

## Biog 4 Mary Barbour Morag Cross 5 Jan 2014

### \*\*\*4.1

Mary Barbour (1875-1958) is a heroine to many social and political causes, but her own personal sorrow must also have motivated her campaigns for better living conditions and health care for working class families.

Born Mary Rough, the daughter of a carpet weaver in Kilbarchan, Renfrewshire, Mary herself was a 'carpet printer' when she married journeyman iron-turner David Barbour in 1896. Their first son, David, was born in Elderslie that December, and the family moved to 229 High Street, Dumbarton, soon after. The following year, the baby contracted meningitis, and died in October 1897, while the Barbours were still in Dumbarton. Bacterial meningitis, if this was what killed young David Barbour, was a highly-infectious and serious illness amongst young children, and it was only in the 20th century that the first steps were taken towards developing vaccines for the disease. As antibiotics were not discovered until the 1940s, and meningitis spread rapidly among people living in overcrowded accommodation, it was natural that housing and healthcare should be one focus of Mary Barbour's attention. [Statutory Register of Births, Marriages, Deaths, and 1911 Census, at [www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk); *History of Meningococcal Meningitis*, [US website], at [www.meningitis.com](http://www.meningitis.com); Dr Ananya Mandal, 'History of Meningitis', *News Medical* [US website], at [www.news-medical.net](http://www.news-medical.net)].

### \*\*\*4.2

In June 1899, Mary's second son, James was born in Dumbarton, and it was after this date that they moved to Macleod Street (renamed Dunvegan St, now demolished) in the deprived, industrial district of Govan, and her notable political career began. Macleod St, leading past shipyards to a wooden pier on the River Clyde, was immediately north of the historic Govan Old Parish Church. It had been called after the much-respected, socially-aware minister Dr John Macleod (1840-1898) of that church. It was here in August 1904 that their third son, William was born. [Sources: Statutory Register of Births, at [www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk); 'Govan Pier', Site NS56NE 1964, Item SC646227, Photograph by John R Hume, *Canmore* (Online Database), at [www.rcahms.gov.uk](http://www.rcahms.gov.uk)].

Mary joined the Scottish Co-operative Women's Guild, which had been founded in Kinning Park in 1890, an area 'that resonated with all the qualities of Glasgow's skilled working class with vigorous social activities centred round the co-operative society'. This applied equally to Govan, where David Barbour worked for the Fairfield Shipbuilder and Engineering Co, Ltd.

### \*\*\*4.3

Mary joined the Socialist Sunday Schools (founded during a London dock-strike), a nationwide movement for social reform, 'teaching ... children ... the causes and consequences of poverty'. She also became a member of the Independent Labour Party, and like her contemporaries of what became known as 'Red Clydeside', she was involved in socialist and political causes before the war. Partly, living conditions for the mass of the population were so poor that many articulate workingclass

people of ability, felt there was no choice but to campaign for improvements. Politics was an alternative to the church's charitable and missionary work, and could also be interpreted as the practical application of the same desire for change. The reformers' driving energy could be derived from religion, or from personal conviction and their own too-real experiences of poverty. [Chris Cook, 2005, *Routledge Companion to Britain in the Nineteenth Century*, p162; W H Fraser, 'Second

City of The Empire ... Kinning Park', and 'No Mean City: Socialist Sunday School', *The Glasgow Story*,

[www.theglasgowstory.com](http://www.theglasgowstory.com); Audrey Canning, 'Barbour, Mary', *Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women*, 2006, (editor R Pipes *et al*), Edinburgh, p28-9; *Glasgow Post Office Directory 1904-5*, p211].

### \*\*\*4.4

James Maxton (1885-1946), another Independent Labour Party (ILP) member, John MacLean (1879-

1923), a teacher, Helen Crawford (1877-1954), future Lord Provost Patrick J Dollan (1885-1963) and his wife and fellow-activist Agnes Dollan (1877-1966), were all involved in pre-war socialist movements of various shades. Crawford, a suffragette, joined the ILP in 1914, but being an 'outspoken anti war protester ... [this] caused her to break with the suffrage movement'. [Sources: Joe Fisher, 1994, *The Glasgow Encyclopedia*, Edinburgh, pp269, 270, 277).

