

# ARCHIVES OF THE WORKING CLASS MOVEMENT. A NATIONAL COLLECTION IN MANCHESTER

Stephen Bird

A Swiss social historian recently remarked to me on his first visit to Manchester on the importance of the city not only to the British labour movement but to the labour movement throughout the world. It is an obvious point, but always worth remembering. The TUC was founded in the Mechanics' Institute. The Co-operative movement was founded down the road in Rochdale. The second Labour Party conference was held here. It is therefore appropriate that the National Museum of Labour History is located in the city. It is therefore equally appropriate that an archive centre should be established in the museum dedicated to the purpose of collecting national records of the Labour Movement. This centre is the only archive that specialises in labour history. Its purposes are twofold. First, it aims to collect national collections of organisations and people connected with working-class causes, political, industrial and social. Second, it acts as a focal point for information about labour history collections in other archives; in such a capacity it will build up a microfilm collection.

The largest collection in the archive centre are the records of the Labour Party. These arrived in March 1990. They are a substantial collection, going right back to literally the first day of the Party's predecessor, the Labour Representation Committee, February 27th 1900. The records are continuous going up to the early 1980s. These include a complete set of minutes of the National Executive Committee. There will be annual deposits from the Labour Party Headquarters in Walworth Road of committee minutes up to fifteen-years-old. There are also collections of Party correspondence and memoranda from the Party's earliest days. In addition the Party has collected a number of private collections, by donations and purchase.



Jim Middleton (1878-1962).

It was fortunate that the Labour Party's first employee, Jim Middleton (1878-1962) was a conscientious preservator and collector. Middleton was the assistant to the Party's first General Secretary Ramsay Macdonald and his successor Arthur Henderson. In 1935 he was deservedly, if somewhat belatedly, given the secretaryship of the Party, a post he had *de facto* held for twenty years. He remained secretary for another nine years, after which in his retirement he became agent to his wife Lucy, who was MP for Plymouth Sutton from 1945 to 1951. Because of his orderly sense of maintaining office records the archives survived four moves up to the move from Eccleston Square to Transport House in 1926. (When the headquarters changed to Walworth Road in 1980, I was the Party's archivist and was able to ensure that not only were eighty years of records kept for posterity but further papers hidden in various corners of Transport House were not thrown away).

Jim Middleton's legacy, therefore are the Labour Party archives up to 1945, of which two collections need particular mention. These are the correspondence of the Labour

Representation Committee (1900-06)<sup>1</sup>, combined with the Labour Party General Correspondence (1906-07)<sup>2</sup> and the War Emergency Workers National Committee (1914-20)<sup>3</sup>, of which Middleton was secretary.

The LRC and LPGC collections are invaluable as they contain a complete and unabridged archival history of the formation of the Labour Party. Every letter to Ramsay Macdonald or Middleton with its typed reply is there. We can see for example from the receipt of its fees that the Manchester and Salford Trades Council affiliated to the LRC on June 25th 1904.<sup>4</sup> There is also the interesting correspondence between the Manchester-based member of the National Executive Committee, John Hodge of the British Steel Smelters Mill and Tinplate Workers Association and Jim Middleton in April 1904.<sup>5</sup> It concerns the possibility of the LRC adopting the Free Trade League's candidate in North-West Manchester, a certain Winston Churchill. Needless to say the NEC came to the conclusion that "Mr. Winston Churchill is a Liberal candidate within the meaning of the LRC Constitution".<sup>6</sup>

After 1907 Middleton began a policy of what today's archivist would term 'records management'. A process of weeding down correspondence files to their bare essentials took place. These are described as the Labour Party subject files and come in three volumes. They date from 1906 and continue up to the end of World War II. Files worth mentioning are those on the Dublin disturbances of 1913,<sup>7</sup> a file of Laski's correspondence,<sup>8</sup> and a questionnaire to Local Labour Parties on Fascist activity in their area in 1934.<sup>9</sup> In addition to these files are those of Middleton himself, which are indistinguishable from the Labour Party Subject Files. An interesting file in this collection is that on Public Health from 1919-45.<sup>10</sup>

