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JOHN HENRY MACKAY – THE UNIQUE



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"A thousand days come and go:  
Sometimes someone comes to you and me and awakens us.  
But to so many others no-one comes in many thousands of days  
Boldly interrupting the course of their lives.

I cannot make you other than you are  
But I can awaken you  
From the dulness of your heart and mind.  
That is my triumph!"

JOHN HENRY MACKAY

It was not only in the sense in which Stirner used the expression that his rediscoverer was unique, but John Henry Mackay was unique in three respects - as a Poet, in his prose as well as in his verse; as a Thinker, especially as a social critic; and, above all, as a Personality. "Because I want what others do not want, I see what only few can", he said in one of his poems. And . . .

"I want to live in Freedom!", I said.  
Then, with a strength which was greater  
Than that of my youth,  
I drove myself a path through the gossiping crowd.

Friends left my side,  
As blossom flies before the storm . . .  
My gaze was set on the far distance,  
They watched me go, doubting.

The strong wings of my purpose  
Bore me through the night towards the dawn;  
When, finally, they brought me to my goal  
I looked around in the silence and found I stood alone.

A whole generation has grown up since John Henry Mackay closed his eyes for ever on May 16, 1933. They have hardly heard of him because a large part of the pertinent literature was destroyed by

the Gestapo or lost in the bombings. Even the house in which Mackay last lived, Berlinerstrasse 166, "Am Knie", Berlin-Charlottenburg, was razed to the ground.

This new generation, as well as those of his contemporaries who knew little or nothing of him, must now be told who and what he was. Son of a Scottish father who died early in life and a German mother, who came from a Hamburg merchant family, he was born on February 6, 1864 in Greenock in Scotland. From the age of two he was brought up in Germany where his mother lived during her unhappy second marriage. His name is pronounced as written, with the accent on the second syllable. German was his mother tongue and he had an especially deep and affectionate relationship with his mother. His passport was German but he once said, when angered by a typical example of German subservience, "I am not a German, I am a Scot!"

There was, undoubtedly, something of the proud feeling for freedom of the Scottish Highlander in his outward appearance. In spite of the stoutness of his later years, one could well have imagined him in a Scottish kilt. It is a pity that so very few, mostly poor, photographs of him exist. The best of these is a youthful portrait. There is also a line drawing. His powerful head with its high forehead, the small moustache under the strong nose and the well-formed, energetic chin would have been the delight of any portrait painter, particularly since his temperament sometimes gave his profile an almost wild expression which belied his nature. Unfortunately Mackay did not like to be photographed. Indeed, it was laid down in his will that all pictures in his possession together with all correspondence and unfinished manuscripts should be destroyed and that his bust should be broken. He wished only to survive in his completed works. That he will do - and for all time.

John Henry Mackay was that rarity - a complete Human Being. Such a man is not diminished by a small amount of normal human failing. He made of his life a work of art because to him Art and Life were one as were Conviction and Life. With an unflinching instinct, almost psychic

in its vision, he steered, from his earliest days, towards the goal which appeared to him, ever more clearly, as his freely chosen aim in life. He followed this without thought for his own wellbeing, always struggling for more precise means of expression.

"The dream of my youth was  
To go proud and free  
Through the howling masses  
Of Mankind . . .  
Alone,  
And with the God in my breast,  
Unswerving and sure,  
Master of Sorrow and Delight.  
My purpose taught me, day by day,  
To be a complete, Free Man."

As if driven by what Socrates called his Daemon - he says this quite clearly in "Beschwörung", which could well be his crowning poem - free of all obsession, listening only to his innermost being, he gave himself passionately to Life, the real Life which he praised and sang about in so many of his poems. This is the Life which forms the impressive background to the characters in his prose - characters so often completely the opposite to himself.

This is what makes John Henry Mackay unique and distinguishes him from others who are important as personalities or in their work. With such people one can almost always establish a break in thought or deed caused by a wish to win success or prestige. One is always amazed at the way in which otherwise impressive personalities or accomplishments are reduced in our estimations by actions or statements which can only come from ignorance or from a surrender to an over-riding authority. John Henry Mackay made no such compromises. In fact, at a time when he was most in need, he refused "hand-outs" from Public Funds which had been arranged by friends, because, as he informed the Authorities, he would not accept stolen money. In his

clearly reasoned opinion, all money "collected" by the State is stolen or plundered, the State itself being a degenerate form of Society which most people accept as the only possible form of Society.

