

J. B. McLachlan Fills Out a Questionnaire, 1931

David Frank

Volume 88, Fall 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1084983ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2021v88.0008>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Frank, D. (2021). J. B. McLachlan Fills Out a Questionnaire, 1931. *Labour / Le Travail*, 88, 169–175. <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2021v88.0008>

NOTE AND DOCUMENT / NOTE ET DOCUMENT

J. B. McLachlan Fills Out a Questionnaire, 1931

David Frank, University of New Brunswick

Keywords: J. B. McLachlan, Nova Scotia coal miners, workers' autobiographies, Communist International, Communist Party of Canada, Trevor Maguire

Mots-clés: J. B. McLachlan, mineurs de charbon de la Nouvelle-Écosse, autobiographies ouvrières, Internationale communiste, Parti communiste du Canada, Trevor Maguire

IN MOSCOW, AT THE OFFICES of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, it is 23 December 1931. A veteran leader of the coal miners in Nova Scotia, J. B. McLachlan, is filling out a questionnaire. The five typed pages are addressed to “Leading Workers of the Parties and International Organisations.” They ask about background, social position, political experience, and public activity. At this time, McLachlan is in his early 60s, a “grand old man” of the radical left in Canada. He is completing his only trip to the “land of socialism,” a sympathetic visitor more than prepared to be impressed by what he came to see.¹ But here our interest is not in Soviet conditions or the politics of the Comintern but in what McLachlan has to say about his own history. With his fountain pen, he fills in short answers, and mostly he repeats familiar information. For the biographer, there is confirmation on various points. There are some new details, and there is interest too in how McLachlan phrases some of the answers.²

1. The trip is discussed in my *J. B. McLachlan: A Biography* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1999), 447–459. He had sailed from New York on 23 October 1931 and returned through Halifax on 13 January 1932. This indicates that the questionnaire, dated 23 December 1931, was completed toward the end of his visit.

2. The present note is based on the file for J. B. McLachlan in fonds 495, Executive Committee of the Communist International (1919–1943), opis' 222, delo 846, Russian State Archive for Socio-Political History (RGASPI). The heading on the first page refers to “The Sector of Cadres of the Organisational Department of the ECCI” and refers to the document as an “Exemplary

This questionnaire is one of the documents that became available after the opening up of Soviet archives in the 1990s.³ A large body of material from several fonds in the Comintern Archives was filmed by Library and Archives Canada at the time, and this resource has been available to Canadian researchers.⁴ The material copied, however, did not include a series of “personal files” that are listed as part of the fonds for the Executive Committee of the Communist International.⁵ Nonetheless, several researchers have obtained individual files from this source.⁶ In October 2020, with the assistance of a

Scheme of Autobiography.” There was also a strict warning at the end of the document: “The person who will give incorrect information will be expelled from the Party.” Questionnaires of this type are discussed by Brigitte Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 76–77. More specialized questionnaires were utilized for students at the International Lenin School and for employees within the Comintern apparatus. See also Brigitte Studer & Berthold Unfried, “At the Beginning of a History: Visions of the Comintern after the Opening of the Archives,” *International Review of Social History* 42 (1997): 419–446, esp. 431–432.

3. As Studer notes, rudimentary questionnaires were already in use for transnational comrades in 1919, at the first congress of the Communist International. The scope of questions became more elaborate over time and served several purposes, including political evaluations and assessments as well as the preparation of autobiographies. Studer notes that by the second half of the 1930s, with the increasing Stalinization of the Comintern, the use of biographical information was shifting from “political-pedagogic ends to an instrument of discipline and repression.” See Studer, *Transnational World*, 73–89. The accumulation and uses of “biographical capital” are reviewed more generally in Kevin Morgan, “Comparative Communist History and the ‘Biographical Turn,’” *History Compass* 10, 6 (2012): 455–466.

4. Comintern Fonds (Communist International), MG 10 K3, R14860-0-3-E, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa (LAC). A finding aid (#2058), prepared in 1995 by George Bolotenko, explains the scope of the Canadian material copied from what was then the Centre for the Preservation and Study of Records of Contemporary History. Since 1999 this material has been divided between two archives, the Russian State Archive for Socio-Political History (RGASPI) and the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI), which specializes in the post-1952 documents of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

5. This series is currently identified as Communist Party of Canada, Personal files, fonds 495, opis' 222, RGASPI. The list includes 1,315 file titles. There is no obvious chronological or alphabetical order and no indication of what dates are covered by each file. The titles are in Russian, so careful transliteration is required. Some individuals have more than one file, and other files cover multiple individuals. Researchers will note that there are many familiar names in the list, both Communist and non-Communist, including obvious non-leftists such as Maurice Duplessis, William Lyon Mackenzie King, and Louis St. Laurent. Many files refer to the period after the dissolution of the Comintern. This seems to be explained by the fact that after 1943 the files were initially held by the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute but were then transferred to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which evidently adapted the collection to their needs and added to the series. The files were eventually divided between the RGASPI and RGANI but it is difficult to determine the current location of individual files.