The War Emergency Workers'

National Committee is an historically important yet understudied organisation. JM Winter has a chapter on it in his book *Socialism and the Challenge of War*.<sup>11</sup> In my opinion it played a vitally important role in the Labour Party's development. At the outbreak of the First World War, the Labour Party was divided. Macdonald and Keir Hardie were opposed to it. Henderson and Jimmy Clynes supported it and joined the wartime coalition government. However, the moment the war broke out, the War Emergency Workers' National Committee was formed. It included a wide range of members from Sidney Webb of the Fabian Society to HM Hyndman of the British Socialist Party. Its purpose was to be a focal point for the issues raised at grass roots level such as factory conditions, the employment of women and rationing. For example you find correspondence with Isaac Crabtree of the Oldham Trades and Labour Council about food distribution in his area.<sup>12</sup> When the Party was re-united at the end of the war, after Henderson has left the government, it was ready under Webb's constitution to fight the 1918 General Election, when there was a vastly increased franchise, which included women for the first time. By 1922 they were the official opposition in parliament.



Delegates to the Labour and Socialist International in Berne, 1919.

Letter from Manchester and Salford Trades and Labour Council concerning meeting to be addressed by Michael Davitt, 1905.

Middleton was succeeded in 1945 as General Secretary by Morgan Phillips (1902-63). He too had a sense of history and wished during his secretaryship to establish a museum and archive, but he was not as precise in his bureaucracy as Middleton, so his files were not in any particular order or under any consistent headings. I decided to re-file the

complete collection, keeping the names of subjects, when it was necessary to do so. Phillips' most interesting file, therefore on disciplinary procedures and expulsions, called "Lost Sheep" remains the same with a few additions in it.<sup>13</sup> There are altogether 26 boxes of these papers. The cut-off date is 1964. They remain a very useful record of the Labour Party at its most powerful in government and opposition and were used very extensively by Kenneth Morgan in his book on the 1945 Labour government.<sup>14</sup>

In 1918 Macdonald, Arthur Henderson and the Belgian Socialist Emile Vandervelde re-established the Socialist or Second International. Its new name the Labour and Socialist International indicated the new ideology or as some would say its lack of it. Prior to the First World War, it had been a Marxist organisation. The Labour Party which had rejected Marxism at its first conference was allowed to join because in the words of the great Austrian Socialist "...although it did not believe in the class war, it practised it". The papers of the Labour and Socialist International<sup>15</sup> cover its history from 1919 to the 1950s, when the Socialist International, as it was re-named after the Second World War deposited its papers with the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. A labour historian can obtain a unique sense of the issues of international socialism in a turbulent ideological period after the Russian revolution,

MANCHESTER AND SALFORD

**Labour Representation Committee.**

L.R.C. 29/110

All Communications to be addressed to  
the Secretary,  
Councillor J. NUTTALL,  
49, York Street, Salford.

Chairman:  
Councillor J. E. SUTTON.

Treasurer:  
Councillor JAMES JOHNSTON.

49 Lever St  
Salford  
M6

Dec 31/05

Dear Macdonald

I hope you will be able to arrange for Michael Davitt to address two meetings for us on Jan 6<sup>th</sup> as it is not possible to arrange a joint meeting for both our candidates, on account of the two divisions being widely separated.

There is a large Irish vote in both constituencies & unless Mr. Davitt speaks in both, there is a danger of offending the Irish electors in the one of the divisions.

We suggest that the first meeting should commence at 7-30 & the second one at 8-30, which would allow ample time for Mr. Davitt to speak at both meetings, but if he prefers to have one meeting in the afternoon & the other in the evening we will try to arrange.

We realize the danger of our wanting Mr. Davitt but under the exceptional circumstances of our case & the importance of the issue we feel that he will feel in with our views. Please reply at once, so that there can be time for printing and in hand.

Yours sincerely, J. Nuttall



reasons of principle involved. I felt that local archives should have elements of labour history in them. I have also applied this principle to trade union records as well. The records of the Manchester Tinplate Workers have therefore been re-located in the Greater Manchester Record Office. I am at present compiling a register of labour history collections in other archives. This will be part of the Archive Centre being the focal point for information on labour history collections. The museum's membership of the International Association of Labour History Institutions will bring it into a world-wide focus.

