

Jaime Reynolds and Robert Ingham

analyse the career of Archie Macdonald (1904–83), Liberal MP for Roxburgh and Selkirk for just eighteen months, between the 1950 and 1951 elections.



BIOGRAPHY: ARCHIE MACDONALD

Amidst the wreckage of the February 1950 general election, when the Liberal Party made its last effort at revival before the era of Jo Grimond, just three seats were wrested from the other parties: Grimond's Orkney and Shetland; Huddersfield West, where Donald Wade won, thanks to a local pact with the Conservatives; and Roxburgh and Selkirk in the Scottish Borders, where Archie Macdonald defeated the sitting Tory. Macdonald's victory was one of the very rare Liberal gains in three-cornered general election contests with the other two parties during the long years in the electoral wilderness from the end of the 1920s to the mid-1960s.¹

Macdonald's triumph was short-lived. The Conservatives regained the seat at the next general election, in October 1951, and it was to remain in their hands until David Steel's victory in the enlarged Roxburgh, Selkirk and Peebles constituency at a by-election in 1965. Nevertheless Archie Macdonald's victory put him amongst the tiny handful of Liberal MPs during the nadir of the party's fortunes in the

1950s² – though perhaps the least remembered today.

Archibald James Florence Macdonald was born on 2 May 1904 in Uniondale, South Africa. His parents were Dr G. B. D. Macdonald, an eye surgeon originally from Aberdeen, and Beatrice Blanche Meeking. They travelled widely in Africa and Asia studying tropical eye diseases and finding cures for them. After spending a short time in South Africa, the family moved to Australia, where Macdonald was educated at Chatswood Grammar School, Sydney, and the Royal Australian Naval College. He was a highly successful wool buyer in Australia in the mid-1920s, and then in the early 1930s, after his arrival in Britain, he and his brother established their own firm importing decorative woods and tinned fruit and vegetables from Australia. From 1933 he worked for Rowntrees, and it was Seebohm Rowntree (one of the founders of Management Research Groups) who encouraged his successful application for the job of Joint Chief Executive of that association in 1937.

Macdonald volunteered for service on the outbreak of war but

was refused on health grounds: he had had a serious thyroid operation in 1935. In 1940 he became Secretary of the Paint Industry Export Group, a position he held until 1949. He was also Director and Secretary of the Wartime Paint Manufacturers' Association from 1943 to 1945. He was a director of Robert Bowran and Co. Ltd, a paint manufacturing firm, from 1949 to 1953 and then of Joseph Freeman Sons and Co. Ltd (later Cementone) from 1956, serving as vice-chairman from 1962 to 1966.³

He played little role in Liberal politics before the 1945 general election, when he stood as candidate for Roxburgh and Selkirk. Captain George Grey, MP for Berwick-on-Tweed until his death on active service in 1944, had heard Macdonald speak at a paint industry meeting and persuaded him to offer himself as a Liberal candidate. He was suggested as a suitable candidate for Roxburgh and Selkirk on account of his experience in the cloth trade.⁴ Macdonald was interested in public service and of an independent non-partisan frame of mind and this may have attracted him to the Liberals.

BIOGRAPHY: ARCHIE MACDONALD

His background in business and importing/exporting was not untypical for a Liberal activist in the party of the 1940s and 1950s.

The constituency was and remains one of the most prosperous parts of Scotland, with a substantial local agricultural industry based on sheep farming, stock raising and upland farms. It was also one of great textile and clothing areas of Britain, specialising in high-quality tweeds and knitwear in the mills of towns like Galashiels and Hawick. It is also 'a real land of the lairds'. When canvassing Macdonald often encountered the response: 'I'd like to vote for you, but if I did the laird would know and then where would I be?' The valleys abound with the castles and stately homes of noble Scottish families. Also many retired military people lived there.

In the early post-war years, politics in Roxburgh and Selkirk was still notably shaped by traditional aristocratic influence, above all that of the Tory Dukes of Buccleuch, the most powerful of the great landowners in the Borders. The constituency had been held by the Conservatives⁵ from the early 1920s, first by the Earl of Dalkieth and then, on his succession to the title as Eighth Duke of Buccleuch and Queensbury in 1935, by his brother Lord William Scott. Liberalism had, however, always been strong in the constituency.⁶ In 1935 the Liberal candidate had gathered a third of the votes, some 6,000 behind Scott. There was also a significant Labour vote in third place. It was a seat where the traditional political culture had arrested the sharp decline in Liberal support evident elsewhere in the country, but it was hardly a hot prospect for a Liberal win.