6. Most of these appear to be records for some of the several dozen Canadian students who attended the International Lenin School. For a recent Canadian example, see Andr  e L  vesque, “The Transnational Experience of Some Canadian Communists,” in Oleksa Drachewych & Ian

researcher in Moscow, I made a request for eight files of interest to me. Two of the file titles referred to McLachlan. One contained the questionnaire discussed here, and the other was a one-page typed summary.⁷

The first section in the questionnaire, “Social Position and Extraction,” reviews McLachlan’s early biography. Year of birth and birth-place? 1869, Ecclefechan, Scotland. Nationality? Scotch. Citizenship? British. His father is described as a casual labourer, but “general living conditions in the family” are noted as “Fair, 4 daughters working and one boy.” Here he seems to be implying that once he and his sisters were of a working age, their combined labours were sufficient to reduce the family’s poverty. The boy referred to was presumably himself, and McLachlan confirms that he started work at ten years of age. He does not mention the two siblings who died in childhood. There are also questions about his parents (“both dead”), his wife (Catherine Greenshields), and her parents (“have not heard from them in 30 years”). Are you well provided for? “Own my home. Have very small wages.” Who are your dependents? “Two young grandchildren” – a reference to the children of their daughter Kate, who had died a few years earlier after a short illness.⁸

Questions in the section titled “Intellectual Development and Education” document the preparation of a working-class leader of his time and place. “In what educational institution did you study, how many years, did you graduate or not?” McLachlan’s answer: “went to school till I reached Grade 4.” Anything more? “Very general and haphazard reading.” Here he is obviously referring only to his earliest reading, as we know that McLachlan built up a substantial personal library over his lifetime. He adds more when asked about “self-education”: “Have read always when I had opportunity. Sought light on no particular question. Read Darwin and Tolstoy and Ruskin and Marx etc.” The questions go on to ask about works by Marx, Engels, and Lenin, and McLachlan names several titles: “Das Capital, Origin of the Family, The Eastern Question, The Road to Insurrection and several smaller pamphlets of Lenin.”⁹

McKay, eds., *Left Transnationalism: The Communist International and the National, Colonial, and Racial Questions* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019), 183–203; see especially the discussion of autobiographies at 191–194.

7. All the files I have seen are relatively short, containing only a few documents or clippings, suggesting they may have been used primarily for identification purposes when linked to other subject files. The larger McLachlan file, for instance, was ten pages in total, although several pages, apparently containing a translation of the questionnaire, were not released. Of the eight files requested, I received four in full and one in part. Three had been transferred to the RGANI, and of those two could not be located and the other was restricted.

8. The questions are clearly generic, including some that seem applicable to the Soviet context in particular: Did you serve in the Army? No. Special military education? No, none at all. If you did not serve in the Army, what was the reason of your getting the ticket? No answer. Did you take part in the civil war? No. Did you serve in the revolutionary armies or military detachments or corps? No.

9. Among these, the less familiar publication, *The Road to Insurrection*, is a British edition

As for “Participation in Public Life,” McLachlan reports that he worked in the coal mines from 1879 to 1908, when he was blacklisted. He belonged in turn to the Lanarkshire and Nova Scotia miners’ unions and the United Mine Workers of America. He held posts as a local officer for ten years and as a district officer for thirteen years, until he was “deposed and expelled” in 1923. He answers a question about his own writing and publishing too: “Help publish a little local miners’ paper for a period of 6 years. It went down three times but have started again and it is still going,” alluding here to the *Maritime Labor Herald* (1921–1926) and its successor, the *Nova Scotia Miner* (1929–1936). For other ongoing activity, he mentions work on behalf of the Canadian Labor Defense League and the Friends of the Soviet Union.

There are also questions on “Repressions and Conviction.” Arrested? “Yes, in Nova Scotia. Taking part in a strike in 1923.” Sentenced? “Yes, sentenced to 2 years for sedition.” Imprisonment, hard labour, torture? “Sentenced hard labor for two years. No, not tortured.” Any opportunity to work at your education? “Was allowed no reading but old and very poor novels.” Elsewhere he notes that he did not serve the full sentence, though he does not discuss the public campaign for his release.