Whenever the Labour Party archives are mentioned, tribute must be paid to Irene Wagner, the Labour Party librarian from 1961 to 1981. In 1969, after much discussion, she persuaded the National Executive Committee to open up the archives. She brought in the Historical Manuscripts Commission to sort and list the material and the task was undertaken by Richard Storey and Tom Jaine. (The former is now archivist at the Modern Records Centre at Warwick University and the latter is editor of the *Good Food Guide*.) They were succeeded in 1973 by Judith Woods in 1973 and I succeeded her in 1978.

It was unfortunate that no archivist was employed at the museum prior to its coming to Manchester. There are three useful collections that we inherited from it. The first was the minutes and correspondence of the Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers.<sup>25</sup> This is virtually a

complete collection of a trade union dating from its beginnings in the early 1880s to its amalgamation into the Transport and General Workers in 1972. They are currently being listed by my colleague Andrew Flinn. For students interested in industrial relations, it is a valuable source of information. The other large trade union collection are the papers of the National Society of Operative Printers, Graphical and Media Personnel (NATSOPA). These are not yet ready for research, but we are uncovering some useful material. The third collection worth mentioning are the papers of the Socialist Sunday Schools. These were donated to the museum by a former activist in the schools, Ivy Tribe. They have a long run of the organisation's journal, the *Young Socialist* and notes and correspondence dating from the turn of the century to the early 1970s. As Andrew Flinn and I sort the material, various interesting collections are emerging. There are, for example, various papers on the General Strike and the Spanish Civil War.

A large number of trade union records have already been collected by the Modern Records Centre at Warwick University. They have the records of the TUC, the Transport and General Workers, UCATT, the National Union of Railwaymen, the Engineers, NUPE and ASTMS. It is very fortunate for labour historians that they have been collecting these and other records since 1972, as a lot of them would have been lost in union mergers, changes of headquarters or general disregard for historical

evidence. It is the policy to co-operate with institutions like the Modern Records Centre with similar aims as ourselves.

It is not the policy of the Archive Centre to collect books. When there is such a rich collection of labour history publications in the Working Class Movement Library in Salford, such a policy would be superfluous. We have however inherited a large number of pamphlets going back to the nineteenth century. These have come with collections deposited at the Museum by people such as Walter Southgate, one of the Museum's founders. The Archive Centre has also received some bound volumes from the Labour Party Library. These include runs of *Clarion*, *Labour Leader*, *Justice*, *Commonwealth*, *Tribune* and *New Statesman*.

The Archive Centre has already in its first year received three important collections. These are the papers of Bob Edwards MP, the Chile Solidarity Campaign and Terry Pitt, the Member of the European Parliament and the former head of the Labour Party's Research Department. We shall continue to build upon our existing collections. We are optimistic about our future. Manchester must become the national centre for the study of the history of the British working classes. Researchers and students wishing to use the collections should contact the **National Museum of Labour History, 103 Princess Street, Manchester M1 6DD (Tel: 061 228 7212)**. The Archive Centre is open between 10.00am and 5.00pm, Monday to Friday.

#### NOTES

1. LRC 1-31
2. LPGC 1-22
3. WNC 1-35
4. LRC 15/177
5. LRC 14/150-157
6. NEC Minutes May 12th 1904.
7. LP/DUB/13
8. LP/LAS/38
9. LP/FAS/34
10. JSM/PH
11. JM Winter, *Socialism and the Challenge of War, Ideas and Politics in Britain 1912-18* (1974) Chapter 7
12. WNC/9/2/48-52
13. GS/LS
14. Kenneth Morgan. *Labour in Power* (Oxford, 1984)
15. LSI 1-28
16. WG/
17. ID/CI/1-74
18. VIN/1-6
19. VIN/1/110
20. VIN/6/40
21. PIC/38,42
22. PIC/15
23. WLL/1-161
24. Christine Collette, "For Labour and for Women" Manchester University Press 1989.
25. NMLH/SD