The need for housing in Govan, Partick and other-inner city tenement areas, already described as 'congested', was made more acute in late 1914 by 'the migration of thousands of workers into munitions districts' to staff the armaments, shipyard and war-related industries. Some unscrupulous landlords, contrary to the wave of almost blind-patriotism presented in the newspapers, took opportunistic and selfish advantage of the emergency, by blatantly overcharging for the already overcrowded flats and rooms to rent. This was deeply resented by those who had no choice but to obey government mobilisation orders, because there was no alternative channel for workers to express their anger at the rent-racketeers. An alternative course of action soon emerged. [Source: Michael Byers, Ian R. Mitchell 2002-2007, 'Clydeside Rent Strikes 1915-16', *Red Clydeside: ... the labour movement in Glasgow 1910-1932*, at <http://sites.scran.ac.uk/redclyde/redclyde/index.html>].

\*\*\*4.5

Because of the landlords' wartime profiteering the 'Glasgow Women's Housing Association (WHA) was born in 1914', set up by the Glasgow Labour Party Housing committee, and Mary Laird, president of the Women's Labour League. Mary Barbour was a founder-member of the South Govan WHA in June 1915. It was born of a grassroots activism that spread to ordinary housewives who had not previously been politically-engaged. The women refused to pay the inflated demands, and found that by combining together, they provided mutual moral support. Mary 'organised women's committees who met in kitchens and closes', which would now be termed 'networking', to share news of forthcoming evictions. 'By ringing hand-bells and ... rattles they alerted the women, who came ... onto the streets to drive off the sheriff's officers'. [Sources: Audrey Canning, 'Barbour, Mary', *Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women*, 2006, (editor R Pipes *et al*), Edinburgh, p28-9; John Couzin 2006, 'Mary Barbour, 1875-1958', *Radical Glasgow*, (Online Resource), at <http://www.gcu.ac.uk/radicalglasgow/>; Michael Byers 2002, 'Mary Barbour (1875-1958)', *Red Clydeside: ... the labour movement in Glasgow 1910-1932*, at <http://sites.scran.ac.uk/redclyde/redclyde/index.html>

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Shipyard and factory workers threatened to strike in support of those who were threatened with eviction, because 'many of the female tenants had husbands fighting and dying for their country'. By taking unpatriotic advantage of workers and women 'doing their duty' in wartime, the landlords aroused popular disgust. On 17 November 1915, 'Thousands of women – nicknamed "Mrs Barbour's Army" by William Gallacher - accompanied by shipyard and engineering workers, converged on the sheriff's courts.' [Sources: Michael Byers, Ian R. Mitchell 2002-2007, 'Clydeside Rent Strikes 1915-16', *Red Clydeside: ... the labour movement in Glasgow 1910-1932*, at <http://sites.scran.ac.uk/redclyde/redclyde/index.html>; Audrey Canning, 'Barbour, Mary', *Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women*, 2006, (editor R Pipes *et al*), Edinburgh, pp28-9;

Audrey Canning, 'Barbour (née Rough), Mary (1875-1958)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Online Edition 2006, at [www.oxforddnb.com](http://www.oxforddnb.com)].

The *Glasgow Herald* reported on the scene at the Courthouse and Municipal Buildings, Ingram Street

(between Hutcheson, Wilson and Brunswick Streets): 'At the 'Ejectment [eviction of tenants] court, a rent strikers' demonstration was held [because] application would be made today for warrants to evict a number of rent strikers ... the demonstration was one of the results of the campaign ... by the Glasgow Women's Housing Association. One of the contingents [stopped briefly] at Lorn Street

School, where Mr John M[a]cLean, whose dismissal was [already] decided upon ... was engaged in teaching. Mr M[a]cLean left the school ... and joined the procession ... [which] was preceded by a band with improvised instruments including tin whistles, 'hooters' and a dilapidated big drum ... men carried ... lighted candle[s] and some of them bore wooden signs announcing houses and shops to let'. They passed peacefully through George Square, but the police barred admission to the court. [Source: *Glasgow Herald*, 18 Nov, 1915, p10].