This great destroyer of the Catchphrase (he himself also described Max Stirner in this way) was a true revolutionary. His effectiveness lies in the simplicity and clarity with which he formulates and presents his profoundly reasoned conclusions. Stirner, in his personal appearance, looked more like a school-master - which he had in fact been, from time to time - than the most revolutionary philosopher of all time, which he in fact was. In the same way, John Henry Mackay did not seem to conform to the popular conception of a Revolutionary any more than Karl Marx resembled a "member of the Proletariat". But it is not the outward appearance but the inner truth which counts. John Henry Mackay's whole life, all his endeavours were always centred upon the things which matter. Even if he had never written a single line, but had only lived his life in the way he did, he would still, through this fact alone have been a unique personality.

In the same way, his purely literary works, in poetry and in prose, suffice to secure him a place in the first ranks of World Literature. "There are few who are aware of the immense forces of the living word which are always ready to be of influence! Who realizes that poets have written verses which, born of the heart, charged with the strength of whole generations, possess a power comparable to that of radio-active elements but far more wonderful because, although the poets have already departed this Earth, their verses continue to influence the World and to bring renewed understanding?" These words, written by Hans Carossa, are particularly pertinent to John Henry Mackay because his unequalled personality combines poetic vision and artistic power. "Songs and Dreams

Are the Crests of the Waves,  
Like Joy and Pain,  
Like chaff before the wind!

We must cherish them  
And tend them with Love  
And talk with them  
Without compulsion.

Else we fools  
Have lost the helpers  
In our struggle  
With Life's miseries."

A young Swiss, Hanns Schaub, in a clever essay, published in Basel in 1970, entitled "John Henry Mackay. Der Dichter des Namenlosen" (The Poet of the Nameless one), has called him a prophet of truly new dimensions and has pointed out that he gave expression in his Lyric Poems to the most radical and uncompromising views. Therefore these, as well as his narrative works form necessary complements to his Social-Critical works. So that, unfortunately, Mackay's qualification is appropriate when he says: "Because my words are drops, they fall from my plumage which has arisen from the Fountain of Life - Alas, my Songs, only an exalted heart can understand your language!"

Already in the poems of the eighteen-year-old there were, besides verses of pure feeling and entirely human emotion, verses which are music transformed into words or visions, words and sounds which have already signposted the direction which he was to follow so resolutely all his Life: such as "Unschuldig verurteilt" (Condemned, though Innocent), "Das Leben" (Life) in which he says "...and everything failing halfway!...and few have the courage of Truth, the blazing Courage which powerful proclaims what it must!", "Moderne Jugend" (Modern Youth), ("...and as my words, set ablaze by deep anger, here canvass for the eternal rights of Youth which daily, hourly, are trodden into the ground...") right up to "Zukunftstraum" (Dream of the Future), "Lied der Zeit" (Song of the Times), "Haerten" (Hard Times) in which are the words, "I hate these well-fed,

satisfied, smiling faces, this riff-raff which considers so anxiously each of its feeble footsteps" and finally in "Dichterwort" (The Poet's Word):

"Your word shall be as the flashing lightening,  
Which strikes from the growling clouds,  
So that the House of Lies and the Seat of Hollowness  
Fall into smoking ruins."

People have tried to belittle Mackay and to label him "a poet with a bias", especially because of his "Sturm" (Storm). The revolutionary 'Poems' in "Sturm" which he intentionally always carefully separated from his poems proper had, of course, a marked direction and were supposed to have. Mackay always said that for these he claimed no artistic merit but at the same time he was prouder of this little book than of anything else he had written! And rightly so!

The twenty-year-old who read Philosophy and the Histories of Art and Literature at the Universities of Kiel, Leipzig and Berlin, shewed himself to be a ceaseless searcher and an uncompromising rebel. It was argued in the literary circles in which, at that time, he moved which included, among others, Gerhart Hauptmann, Arno Holz and Frank Wedekind that the hope of German Literature lay in either Wedekind or Mackay. Certainly two "realistic novels" by Mackay were indisputably the forerunners of the School of Naturalism. He, himself, dismissed those times and those people with the ironic words: "They were all geniuses. I did not feel that I belonged". He went, at twenty-three, to London for a year and there he got to know the Socialist Movement at close quarters. After that he spent four years, partly living in Switzerland and partly travelling widely - it was in the United States that he lost a suitcase containing irreplaceable manuscripts - and he returned to Berlin in 1892 in order to conclude the researches, which he had begun there in 1888, into the life of Max Stirner whose rediscoverer he was to become.