Macdonald was adopted as Liberal candidate for Roxburgh and Selkirk in summer 1944, after touring the constituency with Lady Glencoats, a prominent figure in the Scottish Liberals, and addressing meetings in each of the five main towns. However his candidature was

not universally welcomed. An official of the Scottish Liberal Federation reported in July 1944 that 'he is a Right Wing Liberal and disinclined to fight Labour'. A later report was similarly negative.⁷ Shortly afterwards he seems to have explored the possibility of transferring his candidacy to Aberdeen, but nothing came of this.⁸ It is unclear what might have prompted these criticisms, but in any case the energy and commitment that Macdonald put into his campaign in 1945 and the friendships that he built with many local Liberal figures suggest that they were soon forgotten.

The Scottish Liberal hierarchy was also concerned about the dilapidated state of the party organisation in Roxburgh and Selkirk, and in almost every other Scottish constituency. Particularly seen in this context, Macdonald's result in 1945 far exceeded expectations. He held the Liberal vote steady while the Tory vote fell away, reducing Scott's majority to 1,628. The Labour vote jumped from 17 per cent to 29 per cent, but was not enough to push Macdonald into third place.⁹

One of the features of the 1945 general election was that in a few constituencies the Liberals managed to supplant Labour as the beneficiary of the large anti-Conservative swing. Local factors and the quality of candidate and campaign made a difference. In Roxburgh and Selkirk, Macdonald probably shared some of the anti-Tory swing, compensating for any Liberal votes that shifted to Labour. Personal factors may also have played a part. The right-wing Scott was vulnerable to the backlash against the 'Guilty Men' of the Conservative Party, blamed for the failure of the appeasement policy of the 1930s.¹⁰ In his election address Macdonald made much of the broad, classless appeal of the Liberal Party – 'the only party that can unite the great bulk of the people, as it represents all shades of opinion from progressive Conservatives to moderate Labour' – promising at

all times to put country before party and to establish a 'Constituency Council' including representatives of the Labour and Conservative parties. He stressed the importance of profit-sharing in industry, equal pay for women and home rule for Scotland.¹¹ Certainly Macdonald's performance was impressive, not least when contrasted with the defeat of Sir William Beveridge, founder of the welfare state and the incumbent Liberal MP for the neighbouring Berwick-upon-Tweed constituency, who lost by a slightly larger margin than Macdonald.

Doubtless Macdonald benefited also from his connections with the local Craigmyle family. Shortly after the election on 12 September 1945, he married the Honourable Elspeth Ruth Shaw (b. 1921). Her father was the second Lord Craigmyle, a former Liberal MP, and her grandfather, the first Baron Craigmyle, had been a minister under Rosebery, Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith.¹² Her maternal grandfather was the Earl of Inchcape, a mighty shipping magnate, who had served in Lloyd George's government during the First World War. A fierce proponent of free trade and *laissez-faire*, he famously defected to the Conservative Party in 1926.¹³

After the 1945 election Macdonald was active in policy development within the Liberal Party. He chaired a party sub-committee studying co-partnership in industry¹⁴ and was also a member of the Liberal Reconstruction Committee, established after the election to overhaul the party organisation, and the Liberal Party Council.¹⁵

As a result of the 1945 performance and Macdonald's nursing of the constituency, Roxburgh and Selkirk had become one of the Liberals' most winnable seats at the 1950 general election.¹⁶ Macdonald was again selected as candidate to fight Scott. Helped by a much increased turnout (up by 8.5 per cent) and a fall in the Labour vote of 4.7 per cent, Mac-

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Archie Macdonald and family

donald was elected with a majority of 1,156.¹⁷

New Members of Parliament are often advised to wait for weeks or months before making their maiden speeches, in order to soak in the ambience of the House of Commons, and to choose uncontroversial subjects to raise. New Liberal Members in the middle of the twentieth century could not take advantage of this advice. In his maiden speech, in the debate on the King's Speech in March 1950, Macdonald spoke on self-government for Scotland and Wales. The speech was greeted with the usual courtesy, except by Bob Boothby, who fiercely attacked the ideas it contained. Jo Grimond also made his maiden speech on devolution shortly afterwards in support of Macdonald.¹⁸