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The paper continued: 'The crowd marched round the buildings shouting good-humouredly and came to a standstill in Hutcheson Street facing the entrance to the Small Debts Court. There was some jostling and crushing, and cries were raised to 'rush' the police, but ... the crowd was not hostile. A deputation ... was admitted. .. Mr John M[a]cLean and others delivering speeches'. The police broke up the crowd, seemingly with little resistance. [Source: *Glasgow Herald*, 18 Nov, 1915, p10]. Meanwhile, indoors, the court was 'crowded to overflowing' by the non-payers and their sympathisers, but the presiding judge proved himself an astute diplomat. 'Sheriff Lee urg[ed] strongly upon the petitioning factor [landlord's agent] ... the advisability on patriotic grounds of dropping their actions' until an official committee enquiring into 'the rent question' had reported. [Source: *Glasgow Herald*, 18 Nov, 1915, p10].

\*\*\*4.8

The Sheriff received the leaders of the strike in private, saying 'he had no authority to mix ... with any political questions. These were exceptional times, however and ... he was prepared to take the risk'. Mr Reid, 'Secretary of the Tenants' Defence Committee' acted as a test case on behalf of the other 18 pending evictions (15 or which involved munitions workers). He had been given two weeks to leave his house on refusing to pay higher rent demanded by Daniel Nicholson, the factor. The figures speak for themselves; Reid's pre-war rent was £1/18/-, and it had increased firstly to £1/19/2d, and then another 2/- per month had been demanded. This would have totalled an increase of 3/2d since the start of the war - an increase of approximately 8%. Relative worth is always difficult to calculate, but the frequent practice of rendering 'old money' or pre-decimal currency as 'the equivalent of £1.90', is quite misleading, and trivialises the situation. Monthly wages were correspondingly less than they are today. Female tram-drivers, a skilled and relatively well-paid group, received £1/9/- per week (or £5/16/- per month) in May 1916. For other working women, most of whom would have been paid considerably less (the tram-drivers were getting 'men's wages'), increases of this magnitude would have been unsustainable. [Source: *Glasgow Herald*, 18 Nov, 1915, p10; 'Women Drivers in Glasgow', *Tramway and Railway World*, 11 May 1916, p356].

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When Nicholson was persuaded to drop the case, 'the intimation was received with loud cheering', both inside and outside the court. 'The resulting Rent Restrictions Act marked a turning point in Glasgow's housing history and benefited tenants nationwide', and Mary Barbour became 'a popular legend in Govan'. [Source: *Glasgow Herald*, 18 Nov, 1915, p10; Audrey Canning, 'Barbour (née Rough), Mary (1975-1958)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Online Edition 2006, at [www.oxforddnb.com](http://www.oxforddnb.com)].

Other cases show that there was opposition to the pursuit of the war, possibly by more independent and farsighted thinkers, who could foresee what 'total war' might mean in an industrial age. The motives of capitalists, 'captains of industry', and the exploitation of workers' labour were all suspect in many countries, not only in Scotland. John MacLean, later the unofficial 'Soviet [Russian] Consul to Scotland', was 'arrested for the first time under the Defence of the Realm Act 1915 ... charged with uttering statements calculated to prejudice recruiting'.

