

The Sad March to the Right: J. B. McLachlan's Resignation from the Communist Party of Canada, 1936

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THE RESIGNATION of J. B. McLachlan from the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) in 1936 is one of the more controversial episodes in the biography of this well-known Canadian labour radical. It is also an event of considerable interest in exploring the history of the Communist Party and especially of the party's trade union policy in the 1930s. Generally, historical works associated with the Communist Party have passed over this episode. In the official party history, McLachlan is described as the "colorful" leader of the Nova Scotia coal miners, but is not specifically identified as a veteran Communist and there is no reference to his resignation.¹ The importance of McLachlan's resignation, however, has been recognized in several other accounts. In the popular works by Paul MacEwan and John Mellor, McLachlan's resignation is presented as a repudiation of labour radicalism generally and of the Communist Party in particular. In this view, McLachlan "had had his fill of the Communist Party" and was undergoing a "conversion to a milder form of socialism through the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation."² Other writers have more accurately placed McLachlan's resignation in the context of internal party debates over the united front policy adopted in 1935. Yet these brief references are misleading in presenting McLachlan as a consistent opponent of the policy. Ivan Avakumovic, for instance, describes McLachlan as a party veteran who opposed "the merger with international unions" and "left the CPC over the question of the dissolution of the WUL." Desmond Morton

¹ *Canada's Party of Socialism: History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1921-1976* (Toronto 1982), 38.

² Paul MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers: Labour in Cape Breton* (Toronto 1976), 188-93; John Mellor, *The Company Store* (Toronto 1983), 333-7. For a useful critique see Michael Earle, "The Legacy: Manipulating the Myth of McLachlan," *New Maritimes*, 6, 4/5 (December 1987-January 1988), 10-3.

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also states that McLachlan opposed the dissolution of the Workers' Unity League and adds that he was expelled from the party for refusing to follow the latest "command from Moscow." Similarly, Ian Angus conveys the impression that the change in policy was accomplished with little or no debate and that McLachlan opposed the decision: "With the single exception of James McLachlan, who refused to return to the United Mine Workers, no party leader questioned the 1935 about-face."³ A third explanation has also been advanced. According to this view, McLachlan broadly approved of the campaign for unity in the trade unions, but could not agree to its application in Nova Scotia because of a subjective inability to accept a return to the UMWA under John L. Lewis. This explanation has been favoured by some of McLachlan's contemporaries in the Communist Party. It was given as early as 1937 in one of McLachlan's obituaries in the party press: "He agreed with the party's policy of trade union unity but could never reconcile his political beliefs with his personal hatred of President John L. Lewis of the UMWA." In some respects, this explanation brings us closer to the truth, but it fails to establish the full political context of his decision. Indeed in stating that McLachlan's objections were primarily personal, this approach underestimates the consistency of his position and his support for principles of union democracy and common action in the construction of the united front.⁴

With the exception of MacEwan's *Miners and Steelworkers*, none of these published works had the benefit of using McLachlan's own explanation of his decision to leave the Communist Party. His resignation from the party had been noted by the RCMP as early as 25 May 1936, but McLachlan made no formal public announcement and except for an impromptu speech at a public meeting in September 1936, McLachlan himself remained largely silent.⁵ However, several weeks after his resignation McLachlan prepared his own personal statement in response to a letter from CPC general secretary Tim Buck, who had originally recruited him into the party in 1922. In two and a half long and densely typed pages, McLachlan offered an explanation of the circumstances surrounding his withdrawal from the

³Ivan Avakumovic, *The Communist Party in Canada: A History* (Toronto 1975), 132; Desmond Morton, *Working People: An Illustrated History of Canadian Labour* (Toronto 1980), 150; Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Montreal 1981), 329.

⁴*People's Advocate* (Vancouver), 5 November 1937; see also Tom McEwen, *The Forge Glows Red: From Blacksmith to Revolutionary* (Toronto 1974), 147 and *George MacEachern: An Autobiography: The Story of a Cape Breton Labour Radical* (Sydney 1987), 96. A dissident Communist view, however, has identified McLachlan as one of the party members who opposed an unprincipled application of the united front policy to Canadian conditions. See Fergus McKean, *Communism versus Opportunism* (Montreal 1977 [1946]), 202.