The section on “Political Status” begins with a question about whether he belonged to other parties before joining the Communist Party. “Yes, the Socialist Party of Canada from 1907 to 1914 when the war broke up the party in Nova Scotia.” When did he join the Communist Party? 1922. What organization? Canadian section. Who recommended him? Trevor Maguire. We know that McLachlan had joined by the time of the Toronto convention that he attended in February 1923, but the timing has not been clear. It has been assumed that he was recruited by Jack MacDonald or Tim Buck, party leaders who attended conferences in Nova Scotia in the spring and summer of 1922 and were impressed by the radicalism of the coal miners. Note also that McLachlan refers to the Canadian party as the “Canadian section,” implicitly endorsing the concept of the International as a unitary organization with national sections around the globe. This was no doubt what the Comintern wanted to hear, but there is no reason to doubt that the transnational connection remained important to McLachlan, as it had been in 1922.

Trevor Maguire is not well known, but it is possible to fill in some details. Born in 1887 in the Ottawa Valley, he was listed as a labourer when he joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force in September 1914. He was wounded at Festubert in 1915 (“slaughter on all sides, and precious little gained,” says the *Canadian Encyclopedia*) and suffered permanent damage to his right arm. Sometime after the end of the war, the young veteran joined the Socialist

of Lenin’s writings from the months prior to the October Revolution in 1917, originally published at the time of the General Strike in 1926. Copies were in circulation in Canada, as this was among the titles seized in the police raids on party headquarters in Toronto in August 1931. See Peter Weinrich, *Social Protest from the Left in Canada, 1870–1970: A Bibliography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 476.

Party of Canada. He was present at the secret meeting in a barn near Guelph, Ontario, where the Communist Party of Canada was launched in May 1921. Maguire was elected to the party's first executive and also to a post in the Workers' Party of Canada in February 1922. Later that year he was arrested on charges of uttering seditious words in a May Day speech at Queen's Park in Toronto. One of the offensive passages cited was this: "Looking around the British Empire (vampire would be better), we find untold atrocities committed in India, Egypt and other countries, including Canada."¹⁰ Maguire was convicted, but in light of his wartime service (which included a Distinguished Conduct Medal), he received a suspended sentence.

After his release in November, Maguire spent several weeks in Glace Bay, and the recruitment of McLachlan must have been one of his missions. During his stay, Maguire also made speeches calling on workers to prepare for the coming social revolution. He did not hold back in giving a vivid description of the British "Vampire" – "a fabled monster that flew around at night to suck the blood of its victims." That reference was not lost on the coal miners, who had just completed the first round of their struggle with the British Empire Steel Corporation. I have not been able to trace the first appearance of the British *Vampire* Steel Corporation in the miners' rhetoric of the 1920s, but it is worth noting the coincidence.¹¹

Returning to McLachlan's questionnaire, we see that he is being asked for the number of his party membership card. Here McLachlan tries to inject some local realism into the answers: "No number. Has my name on it." He notes too that at the time he joined "there were only 3 members then in Nova Scotia." Has he done any recruitment work himself? "Have brought in about 20 of whom only 4 remain." In the context of the early 1930s, he clearly did not want to raise expectations. While the local Communist influence would increase in the coming years, it was always larger than the actual membership, and in 1931 both were at a low ebb.

As for internal divisions within the party, McLachlan is circumspect. Did you participate in fractions or opposition groups within the party? No. Attitude to divergences within the party? "I am afraid I did not understand clearly most of the questions until after the party made decisions. For instance, Trotskyism

10. The case is covered in the *Toronto Star*, 1 and 10 November 1922. Meanwhile, Maguire had also stood for office in a provincial by-election, polling some 488 votes as a labour candidate.

11. *Maritime Labor Herald*, 23 December 1922. Was he possibly referencing *Nosferatu*, F. W. Murnau's film version of Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula*? The film was released in March 1922 – in Germany – and is considered a classic expressionist film of the silent era. But I have seen no evidence that it played in Toronto that year. Maguire continued to appear in the historical record well into the 1930s. He was also known for his writing, which included a short anti-war story ("Over the Top"), a one-act play ("Unemployment"), and a serialized novel ("O Canada! A Tale of Canadian Workers' Life"). See James Doyle, *Progressive Heritage: The Evolution of a Politically Radical Literary Tradition in Canada* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002), 73–81.