\*\*\*4.10

There were several peace and anti-war movements, which were both supported and vigorously opposed in turn. The Women's Peace Crusade, founded by Mary Barbour and her friends Helen Crawford (the secretary, who met Lenin in Soviet Russia) and Agnes Dollan, was one of the largest. It

launched nationwide in 1917, holding street gatherings, 'distributing anti-war leaflets' and interfered with at least one Glasgow Corporation meeting. [Sources: Michael Byers 2002, 'John Maclean (1879-1923)', and 'Helen Crawford (1877-1954)', *Red Clydeside: ... the labour movement in Glasgow 1910-*

*1932*, at <http://sites.scran.ac.uk/redclyde/redclyde/index.html>; Audrey Canning, 'Barbour, Mary', 'Crawford, Helen', and Jim Smith, 'Dollan, Agnes Johnston, Lady', in *Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women*, 2006, (editor R Pipes *et al*), Edinburgh, pp28-9, 84-5].

John MacLean appeared in court in December 1915, alongside other names later to become wellknown

in national politics. *The Scotsman* reported: 'Arising out of ... 'a free speech and noconscription demonstration' held [near] George Square, Glasgow, five local Labourists were charged ... with having caused an obstruction'. [Source: *The Scotsman*, 30 Dec 1915, p3].

#### \*\*\*4.11

The list of the accused now resembles the 'Who's Who' of Red Clydeside. 'The accused persons were: Emmanuel Shinwell [trade unionist, longtime Labour MP, later Lord Shinwell, who died aged 101], John MacLean [famous radical], William Gallacher [later Communist MP for West Dunfermline, 1935-1950], James Maxton [pacifist, Labour MP for Bridgeton from 1922], and Arthur McManus [anti-war campaigner, leader of Clyde Workers' Committee, first president of Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920].' [Source: *The Scotsman*, 30 Dec 1915, p3; Michael Byers, Ian R. Mitchell 2002-

2007, 'Key political figures of the Red Clydeside period', *Red Clydeside: ... the labour movement in*

*Glasgow 1910-1932*, at <http://sites.scran.ac.uk/redclyde/redclyde/index.html> ].

The newspaper recounts: 'They were charged with having, on 12 December, occasioned an obstruction in North Hanover Street [leading to George Square] by [placing] there a horse and a lorry, respectively delivering speeches from the lorry, causing a large crowd of persons to assemble, and preventing a free passage ... They pleaded not guilty.' [Source: *The Scotsman*, 30 Dec 1915, p3].

#### \*\*\*4.12

The police stated that 'a procession headed by a brass band' assembled, and were addressed by the 'Labourists'. The 'crowd extended right across the street ... [for] an hour and a half'. Fellow sympathiser Patrick Dollan, now an elected Glasgow Councillor, spoke in defence of the accused: 'The meeting [was] an anti-conscription ...protest against the refusal' to permit previous such events. The charges were dismissed as there were 'extenuating circumstances'. [Source: *The Scotsman*, 30 Dec 1915, p3].

#### \*\*\*4.13

Mary Barbour continued in Labour politics after the war, serving as one of the first two female Labour councillors elected to the Corporation in 1920 (the other being Eleanor Stewart for Maryhill), with the newly-enfranchised female voters strongly favouring her. Although the Dictionary of National Biography and several online sources suggest that she was the first woman elected as a councillor in Glasgow, there were actually five women in total elected in 1920, of whom she was one. Mrs Barbour was the Govan Ward's first female City Councillor, however. She remained committed to women's and children's healthcare and served on official committees regarding mortality in childbirth, and the provision of local child welfare clinics. In this, her own bitter experience of losing her first son must have played some part, and in serving future generations of children she brought benefits denied young David Barbour (1896-1897) to many other families. [Sources: Statutory Register of Births, Deaths, at [www.scotlandspopulation.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspopulation.gov.uk); Glasgow Herald, 3 November 1920, pp11-12; The Scotsman 4 November 1920, p9; Govan Press 12 November 1920, p2; Michael Byers 2002, 'Mary Barbour (1875-1958)', *Red Clydeside: ... the labour movement in Glasgow 1910-1932*, at <http://sites.scran.ac.uk/redclyde/redclyde/index.html>; *Dundee Courier*, 9 June 1923, p4; *Aberdeen Journal*, 27 May 1924, p5; *The Scotsman*, 8 Nov 1924, p9; 15 Jan 1944, p3]. I am

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