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The Consolidation of Farms in Six Countries of Western Europe

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J. P. MAXTON

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1896 JOHN PURDON MAXTON 1951

WITH this issue ends the pioneering work, as editor of the *Journal*, of the late John Maxton. Most of the material in these pages was completed before his sudden and untimely death on 6 May 1951, and here, then, is a fitting place to portray the man and his work.

Born on 18 September 1896, the son of a Scottish headmaster, at Barrhead in Scotland, he inherited a thirst for knowledge which coloured his whole life. Before he had reached his fifth birthday, however, he lost his father in a tragic drowning accident, a blow to the family fortunes which created difficulties for the youngest member of the family and for his future. None the less, the environment of his home in his early years, with its love of learning and the search for truth, left an indelible mark on his life and character and enabled him to overcome the worst effects of the disaster.

It was early decided that John was cut out for an academic career, and the older members of the family—three sisters and one brother, the late James Maxton, a Member of Parliament for twenty-five years—were determined to see that any sacrifice which might help to make this possible would be cheerfully borne. As the years passed, it became even more clear that the choice of career was well founded, and John himself proved his own case by an unfailing ability to win scholarships and bursaries. These took care of most of the school fees at Spiers School, where he studied until he matriculated at Glasgow University shortly after the outbreak of the First World War. Spiers School has a proud history in the field of both sport and learning, but few more illustrious names than John Maxton's adorn the list of former pupils. In both fields he was outstanding. He was a leader in many sports, and captain of the school Rugby team, but excellence in these directions did not prevent his taking the medal of his year for academic achievements.

His wonderful zest for life and his deep interest in his fellows, along with his brilliant intellect, made him a distinctive student while at the University, where he took first-class honours in both science and economics. The abounding energy that he displayed when sport or prank was in the offing amazed all his friends and fellow students. At

the Rectorial election he led his band of followers in the 'Big Day' for possession of the Union. Rotten eggs were the popular shot and shell of his opponents and when his ruffled locks of black hair streamed with this far from fragrant ammunition, his followers cheered him as a worthy chieftain. Nor could a party be complete during his time without his genial presence and happy improvisations at the piano. Once he had heard a melody hummed in his ear it emerged from the piano with appropriate accompaniment; and how he loved to coax the unwilling singer to give of his best! These lighter sides of his character were underlain by a deep seriousness when he could offer just the right word of eager encouragement for his friends when they were depressed and of merciless banter for the pompous or the insincere.

Although academic success seemed to pursue him at every turn—he was placed first in the Finals Honours List of his year and tied for the Gladstone Memorial Prize, at the same time winning the Alexander Smart award for the best student of the year in economics—he was never one who hunted prizes. The readiness of his advice and help became a legend, and nothing gave him more genuine happiness than the feeling that some poor soul might be less fearful of the morning's examination as the result of the help and encouragement which he had been able to give him.

He took an active part in student party politics at the University and never lost touch with his fellow supporters in this field, but he had no urge to go into politics in a professional way after he had completed his university career. This will not seem strange to anyone who knew him well. He would yield to no one in his determination to promote the welfare of his fellows, but it was in searching for the truth rather than in fighting for a cause that he knew his best contribution could be made. Too active a participation in the party field he feared might undermine his ambition to analyse and interpret with complete objectivity. Thus, while his sympathies undoubtedly lay with the party to which his brother belonged, he became a discerning source of intelligence for any party. And as a frank critic, he refused to take any party line with which he disagreed.

After leaving Glasgow he was awarded a Research Fellowship in Economics. This enabled him to enlarge his field of study at Oxford University, where he joined the Agricultural Economics Research Institute under Dr. C. S. Orwin, first as a research scholar and later as a member of the staff. He was given a special assignment to deal with international affairs, particularly in relation to questions affecting

Empire trade in agricultural products. Here again he refused to approach his subject in a narrow sense, but tried to look at it as part of a much wider problem. His zeal for this more comprehensive approach carried conviction to most of his friends and colleagues and aroused their interest and devotion, but it also gave rise to controversy, sometimes indeed to intense opposition. In such a case he could pursue his own line with a devastating and obstinate persistence, though he never denied his opponents the full text of his own policy, welcoming criticism, and a fight if that were necessary. But even while 'debunking' any attitude he thought undesirable or wrong, he had an inimitable way of creating a friendly atmosphere and a unique facility for maintaining peace. Along with meticulous honesty, it was this great capacity for toleration that was one of his signal assets.