not understood by me until long after question settled.” McLachlan felt no need to comment on the recent upheavals in which individual leaders were expelled for “left” and “right” deviations from the party line. Nor did he refer to his recent differences on strategy in Nova Scotia. Most of those were related to the “third period” turn in Comintern policy that may have had more to do with Stalin’s consolidation of power in the Soviet Union than with improving prospects for the left in other countries.¹²

In all, McLachlan’s self-portrait conformed to the model of the dedicated working-class revolutionary that the Comintern was seeking to promote. In places, he even adopted a Comintern vocabulary, including terms such as “Agit-Prop” and “street nuclei” to describe his political activity. A statement at the end of the questionnaire, however, reminds the respondent that the questions were intended to serve as an “exemplary scheme” for a brief autobiography. Such a composition, the instructions read, “should give a concise [*sic*] statement of the basic facts of life, giving a sufficiently full idea of the personality of the author, one should avoid giving mechanical answers to the questions.” McLachlan seems to have made an attempt at the requested composition, but it is notably less articulate or informative than the questionnaire itself. Apparently he lacked the time, patience, or inclination to produce a more ambitious summary. This document found its way into another file, but it is only one typed page and adds little to the earlier answers.¹³

After 1931, there was still more to come in the last chapter of McLachlan’s life as a working-class leader. On his return to Canada, his “fighting spirit” seemed to have revived. That year he took the chair at a Workers’ Economic Conference in Ottawa and also had a showdown with Prime Minister R. B. Bennett. He presided at meetings of the Workers’ Unity League and welcomed the new union that was challenging the United Mine Workers in Nova Scotia. In 1933 he stood as a candidate in the provincial election, and in the 1935 federal election he received some 5,365 votes, his best result since 1921. In these years he also campaigned for the Canadian Labor Defense League, and for the Canadian League against War and Fascism, which was directed by the energetic A. A. MacLeod, a Cape Bretoner who counted McLachlan as one of his mentors and later became a member of the Ontario legislature. In 1936, however, McLachlan came to a parting of the ways with the Communist Party

12. The final question on the form was a request: Who could confirm his statements? McLachlan named Tim Buck, whom he had known since their first encounter in 1922 and who had emerged as the new party general secretary in 1930.

13. “James Bryson McLachlan,” fonds 495, opis’ 222, delo 884, RGASPI. The document is stamped 3 February 1936, which would indicate it was in use several weeks after the final convention of the Workers’ Unity League but still some time before McLachlan’s resignation from the party. Although written in the first person, it is also possible this summary was prepared by someone else on the basis of McLachlan’s answers to the 1931 questionnaire.

and resigned over what he considered to be their mishandling of the united front strategy endorsed by the Communist International.¹⁴

None of these developments entered into the files discussed here. Whatever its value for internal purposes, and subsequent historians, the original 1931 questionnaire administered by the Comintern was a limited document, structured as a bureaucratic survey and serving almost as a rite of recognition for a veteran comrade. The two files contained no secondary documents, such as additional evidence or political evaluations of the type found in files for students at the International Lenin School. And the autobiographical statement fell far short of the kind of writing McLachlan was capable of producing. A few years later, however, McLachlan prepared a brief but compelling autobiographical essay for a Canadian children's magazine. Using a rhetorical device that would appeal to children, in "Floors That Have Talked to Me" he reviewed four stages in his life story. In turn, he rehearsed the messages delivered to him by the dirt floor in his grandmother's house, by the brick floor in his first home as a young newlywed, by the soft carpeted floors in the hotels where he negotiated with the coal companies, and finally by the sturdy wooden floors he visited in a Soviet miner's home during that same trip in 1931. Although lacking in the political detail elicited by the questionnaire, this was the kind of heartfelt personal writing that appealed to McLachlan. In reviewing his experience of working-class struggles and achievements for the benefit of a younger generation, McLachlan was serving a didactic purpose that was meaningful to him. This account might well have met the Comintern criteria for a short "exemplary autobiography," but it also asserted McLachlan's control over his own "biographical capital."¹⁵

14. Frank, *J. B. McLachlan*, 500–522. See also David Frank & John Manley, "The Sad March to the Right: The Resignation of J. B. McLachlan from the Communist Party of Canada, 1936," *Labour/Le Travail* 30 (Fall 1992): 115–134.

15. "Floors That Have Talked to Me," *Cape Breton's Magazine*, no. 74 (June 1999), ii, 75; originally published in *Always Ready: A Magazine for Canadian Workers' and Farmers' Boys and Girls* 1, 2 (March 1934): 19–20.