Besides following the great purpose of his life he wrote poems and "stories" but never "novels", although his friend, the publisher S. Fischer was always urging him: "Write a novel, you've got talent!" ("Schreibense hen Roman, Se haben Talent!"). "Literature" went as much against the grain with him as did "Politics". He once said: "Between Literature and Poetry there is an insurmountable difference: the difference between artificially produced work and work which is conceived and given life; between work which is manufactured and work which is created; work which has been dragged forth and work which has sprung to life unbidden". The Literati revenged themselves for his contempt with silence or with falsehoods. He who really wishes to get to know John Henry Mackay must not rely, therefore, on Histories of Literature or on the judgements of others but must himself read his works - all his works, from the twelve hundred pages of "Werke in einem Band" (Works in one Volume) published in 1928 which contains too both his Social Critiques "Bücher der Freiheit" (Books of Freedom), through his outstanding story of a revenge "Staatsanwalt Sierlin" (District Attorney Sierlin) and the story of a transformation, "Der Unschuldige" (The Innocent) to his last work the fast-moving "Abrechnung" (Settling of Accounts). To these must be added the eight volume "Gesammelte Werke" (Collected Works) of 1911 and of course his biography of Stirner, "Max Stirner. Sein Leben und sein Werk" (Max Stirner. His Life and his Work), first published in 1898 which went into a third edition in 1914; a fourth edition of which was published in 1977. Finally there are his seven books published under the pseudonym SAGITTA.

It will then become clear what distinguishes him in so singular a manner from other true poets. They all - even Goethe, the Government official of Weimar - have from time to time, if not frequently, kowtowed to Authority or at least allowed their points of view to be so restricted that something important was lost which was vital to the full development of a complete personality. Had John Henry Mackay been nothing else but a poet the idiosyncrasy of his verse

and his prose alone would have assured him of a place in the first rank. But he was above all a unique personality and, as Walter von Molo wrote, "He was a Man - above all a Character, and one is ashamed in the knowledge that those who come after us will see him as far greater than we do - yet one is glad!"

John Henry Mackay was basically a Thinker. The decisive turning point of his life was his meeting with the work of Max Stirner "Der Einzige und sein Eigentum" (The Owner and his Own). Already, as a twenty-four-year-old he had begun his researches into the long-forgotten life story of Max Stirner, researches which he only concluded nine years later. The following year he published his biography which went into four further editions. The publications he arranged of Stirner's two works "Max Stirner's Kleinere Schriften und seine Entgegnungen auf die Kritik seines Werkes" (Max Stirner's Shorter Writings and his Replies to the Criticisms of his Work) and "Das unwahre Prinzip unserer Erziehung" (The false Principle of our Education) also went into two or three editions. In regard to this he said:

"The fury of the Brotherhood broke over me.

Because I did what they failed to do.

Because I saw whereas they were blind.

Because I found and took up that which they despised.

What a disgrace for Academic Philosophy - that an outsider, a non-philosopher, should find a work of philosophy which they themselves had denied, overlooked and put in the corner and that it should now prove, by their own admission to be one of the most important ever written! ..."

From 1927 onwards the Reclam Edition of "Der Einzige" carried John Henry Mackay's foreword, which makes it incomprehensible that in the latest edition an epilogue was substituted by a Marxist ideologist of the strongest views who misunderstood and misinterpreted Stirner in the same way as Marx himself did.

Mackay is right in saying that all the volumes in all the libraries

in the World could not replace the works of Max Stirner if they were lost. It is just as right to ask what would one know of these works if Mackay had not snatched them from oblivion, had not followed the slender traces of this life with such love and care and if he had not pointed out so openly and clearly the importance of Stirner's work to the prejudiced masses, the ignorant, the mistaken and the misinterpreters.

John Henry Mackay's name will always be linked with that of Max Stirner, not only as the rediscoverer but as the completer of the work which Stirner had already clearly indicated but had not developed in all its implications.