He enjoyed meeting people from all classes and nations. He was indeed a true humanist in that it was a man himself and not his origin, colour, or creed that impressed him. Although a lover of his native Scotland, he was critical of all forms of what he suspected was plain national selfishness or provincial conceit, and never argued, 'My country right or wrong'. Yet where did he ever appear more at home than when playing the piano at the Oxford 'Reel Club', where he and his fellow Scots took their pleasure till the small hours in typical dances of the north country?

At the Agricultural Economics Research Institute he met folks from all over the world and his tour of the U.S.A. as a research scholar gave him a considerable connexion among professional colleagues and a wide knowledge of the work being undertaken outside Britain in the field of agricultural economics. During this time, too, he gained insight into the kinds of problem that were besetting countries large and small, rural and urbanized. This practical experience following a distinguished academic career was a good preparation for his subsequent work as first Director of the Institute of Agrarian Affairs at Oxford University, and as editor of the *Proceedings of the International Conference of Agricultural Economists* and of this *Journal*. In these capacities he was able to extend and maintain intimate contacts with economists the world over. To this kind of work he could devote all his energies since, rejecting physical combat as a means of settling disputes, he held the certain conviction that there was an ultimate and peaceful solution to all problems of an international nature.

Maxton could write with ease and although he never felt any urge to write books himself there are many of his friends who would be the

first to acknowledge that but for his thought and criticism a great deal of their work would have been much the poorer. He loved argument, by word or letter, as a means of clearing both his own mind and that of his adversary, and he was completely unselfish in his help to others. In the files of his numerous colleagues all over the world there is much interesting written material of his, and in many publications are to be found articles which he contributed on a wide range of economic topics. His most original contributions probably were made to the Agricultural Economics Society in Britain. His two last papers to the Society given during and shortly after the war, on 'Professional Stocktaking' and 'The Teaching of Agricultural Economics', were among the more outstanding of his writings and, possibly, of any written work on these subjects. They will long remain a challenge to his professional colleagues in many lands.

As an editor, his unique qualities are apparent to anyone who turns the pages of the five last volumes of the *International Conference of Agricultural Economists* and notes more especially the editing of the contributions to the discussions. He could unravel the essentials of any problem and make a concise and orderly statement out of any contribution, however confused. And while he had a profound dislike of censoring other people's views, his concern was to have them presented, so far as possible, with absolute clarity and without reiteration. In this work he was helped by his innate love for detail and precision and by the breadth of his interest in all sorts of subjects, things, and people.

Although a delightful and interesting conversationalist, he was very diffident about taking part in public discussion. It took a lot of prodding to get John Maxton to his feet; his style was not that of the professional orator, but it was effective and could be impassioned. He had a rare capacity for digging down to the vitals of a problem, and having laid them bare, would leave no doubt of his views about them. In public or in private he liked to get things straight, and it was his discontent with slovenly thinking, as much as anything, that led old and young to seek his counsel and that made his counsel so well worth seeking. Especially was he greatly beloved by those, so much junior to himself, who went to him to discuss thesis, article, paper, or plans for their own immediate future, and rarely came away without being impressed by the patient, considerate attention, the pains taken to get at the heart of the matter and the encouragement he gave to any honest inquiry. As often as not, it was the younger members of the profession whom he sought out and encouraged at conferences, national or international.

He fought hard for frank international relations and understanding, not by mere pleasantries, which after all might be misleading, but by getting to know the other fellow intimately, and by sharing not only his problems and perplexities, but his honest laughter. Any step which might serve to reduce ignorance and soften misunderstanding or foster good relations between the folk of different countries was always worth experiment. It was his solid conviction that world peace could be built only step by step, with infinite striving and intense devotion.

In 1934 he married Jenny Alston of Glasgow who, with three sons and a daughter, survives him.