With his background in business, Macdonald was pressed straight away into action as an economic spokesman for the Liberal Party, calling for economy, deregulation, and on one occasion declaring his belief in 'substantial profits'. However, he was by no means an out-and-out *laissez-faire* free-trader, proposing

in one debate that the United Nations should become the sole buyer of vital raw materials in order to avoid countries bidding up prices against each other. He also argued strongly for the Liberal policy of co-partnership in industry, a cause with which he was closely identified.¹⁹ He was an active MP. In the eighteen months of the Parliament he made speeches in thirteen debates in the House, mostly on economic questions, and often spoke in Committee, as well as asking some fifty questions

In 1951 Macdonald faced a new Conservative candidate, Commander C. E. M. Donaldson.²⁰ The Liberals, divided and exposed by the intense Labour-Conservative struggle in the 1950-51 Parliament and ill-prepared for another general election so soon, were in trouble. It was no surprise that Macdonald lost his seat in a bruising campaign. In fact he did well to keep the margin of defeat down to 829 votes. Macdonald had worked hard as a constituency MP, writing over 2,000 letters to ministers on behalf of his constituents during his eighteen-month tenure.²¹ The Liberal poll actually increased by some 250 votes, perhaps partly as a result of tactical voting by Labour supporters. However, on a very high turnout the Tory vote rose by over 2,000.²² Donaldson was to hold the seat until his death in 1965, when, at the ensuing by-election, David Steel won Roxburgh, Selkirk and Peebles for the Liberals.

It is curious that, although Macdonald remained a committed Liberal for a further twenty years and seems to have retained some political ambitions, he did not stand again for parliament or – as one of the party's very few recent MPs – play a significant role in the Liberal revival of the later 1950s. He did not contest the expanded Roxburgh, Selkirk and Peebles constituency in 1955, despite invitations from local Liberals to return.²³

He remained active in the party debates of the early 1950s,

opposing the economic right which was vocal in the Liberal Party at the time. Macdonald was perhaps the most prominent of the signatories of the letter to the *Guardian* of 27 March 1953 announcing the establishment of the Radical Reform Group to oppose *laissez-faire* (though supporting free trade). The group aimed to promote 'the policy of social reform without Socialism which Liberals have developed from 1908 onwards'.²⁴

His gradual withdrawal from front-line politics was partly a reaction to the exhausting experience of sitting in the 1950-51 Parliament, where the Conservative opposition was intent on wearing down the Labour Government, with its wafer-thin majority, by means of repeated all-night sittings. The strain on the nine-strong band of Liberal MPs was particularly intense. Macdonald had a young family and continued to work for Robert Bowran, where the Managing Director, despite being a 1950 Liberal candidate himself, was unsympathetic towards Macdonald's political commitments. By the end of the parliament Macdonald was utterly exhausted and had developed problems with a nerve in his face due to stress. The 1951 election in Roxburgh and Selkirk, during which he was subjected to sharp personal attacks by the Conservatives, left its mark.

According to his son, Macdonald was 'not a career politician with personal political ambitions. His interest in a political position ... was the opportunity it gave to help individuals with difficulties and to serve his community ... He had many interesting and creative political ideas but lacked the political instincts to trim them in order to "sell" them successfully ... he was always an individual thinker and would never support a policy with which he disagreed simply because it was avowed by a party to which he belonged'.²⁵

He found a more satisfying outlet in local government in

BIOGRAPHY: ARCHIE MACDONALD

Hampstead, where he lived for most of his life. He served as a Hampstead borough councillor and Liberal group leader from 1962–65. His brief Liberal municipal career ended with the reorganisation of London politics in 1964. He stood as one of the Liberal candidates for Camden in the Greater London Council elections of that year, polling badly, and was also defeated in Hampstead Town Ward for membership of the new Camden Borough Council.²⁶

He retained some connections with the Scottish Borders. According to David Steel in his memoirs, *Against Goliath*, Macdonald indicated a willingness to contest the 1965 by-election in Roxburgh, Selkirk and Peebles, suggesting that Steel might stand down as candidate in his favour and act as agent, although Macdonald's family consider this to be unlikely. In the event, Macdonald returned to support and speak for Steel in the by-election.²⁷

Macdonald roundly condemned his Conservative opponents in Hampstead on his borough council defeat in 1965 and predicted that the Liberals had a bright future in the area.²⁸ Less than six years later, and after much agonising, he joined the Conservative Party and served as a Camden councillor until 1976. Macdonald was a public-spirited man – he was also for many years a magistrate and a member of the Board of Visitors of Wormwood Scrubs – and was no doubt attracted by the prospect of again being able to serve his local community and disappointed that, at the time, membership of the Liberals offered limited opportunities to hold public office. It is often now overlooked that the 1970 election was one of the Liberal Party's worst and one of its consequences was to strengthen the role played in the party by 'wild' Young Liberals such as Tony Greaves and Gordon Lishman with whom Macdonald – who had become more conservative in his views in later life – was particularly out of step.