⁵"J.B. McLachlin" [sic] (report dated 25 May 1935), Royal Canadian Mounted Police Files. Access to this file was obtained under the terms of the Access to Information Act, CSIS File No. 85-A-58.

party. This letter, reproduced in Appendix One below, remains the most important single piece of evidence concerning his resignation.⁶

This is not the place to review the full history of McLachlan's career as a labour radical, but it is important to recognize that McLachlan was a working-class leader with a strong base of local support as well as a national reputation. Born in Scotland in 1869, he arrived in Canada in 1902 at the time of the industrial boom in the Cape Breton coalfields. By 1910 he was well-known as a leader of District 26 of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and also as a local spokesman for the Socialist Party of Canada. In the labour revolt at the end of World War I, he led the coal miners to important victories and won a large following in the coalfields. He was repeatedly elected to union office, and as a labour candidate in the 1921 Dominion election he received 8,914 votes. His career as a union official came to sudden end in 1923 when he was removed from office by UMWA president Lewis for promoting a sympathetic strike in support of the Sydney steelworkers. At the same time he was tried and convicted on charges of seditious libel and sentenced to two years in Dorchester Penitentiary. Subsequently, as editor of the *Maritime Labor Herald* and then of the *Nova Scotia Miner* McLachlan continued to voice the cause of labour radicalism in the coalfields. He had joined the Communist Party in 1922 and although his relations with the party leaders were not always harmonious, he remained an active supporter and a valuable spokesman who was relatively uninvolved in the factionalism which divided the party in the late 1920s. In the accelerating class struggle of the early 1930s, McLachlan was described by *The Worker* as "the grand old man of the revolutionary movement." In 1933 he was acclaimed as National President of the Workers' Unity League (WUL), and as a Communist candidate in the 1935 Dominion election he secured more than 5,000 votes. Although never a key party strategist, McLachlan was one of the few party leaders to enjoy wide recognition and popular support. All this made McLachlan's break with the party a difficult personal decision as well as a significant event in the history of the party.⁷

⁶The document was written on 13 June 1936. McLachlan's daughter Eva vividly recalled the night her father tapped out the letter on his old typewriter at Steele's Hill. She fully appreciated the significance of the moment and asked him if she could keep a copy. We are grateful to Mrs. Eva Pemberton for providing a copy of the letter and for her permission to publish it. The document is reproduced in full; minor typographical errors have been corrected. The letter from Buck has apparently not survived and there is no record of Buck's response to McLachlan's resignation.

⁷For recent articles on McLachlan see David Frank, "The Trial of J.B. McLachlan," *Historical Papers/Communications historiques* (1983), 208-25 and Frank, "Working-Class Politics: The Election of J.B. McLachlan, 1916-1935," in Ken Donovan, ed., *The Island: New Perspectives on Cape Breton History, 1713-1990* (Fredericton/Sydney 1990), 187-219; John Manley, "Preaching the Red Stuff: J.B. McLachlan, Communism, and the Cape Breton Miners, 1922-1935," *Labour/Le Travail* 30 (Fall 1992), 65-114.

The central theme of McLachlan's letter is the debate over the changes in Communist Party policies in the years 1934-36. In response to the news of McLachlan's resignation, Tim Buck had written: "needless to say, we feel that your action can be based upon nothing less than a misunderstanding of the political line of the comintern." McLachlan strongly rejected Buck's claim that he had failed to understand the decisions of the Communist International in 1935. On the contrary, he replied, "I can assure you that I have paid the greatest attention to the line laid down by the VII Congress, specially the part dealing with trade union work, and have read everything I could get my hands on. I am absolutely convinced, that in the 'Nova Scotia Miner', I am following the line laid down by the party. On the other hand, I firmly believe the party in Canada has gone badly to the right." In July 1935 the Seventh Congress of the Communist International formally adopted the policy of the popular front, a decision widely recognized as a turning point in the history of the international Communist movement. In 1928, the International had predicted a violent upsurge in the class struggle and accordingly propounded a set of revolutionary policies which it judged timely. Now, however, the International was explicitly endorsing a policy of alliances to increase working-class unity and oppose the rise of war and fascism. Instead of denouncing other parties on the left, Communists would attempt to establish working alliances with them; and instead of promoting separate radical unions, Communists would attempt to unite with existing labour organizations.⁸