His own achievements as a thinker are absolutely unique. What he expressed in his two "Books of Freedom" ("Die Anarchisten" and especially "Der Freiheitsucher") he had already formulated in the first edition of "Sturm" which was written before he had set eyes on the works of Stirner. "Sturm" was first published in 1888 - with a torch instead of his name on the title page - as an open challenge to all authority, because: "The enormous movement known as Socialism seized me as well and pulled me into its whirlpool. I began to feel that this was the answer. I was shaken profoundly in the iron grip of this revelation and was raised to heights which can only be reached when young - the only time it is possible to think so feverishly and to feel to the last fibre of ones being". It was - apart from Stirner - by far the most revolutionary material that had ever been printed, but in Germany it fell foul of the anti-Socialist Laws and was published only in Zurich. Most of it was, nevertheless, reprinted in the Socialist Press.

A curious thing happened which is characteristic of the relationship between Socialist Literatur and the Socialist Press, even most of that which called itself Anarchist. After the second edition of "Sturm", in which his meeting with Stirner's work found expression, the whole of the Social-critical works of Mackay were put on a sort

of "Index". This happened although Mackay retracted nothing of what he had said in the first edition, but only complemented it with further findings and formulated a few things more precisely. One can understand this in the bourgeois Press of those years, but how could the Press and Literature of Socialism - of which Anarchism is only one facet - have misunderstood him so completely? Kropotkin, for instance, comments on Stirner and the Anarchism of the Individual with quotations which are torn out of context shewing a complete lack of understanding, whereas he, with his intuitive and often contradictory style of argument would have benefited enormously from Mackay's clear definitions of concepts. Even a man like Rocker asserts, referring to Mackay's "Anarchisten" - which he calls a "novel"! - that "the theoretical basis of the book is extremely weak and very vulnerable", without, however, proving this or elaborating in any way. Such denigration, falsification and even slander have prevented many people from studying the philosophy of Mackay in any detail. So a great deal of nonsense has been spread about his work. Why is this?

In the first instance because Stirner's work is woefully misunderstood as simply "extreme individualism". Stirner himself answered the first critics who mis-interpreted him that they did not give him credit for that part of his book in which he described as "Mein Verkehr" (My Traffic) the relationship of the Individual to others. Stirner defends a social (in the true meaning of the word) individualism which, of its own free will and purely out of self-interest sets limits to its own influence as well as bridges of co-operation between itself and others. It is certainly not isolationism and even less the declaration of superiority we get from Nietzsche. So we see that Mackay has interpreted Stirner quite correctly, not as a mere Individualist, but as an Individualistic Anarchist whose aim is mutual and equal Freedom for all. In his "Confessions d'un Révolutionnaire" (Confessions of a Revolutionary) Proudhon says, "Seen from the Socialist point of view Freedom and Solidarity are identical concepts. The Freedom of the individual is not limited by the Freedom of others, as stated in the Declara-

tion of Human and Civil Rights of 1793, but rather is it supported by the Freedom of others. Thus, the man who is most free is the man who is most involved with his fellow men". However, it must be understood that such relationships must be entered into voluntarily. In "Abrechnung" (A Settling of Accounts) Mackay says: "You need others. Take care that they need you too, otherwise you are finished". He always placed Stirner and Proudhon as the fathers of what he understood as "Individualistic Anarchism".

The concept of "Egoism" has also contributed greatly to the misunderstanding of Stirner. The normally accepted definition of egoism, that of inconsiderate selfishness, was rejected out of hand by Stirner as a form of "obsession". In "Der Einzige und sein Eigentum" he says: "I, too, love People, not just a few individuals but all People. I love with conscious egoism; I love because to love makes Me happy. I love because to love is natural to Me. I love because I like it. I know of no 'commandment to love'." To Stirner "egoism" was the acceptance of the ego as a starting point and the recognition of the ego as the indefinable but nevertheless real power. This power, while slowly awakening and discovering itself during the earlier history of Man, had come to let itself be ruled by its own creations, either by those which exist only in the mind and become confused with reality or by those of Society. Stirner rebelled against this rule, not only on behalf of his own ego but on behalf of all egos.