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However, it seems that he was not converted by Conservative policies, profoundly disagreeing with many of them, as he openly told the Hampstead Tories.

Macdonald's role in the Liberal Party, after its promising start, was unfulfilled, and clearly disappointing to himself. One can only agree with the view of his son Michael that 'he was not a politician and above all not a "party man". He was always his own man and so was very difficult for politicians to use. He should really have been an independent.'²⁹

Archie Macdonald died on 20 April 1983, aged seventy-eight. He was survived by his wife and two sons, Michael and Ian.

Dr Jaime Reynolds studied politics at LSE, and has a long-standing interest in Liberal Democrat and electoral history. Dr Robert Ingham is a historical writer, and Biographies Editor of the Journal of Liberal History.

- 1 The others were Colne Valley, in somewhat unusual circumstances, in 1931, Orkney and Shetland in 1950, and North Devon in 1959. A few more were gained in the absence of a candidate from one or other of the main parties, and Torrington and Orpington at by-elections in 1958 and 1962 respectively.
- 2 A total of twelve Liberal MPs sat in Parliament between the 1950 election and the end of the decade. Apart from Grimond, Macdonald was the only one who sat for a Scottish constituency.
- 3 Information provided by Michael Macdonald.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 The Conservatives ran under the label 'Unionist' in Scotland.
- 6 The separate Roxburghshire and Peebles & Selkirk seats were Liberal from 1906 to 1923 and Hawick Burghs (Hawick, Galashiels and Selkirk) was a safe Liberal seat until its abolition in 1918.
- 7 Esslemont Papers, Aberdeen University Library, MS3037/1/4/42 a–b.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 The full result was: Scott 13,232 (37.9%), Macdonald 11,604 (33.2%), Thomas (Lab) 10,107 (28.9%). Electorate 47,492, turnout 73.6%.
- 10 He had been a member of the 'January Club', established by Sir Oswald Mosley in 1934 to

win support in Conservative and 'respectable' circles for the ideas of the British Union of Fascists. Nevertheless he served in the army during the Second World War as Field Marshal Alexander's military secretary. Scott was not alone in his right-wing views. His brother, the Duke of Buccleuch, was an admirer of Hitler and lobbied for a negotiated peace with Germany in 1940; see John Colville, *Fringes of Power*, p. 83. Scott's fellow Conservative MP for the neighbouring Peebles and Midlothian constituency, Captain 'Jock' Ramsey, was interned during the war for his pro-Nazi activities.

- 11 *Election Address of A. J. F. Macdonald, Liberal Candidate* (1945).
- 12 See Robert Shiels, 'Tommy Shaw: Lawyer, Politician and Judge', *Journal of Liberal History* 38, spring 2003, pp. 22–23.
- 13 James Lyle Mackay, first Earl of Inchcape (1852–1932) shipowner – most prominent figure of his time in British shipping; 1917, Committee of Imperial Defence; 1921–22, 'hawkish' member of the Geddes Committee which recommended sweeping cuts in public expenditure. Liberal until 1926 when he joined the Conservative benches in Lords. Ardent and committed free trader and fierce opponent of state intervention. He contributed £50,000 to the Liberal election campaign in 1923.
- 14 *The Times, House of Commons* 1950.
- 15 *The Times, House of Commons* 1951; Alan Watkins, *The Liberal Dilemma* (1966), p. 43.
- 16 The third most winnable after Caithness and Sutherland and Orkney and Shetland.
- 17 The full result was: Macdonald 15,347 (39.4%), Scott 14,191 (36.4%), Thomas (Lab) 9,413 (24.2%). Electorate 47,430, turnout 82.1%. The constituency boundaries were unchanged from 1945.
- 18 HC Deb, 10 Mar 1950, cc. 615–29.
- 19 For example on the debate on the second King's Speech of the parliament, see HC Deb, 7 Nov 1950, cc. 774–84.
- 20 According to David Steel, Commander Donaldson was not a strong candidate and his victory in 1951 was unexpected; David Steel, *Against Goliath* (1989) pp. 33–34.
- 21 Information supplied by Michael Macdonald.
- 22 The detailed result was Donaldson 16,438 (40.6%), Macdonald 15,609 (38.6%), White (Lab) 8,395 (20.8%). Electorate 47,614, turnout 84.9%.