When the Communist International proclaimed its support for the popular front in July 1935, there was much to show that McLachlan and other Canadian radicals sympathized with the new policy and welcomed its formal acceptance. Already in February 1935 he and Tom McEwen, on behalf of the 'Workers' Unity League, had launched an appeal to unite all organized labour in Canada in "one all-inclusive labour union federation." This was a far-reaching proposal that envisaged cooperation even with the most conservative of the syndicats nationaux in Quebec and the

⁸The importance of this development has been widely discussed. Leftist critics have usually condemned the turn as a repudiation of the class struggle and a capitulation of the international movement to the domestic and security interests of the Soviet Union. See Fernando Claudin, *The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform* (Harmondsworth 1975). More sympathetic historians have emphasized the roots of the popular front strategy in the labour and anti-fascist movements of the west. See E.H. Carr, *The Twilight of Comintern, 1930-1935* (London 1982). See also: "Special Issue: The Popular Front," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 30 (Fall 1986). Certainly this was a turn in communist policy which was widely discussed and bore little resemblance to the sudden about-face in 1939 which took much of the international movement, including the Canadian party, by surprise. One recent Canadian study has divided the history of the party prior to the Cold War into two periods, one marked by leftism (1921-1934) and the other marked by the united front (1934-1945): Robert Comeau et Bernard Dionne, *Le droit de se taire: Histoire des communistes au Québec, de la Première Guerre mondiale à la Révolution tranquille* (Montréal 1989), 22.

railway brotherhoods in the American Federation of Labor. Although the WUL was originally established in 1929 in response to the new international line and little more than a paper organization in its first two years, by 1933 the League was pursuing increasingly effective tactics in industrial conflicts; with a membership of about 35,000 workers (and thousands more sympathizers among the unemployed or in independent unions such as the Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia), the WUL had become a genuine force within the Canadian labour movement. Although the unity appeal received no response from the TLC and the ACCL, it can be regarded as one of the early domestic versions of the united front which preceded the decisions of the Communist International in July 1935. The WUL appeal was for a form of unity in common action or by merger of the existing federations; it was to be achieved on the basis of a program of union democracy and militant struggle. These principles were similar to those of an earlier united-front appeal which McLachlan had advanced in 1922 and they remained central to his view of the united front in 1935.⁹ Later in the year, following the meetings of the Communist International and the circulation of key documents such as Georgi Dimitroff's speeches, McLachlan's views remained consistent. In the *Nova Scotia Miner* he excerpted one of Dimitroff's speeches to highlight the view that the united front was a form of "unity in action" and to reaffirm the importance of maintaining independence even while entering into short-term and long-term agreements for joint action; moreover, Dimitroff had stated, "The chief stress in all this must be laid on developing mass action locally, to be carried out by the local organizations through local agreements."¹⁰

McLachlan's views on the united front were most fully articulated at two significant meetings in Toronto in November 1935. After hearing a report by Stewart Smith, who had attended the meetings of the International, those attending a CPC central committee session unanimously endorsed the new policy. In his contribution to the discussion McLachlan delivered an extended report on the Nova Scotia situation and spoke in support of the policy: "The basic conditions are a threat of war and fascism and a continual threat of the worsened condition of the working class. These are the conditions under which we have got to go out from this plenum and hunt for every ally we can get, and build up this great united front we are talking about." In Nova Scotia, McLachlan pointed out, the recent Dominion

⁹"Unite the Canadian Trade Union Movement," 28 February 1935, in R.B. Bennett Papers, National Archives of Canada (NAC), Vol. 420, #266477. See also *Worker*, 2, 26 March 1935. The Canadian initiative was paralleled internationally by appeals for unity between the Red International and the International Federation of Trade Unions. McLachlan published several of these documents in the *Nova Scotia Miner*, 18, 25 May 1935. For the most detailed study of the Workers' Unity League, see John Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class During the Great Depression: The Workers' Unity League, 1930-1936," PhD thesis, Dalhousie University, 1984; for the developments discussed here, see especially 259, 314-32, 360-72.

