Universities in February 1936 and continued as Lord President, an isolated and almost irrelevant figure until his death in November 1937.

This last eighteen months leaves one poignant memorial within the collection. Jimmy Thomas, the railwaymen's leader, probably had been as close as anyone to MacDonald pre-1931. He had gone along

59 Sir Samuel Hoare to JRM, 11 and 28 August 1935.
60 JRM to Stanley Baldwin - not sent, dated 12 August 1935.
with Snowden in the National Government and unlike Snowden he had remained there first as Secretary for the Dominions and later at the Colonial Office. He was MacDonald's last link with his Labour past. His bonhomie had always contrasted with MacDonald's intensely private style: Thomas's gregariousness had included friendships in the City that had earned him a reputation as a speculator on the Stock Exchange. In May 1936, a tribunal reported that Thomas had leaked budget proposals to a Tory MP and to a business associate. Thomas resigned from the Government and from the House of Commons. The papers contain the draft of a letter from MacDonald to Thomas, painful in its pessimism: ' . . . our Parliamentary partnership is drawing to a close. That leaves a dreary prospect for me and I feel much inclined to end my active official life . . . the old order will have passed never to return. I shall have no compensating thoughts. It will be all loss – all terrible.'

It was the final tragic note in a complex, sometimes ambiguous but, above all, creative political career. There will be continuing controversy over MacDonald's significance, his choices, and the character of his achievements. The John Rylands University Library collection can make a contribution to an informed debate that is both scholarly and evaluative.

61 JRM to Jimmy Thomas (draft), 9 June 1936.