- 23 Steel, *Against Goliath*, p. 37, says that after much toing and froing Macdonald declined the Liberal Association's invitation. However his son doubts whether Macdonald considered returning to fight the seat, although asked to do so by local Liberals. The Conservative majority increased to 15.6%, with the Liberal in second place on 32.1%.
- 24 Watkins, *The Liberal Dilemma*, p. 70. The letter was also signed by Desmond Banks, E. F. Allison, Norman Clark, Peter Grafton and Philip Skelsey.
- 25 Michael Macdonald note to the authors, 8 October 2002.
- 26 The Liberal candidates won 6% of the votes in the three-member constituency. Macdonald polled slightly better than the other two.
- 27 Steel, *Against Goliath*, p. 37, and information provided by Michael Macdonald.
- 28 *Hampstead and Highgate Express and Hampstead Garden Suburb and Golders Green News*, 15 May 1964.
- 29 Michael Macdonald note to the authors, 8 October 2002.

LETTERS

Peter Hatton

Having done a PhD on the Colonial Office under Lewis (Loulou) Harcourt over thirty years ago, I was delighted to see Patrick Jackson's biographical article about him in issue 40. He is most illuminating on his years as his father's secretary (and manager?) and his social and political background.

However, it seems to me perverse not to consider Harcourt's contribution in office to colonial / imperial policy. I would summarise the main heads there as:

1. Amalgamating the Nigerias (1912–14).
2. Further developing Dominion status – especially at the Colonial / Commonwealth conference of 1911, and through his close relations (via the first Governor-General, (Lord) Herbert Gladstone (son of W. E.)) with the new Union of South Africa.
3. Vigorously defending the policy of coastal concentration in British Somaliland when the Tories (amendment to King's Speech, February 1914) demanded aggressive action against Muhammad Abdille Rahman ('the mad mullah' to the British press).
4. Supporting peasant proprietor export development in

colonial Africa (especially Ugandan cotton and Ghanaian cocoa); he even sacked a Governor of Kenya (then the British East African Protectorate) for sharp practice over an African land reserve.

5. As MP for Rossendale, in Lancashire (and with an ennobled ex-MP for Oldham as his number two) he was zealous in securing supplies of cotton, palm oil, rubber and chocolate for British (especially Lancashire) industries.
6. He kept a close eye on Liverpool shipping interests and when he thought Treasury actions over the silver coinage of British West Africa was threatening them he won a tussle with Lloyd George on this issue.

I could go on, but I hope that this is more than enough to suggest that Jackson's argument that Harcourt 'looked to the past and failed to come to grips with the industrial and social problems of the new century' is not the whole story.

The other section I would like to comment upon is Harcourt and foreign policy (in 1971 I published an article in *European Studies Review* entitled 'Harcourt and Solf: the Search for an Anglo-German

Understanding through Africa, 1912–14'). Harcourt remained throughout the leading Cabinet advocate of détente with Germany; he organised the Cabinet majority that led to the Haldane mission to Berlin in 1912. He was also totally dismissive of any obligations towards Russia, and challenged the phrase 'Triple Entente' whenever it appeared in Cabinet papers. As I stated in my letter in issue 30, more ministers considered resigning during the fraught Cabinet meetings of 30 July – 4 August 1914. Although Belgium was a useful pretext for backing down, I am sure the prime motive in Harcourt's case was to avoid splitting the party; once it was clear that Asquith, Grey and Churchill could not be moved, more resignations could only have led to a coalition or a minority Tory government.

Larry Iles

With reference to the special issue 39 of the *Journal of Liberal History*, it is a pity that Lord Rennard agrees so readily with Bill Rodgers' contemporary document indicting Tony Cook's SDP candidature for the Darlington by-election debacle in 1983. Both of them underestimate the impact of the media, and in particular the behaviour of Vincent Hanna, the avowedly pro-Labour, *Newsnight* interrogator. He went overboard in praising Labour's Ossie O'Brien in his reports, and gave Cook the kind of merciless battering at press conferences that even veteran candidates would have found difficult to withstand. Hanna later admitted that he had really gone for Cook, hammer and tongs.

The argument that Cook was a lightweight TV reporter is also overdone; Tyne Tees always specialised in young and telegenic presenters. A much worse fault was that on policies Cook chose to be rigorously – and rather emptily – centrist, rather than take strong stands, as O'Brien and Fallon both did.