¹⁰*Nova Scotia Miner*, 2 November 1935.

election campaign (in which he won more than 5,000 votes) had helped strengthen links between the miners in the AMW and the UMW. Indeed, local officers of the two unions already had launched discussions to establish a single union of Nova Scotia coal miners which, McLachlan expected, would end the rivalry between the existing unions. But although the unification process was underway, he did not believe it would result necessarily in a return to the UMWA: "You cannot walk down and get into a miners' meeting down there with a cut and dried proposition and say: 'You ought to all go back into the UMWA'." McLachlan was optimistic about the prospects for unity among the coal miners but believed that a cautious approach was required, a point underlined in the last words of his speech to the central committee: "With patient work unity will be advanced."¹¹

Shortly afterward, McLachlan presided at the Third Congress of the Workers' Unity League which also took place in Toronto in November 1935. Again he was determined not only to promote unity but also to ensure that it was achieved on the best possible terms. Prior to the meeting, McLachlan had issued an extended message to WUL delegates stating the case for unity: "History demands of us, of the working class, and especially of members of the Workers' Unity League unions, that we stretch out our hands in solidarity to every worker who is willing to struggle in defence of such democratic rights as we have and for all-round better conditions of life." It was a strong statement in favour of united action, fully in accord with party policy. But McLachlan had worded it carefully, drawing directly from his reading of Dimitroff, to underline the importance of establishing a negotiated unity, based on the common demands of workers and adaptable to local situations: "Not an iron-clad and fixed program of unity that cannot be changed, but a program of unity open to amendment and discussion from any section of workers in Canada who have come to the conclusion that the workers of this country must struggle unitedly for a better life."¹² The 150 delegates unanimously resolved to urge each WUL union to "take up the question of unity in its own industry and on the basis of the concrete conditions prevailing in each industry, strive to establish one union of all workers in such industry."¹³ Endorsing the "One Industry — One Union" policy, McLachlan returned from the Toronto meetings satisfied with the broad outlines of the new trade-union policy. Certainly there was no sense of despair in McLachlan's account of these last meetings of the WUL: "My firm opinion is that we grappled with these life-or-death questions in a proper way," McLachlan wrote in *Unity*, "We are prepared to go more than half-way to unite with our brothers and sisters . . . When the history of Canadian Labor is written I'm pretty sure that our efforts to hammer out correct policies at the Third National Convention of the Workers' Unity League will be recognized as a worthwhile contribution. They are

¹¹*Toward a Canadian People's Front* (Toronto 1935), 148-53.

¹²*Worker*, 9 November 1935. See also *Unity* (November 1935).

¹³Thomas A. Ewen (McEwen), *Unity is the Workers' Lifeline* (Toronto 1935?).

good policies. Let's roll up our sleeves and put them into practice from Cape Breton Island — way across the Dominion — clean to Vancouver Island."¹⁴

Subsequent developments undermined McLachlan's confidence. In the six months preceding his resignation, McLachlan was increasingly disturbed about the way the new policy was being implemented. It appeared to him that a policy of "unity at all costs" was taking precedence over the principles of "unity in action." In his letter of June 1936 he would single out several examples of unprincipled reconciliations between WUL and AFL unions. This demonstrates how closely he was following from Cape Breton the development of the unity campaign. One instance that particularly troubled him concerned the Toronto Coal Handlers' and Truckers' Union. J. B. Salsberg, the party's industrial theoretician and tactician, urged its members in November 1935 to apply for a federal labour union charter from the TLC. Although Salsberg insisted that the guiding principle must be trade union unity, he added that disaffiliation from the WUL would help the men's cause by freeing their union from the taint of association with the left.¹⁵

This was bad enough, but the case of the Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia formed the immediate local context for McLachlan's disillusionment. The AMW had been formed in 1932 and in challenging the control of the United Mine Workers of America, had won the support of about half the coal miners in Nova Scotia. Yet as early as 1933 McLachlan had become doubtful of its prospects of dislodging the UMWA from the coalfields; in the *Nova Scotia Miner* he frequently appealed to the coal miners to set aside the relative merits of the two unions and make common cause with each other in fighting colliery shutdowns and wage reductions. In 1935 the policy of "One Industry — One Union" simply confirmed McLachlan's view that the membership of the two unions must be reunited.¹⁶

