In April 2000, the European Social Science History conference in Amsterdam held a panel on new perspectives on the historical significance of Red Clyde. In the manner typical of such events, a North American academic was asked to summarise the discussion and suggest ways forward. He admitted to being largely ignorant of the events and personalities involved in the militancy on the Clyde between 1915 and 1919 and asked provocatively why, in any case, should anyone outside of Scotland actually give a damn? This is a question worth trying to answer if ‘Scottish labour history’ is going to be anything more than a tartan footnote in the annals of revolutionary Europe.

For socialists in Scotland, the turbulent period of the Red Clyde represents a heady brew of industrial unrest, social movements and mass socialist politics. The panel, which included some of the principal contributors to the Roots of Red Clydeside, insisted that the Red Clyde remains an important point of reference in the revolutionary map of Europe. They pointed rightly to the recognition afforded to the Scottish Marxist, John Maclean, by the Bolsheviks and the detailed accounts of the Red Clyde produced in Trotsky’s Paris-based paper Nashe Slovo. If the Red Clyde appeared to be caught-up in what Maclean had called the ‘rapids of revolution’ during the pre-war unrest, then the city of Glasgow was for a moment an epicentre of the insurgent current.¹ Yet, by the early 1920s, when Maclean famously demanded that: ‘We can make Glasgow a Petrograd, a revolutionary storm-centre second to none’, Glasgow had largely turned from industrial militancy to parliamentary politics.² In the 1922 election, the Glaswegian working class turned out in their tens of thousands to send off ten newly-elected left-wing Labour MPs, the fabled ‘Clydesiders’. Some, like John Wheatley, were radicalised by the experience: ‘When I saw in the square in front of the station jammed tight with over a hundred thousand citizens madly enthusiastic, not for the MPs themselves but the socialism for which they stood, it proved to me beyond doubt that the people were ready to respond to a bold Socialist lead’.³ The Clydesiders initially disrupted polite debate in the corridors of Westminster, most

¹ Maclean 1911, p. 62.
² Maclean 1920, p. 220.
³ John Wheatley, quoted in Paton 1936, p. 150.
notoriously when Jimmy Maxton was suspended from Parliament for condemning as ‘murderers’ the Tories who supported cuts in child welfare. Unfortunately, John Maclean, politically isolated from the recently formed Communist Party and his health broken by repeated periods of imprisonment, scorned the ‘Commons melodrama of Maxton & Co’ as a ‘desperate’ stunt designed to stem the appeal of Maclean’s own call for a Scottish Workers’ Republic.

I ideological struggle continues over the legacy of the Red Clyde. A native sense of Scottish distinctiveness is mixed into this potent stuff by various sections of the Scottish Left, extending from tiny groups of Scottish republicans to as far in the other direction as the current Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown. Compare Brown’s account of Maxton’s pacific road to socialism to Maxton’s own (albeit highly inconsistent) view: ‘[Maxton] never supported those socialists who refuse to make any compromise with the electorate. Mass uprisings, violence, bloodshed or even syndicalism held no attractions for him... there was no alternative but to pass peacefully towards a socialist society’. Yet Maxton soberly defended the October revolution and the historical need for revolutionary force:

Can humanity progress to higher social forms without collapse of existing forms, entailing widespread suffering. Can man by force of intelligence go forward to better things, or must he proceed by way of struggle, violence and brute force? History is on the side of Lenin’s view. At every big change in social structure there has been an open clash of opposing forces.

Notwithstanding Brown’s wilful distortions, from such sources spring the chauvinist myth that Scots, or at least Glaswegians, are ‘naturally’ more socialist than other parts of Britain. To give only one example: ‘Of all British cities, Glasgow is that most associated with socialism... Socialism in Glasgow in the first two or three decades of the twentieth century was extraordinary in scope and unequalled in Britain’. The problem here is that labour historians in Scotland rarely lift their heads to look at other parts of Britain. For example, the Sheffield shop stewards’ movement arguably stands comparison with Glasgow in this period. Although they may have lacked the Marxist influence of a John Maclean, Sheffield engineering workers were far less divided by craft, employer or residence than in Glasgow and in J.T. Murphy they

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5 Maclean 1923, p. 252.
9 See Smith 1984 for a rare comparison of labour traditions in Glasgow and Liverpool.