Red Clydeside: A digital history of the labour movement in Glasgow 1910-1932

Alan Dawson, Centre for Digital Library Research, University of Strathclyde

alan.dawson@strath.ac.uk

March 2004

Background

The term 'Red Clydeside' is usually taken to refer to a turbulent period of industrial, social and political upheaval which occurred in the greater Glasgow area in the early part of the twentieth century. During this period the strong influence of radical socialism in Glasgow generated a wave of working-class protest and political agitation which confronted the forces of capitalism and the institutions of government. The people, organisations and events of this period in Glasgow's history helped to establish the city's reputation as the centre of working-class struggle in Britain at the time, and helped to create a legacy which is still reflected in the political and social culture of the city.

Source materials

The Red Clydeside digital collection provides access to copies of over 200 original source materials, selected from several local sources, including:

- Gallacher Memorial Library, Glasgow Caledonian University
- Bissett Collection, Broady Collection and McFarlane Papers, Glasgow University Library
- Weir Papers and Beardmore Collection, Glasgow University Archive Services
- Glasgow Trades Council Collection and James Maxton papers, Mitchell Library
- Maxton Collection, Paisley Museum and Art Galleries
- Guy Aldred Collection, Strathclyde University Library

As well as greatly widening access and awareness of the source materials, one of the benefits of the digital collection is that it brings together material from a range of disparate sources that would be difficult to consult in person. Research for the collection entailed viewing over 2000 primary source materials. Advice received from librarians, archivists, and academics (from the Division of Politics and History at Glasgow Caledonian University) assisted the selection of items for digitisation. The selection process was difficult, not only in narrowing down selection from 2000 to 200 items, but also in selecting materials which conveyed something of the Red Clydeside story from all sides involved in the political and industrial conflicts, including government, workers, industrialists and political parties.

Materials selected for digitisation included image-based items such as posters, pamphlet covers, illustrations and photographs, together with text-based items such as personal correspondence, election manifestos, party membership cards and propaganda leaflets.

Content presentation

Funding for creation of the Red Clydeside collection was obtained from SCRAN and the Resources for Learning in Scotland consortium. This imposed certain limitations on format, in that all images had to have an associated caption consisting of three short paragraphs. The advantage of this somewhat rigid formula was that it enabled much of the website to be generated automatically from a database by using a standard template and an extraction program.

This basic format of image-and-caption was supplemented by specially written biographies, a timeline of events, a set of carefully chosen links and a bibliography. Furthermore, the consistent use of metadata about individuals and organisations enabled some additional views of the source materials to be generated automatically. The effect of these additions was to turn an organised digital collection into an educational resource which facilitates teaching, learning and research, by providing access to the material in several ways:

- A chronological timeline of key events from the period
- A presentation of left-wing pamphlets and publications
- An analysis of the main political organisations
- An analysis of the key political figures
- A presentation of political cartoons of the period

Glasgow Digital Library

The Red Clydeside collection is available via the Glasgow Digital Library (GDL) at http://gdl.cdlr.strath.ac.uk/redclyde/. Based in the Centre for Digital Library Research at the University of Strathclyde, the GDL was funded as a two-year research project by the Research Support Libraries Programme. This funding has now ceased, but the GDL lives on as a user service and as a testbed for follow-up research into digital library development.

In addition to creating and publishing digital collections, an important aim of the GDL is to build a robust information infrastructure which enables different collections to be accessed as a coherent whole as well as individually, for example by providing cross-collection subject and place indexes along with search facilities. It is also important that the GDL follows international standards for interoperability and accessibility.

James Maxton papers

One of the key sources of content for the Red Clydeside project was the James Maxton papers, held by the Mitchell Library. Maxton was one of the leading figures of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in Glasgow and a key political figure during the Red Clydeside period. Like many of his colleagues in the ILP, Maxton was a pacifist who campaigned against Britain's involvement in the first world war and was imprisoned in 1916 for delivering pro-strike speeches at a demonstration to oppose the Munitions Act. He was a highly popular and charismatic figure who was elected MP for Bridgeton in 1922 and devoted much of his subsequent political life to alleviating poverty within the city of Glasgow.

The wealth of interesting material in the Maxton papers, together with a small amount of additional funding, enabled the creation of a complementary digital collection focusing on Maxton himself. This draws on some material from the Red Clydeside collction, so that a few items appear in both collections (though were digitised only once) and is also available via the Glasgow Digital Library.

Related resources

Other GDL collections of particular local interest are the Springburn Virtual Museum, an annotated exhibition of photographs from Springburn Community Museum, and Memoirs and Portraits of One Hundred Glasgow Men, a full-text digital version of a 500-page book published in 1886. Complementary materials to this book are currently being digitised, and further small-scale funding is being sought for additional digitisation projects that have an interesting research element.