Stirner had to battle with bowdlerised and ambiguous concepts as well as with unfounded ideas many of which are still today rooted deep in many minds. Mackay elucidated much in Stirner's work which was not easy to understand, by the use of extremely clear language. Unfortunately people latched onto sentences torn out of context and individual words were given entirely different meanings so that much of what was misunderstood in Stirner's work tinged Mackay's also.

Furthermore, what made headlines in the press of the nineteenth

Century under the label of "Anarchism" - and still does today - was a conglomeration of varied and contradictory ideas, often connecting Marxist dogma with a sentimental longing for Freedom with no clear conception of its essence, design or consequences. This often led to theories and claims in strict contradiction to the whole concept of Anarchy (without a master). The obvious differences between the various factions which all claimed to represent "Anarchism" made its effectual realisation impossible so long as there was no agreement on the fundamental principles of Anarchism and its consequences. This alone should have directed the efforts of all who were seriously interested towards this goal. But who of those who were recognised as "representative of classical Anarchism" took the indicated path? Though both Bakunin and Kropotkin expressed excellently formulated, though isolated, ideas on Anarchism at the same time they voiced others which, if not entirely anti-anarchistic, are at least questionable. Neither they nor their followers ever defined precisely - or even tried to do so - the basic concepts of Anarchy, Anarchism, Freedom, Government or Power. None of them drew a clearly defined picture of a Social Order without a Governing Body but presented only wishful thinking in strong contrast to all previous experience. Nobody pointed out the decisive errors and gaps in Marxism by contrast with which Anarchism has a solid foundation in economic theory. The only one who took up this task and solved its problems only after long years of painful study, full of sacrifice, is treated with harsh ingratitude, mostly out of ignorance, by those who should be most grateful to him.

He, who relies only on facts and logic, is treated as though it was he and not they who was the dogmatist. He is treated as if, through self-esteem, he claimed to be the Keeper of the Holy Grail of Anarchism, as if he retreated into isolation and despised the masses whereas, in fact, he called tirelessly upon the individuals who make up the masses to wake up to reality and to act together in their own interests instead of allowing themselves to be taken in by demagogic phrases.

All who admire and love Mackay's personality and work with an understanding based on profound study no more look upon his work as a "Bible" than he did upon Stirner's. They see in it only the confirmation of their own ideas, derived from their own observation and experience, and their minds are open to and interested in any well-based objection. Such objections, however, can only be made after a careful study of Mackay's biography of Stirner, his "Sturm" and especially of his two "Books of Freedom". The first of these, "Die Anarchisten", is a piece of cultural history, in fact its subtitle is "a portrait of the culture of the end of the XIXth. Century"; the second, "Der Freiheitsucher" subtitled "the Psychology of a Development", must surely be recognised as Mackay's major work ("in a master form, one that Tucker, Schumm, Robinson, Yarros, Walker or Byington could never have achieved, in a flow of language that their English was never capable of", wrote Thomas A. Riley in "Germany's Poet-Anarchist John Henry Mackay"). Neither of these, of course, is a "novel", though those who should know better constantly refer to them as such. Mackay has the final word upon these books in "Abrechnung" (Settling of Accounts) a work which is essential to a full understanding of his life's work.

The series of pamphlets entitled "Propaganda des individualistischen Anarchismus in deutscher Sprache" (For the Spreading of the Ideal of Anarchism of the Individual in the German Language) was published by him in the years between 1895 and 1922 and 43,000 copies were distributed. These are, without exception, translations from foreign languages and will be found a great help towards a fuller understanding but his literary works, both poetry and prose, must not be neglected in order that this understanding may become complete. Above all, especial consideration must be given to those works which he undertook in middle life, after a long battle full of sacrifices and which he published under a pseudonym for well-considered and completely justifiable reasons. It must never be forgotten that he began this Battle in the years when it was believed that his creative and artistic powers were exhausted.

"As high as ever thought could fly,  
As wide as Phantasie could reach,  
As far as ever longing stretched,  
Let your wishes fly, oh Man!  
Let nothing be your limit and nothing be your end,  
Let everything be only the beginning of new goals!"

John Henry Mackay

The MACKAY Society, which is undogmatic and anti-ideological, would like to form the basis of discussion of all problems of the Social Order. It attempts to base its arguments only on demonstrable facts. These arguments it puts forward in a fashion which can only lead to an entirely new way of thinking, a consummation which Albert Einstein declared to be imperative.

If interested please write to the Secretary: -

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