¹⁴*Unity* (December 1935). At this stage McLachlan was also surely aware that his own integrity was under attack for allegedly endorsing the "unity at any price" approach. The Trotskyist Workers' Party, which since 1933 had urged the CP to dissolve the WUL in order to grasp the new opportunities for radical activity in the mainstream unions, now correctly anticipated — before the November plenum and WUL Convention — that the party would be dissolving the WUL as quickly as possible and would not jib at cooperating with a "cagy and experienced bureaucrat" such as Lewis. Their view was that Lewis and his ilk could be trusted "as far as Mahatma Gandhi can throw a piano." See *The Vanguard*, 16 September, 16, 30 November 1935.

¹⁵See "Coal Workers to Cut Tie to Workers' Unity League," *Toronto Daily Star*, 30 November 1935, and "W.U.L. Sinking Fast," *The Vanguard*, 30 November 1935.

¹⁶For early evidence of McLachlan's skepticism, see *Nova Scotia Miner*, 23 September 1933. The AMW formally appealed for a united front at a special convention in January 1935: *Worker*, 26 January 1935. Conditions for the readmission of AMW members to the UMWA were under discussion in one local early in 1934: Minutes, Local Union 4514 (Springhill), 15 May 1934, Dalhousie University Archives (Halifax). For the history of the AMW see the important article by Michael Earle, "The Coalminers and their 'Red' Union: The Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia, 1932-1936," *Labour/Le Travail*, 22 (Fall 1988), 99-137.

Although reconciled to the disappearance of the AMW, McLachlan believed that the radicals could bargain from a strong position. The last outcome he anticipated was capitulation to the UMWA.

In the early months of 1936, the reunification of the Nova Scotia coal miners passed through several stages. The process began with local committees of rank-and-file members of the two unions meeting jointly to discuss prospects for unity. McLachlan enthusiastically endorsed this democratic initiative. By relying on the process of rank-and-file consultations, the radicals believed they could guide the unity movement toward the conclusion they desired; in McLachlan's view, this was negotiation from strength and a successful agreement would "win back for us our old tradition of fighting power in the world labor movement." McLachlan and other local radicals were optimistic that the process would result in a new miners' union, independent of the UMWA and suitably equipped for internal democracy and militant struggle.¹⁷ Support for the strategy, however, was not as consistent as McLachlan had hoped. In early February, the focus of discussions shifted and the meetings began to consider plans to bring the AMW membership as a body into the ranks of the UMWA. Although no formal decision was announced at the time it was clear to the local press that the proposal for a new union had been set aside and "the UMW is to be the one union to carry on here in future."¹⁸ By the end of March, a unity committee representing locals of the two unions in the Glace Bay area had agreed on a set of four points as a basis for a reunited UMWA District 26. These included complete autonomy for the Nova Scotia district, regular reports to the members on wage negotiations, a membership vote on contracts and officers, and a militant policy including higher wages, increased compensation for injuries and enforcement of the Mines Act. Given the bitterness of the preceding four years and the failure of earlier efforts to reconcile the rival unions, this agreement was a remarkable achievement and clear evidence of the support for unity which existed among members of both unions. The pact was endorsed by district officers of the two unions and forwarded to John L. Lewis.¹⁹

McLachlan regarded the result as a tactical setback for the AMW and the local radicals, but he continued to believe that the principles of the united front could be achieved. Notwithstanding the example of the Toronto Coal Handlers' and Truckers' Union, there were several more significant episodes in which the WUL had displayed a firmness in negotiation which produced sizeable gains for the left in the merged unions. For McLachlan, here was one rough and ready measure of

¹⁷Robert Stewart to Local Unions, Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia, 4 January 1936, File 7, Box 51, and Robert Stewart to Charles Sims, 29 January 1936, File 4, Box 52, Communist Party of Canada Papers, NAC (Ottawa). At one stage "a proposition about the old man" was also under discussion; this may well have been a proposal to put McLachlan's name forward for an honorary office in the anticipated new union.

¹⁸*Sydney Post-Record*, 3 February 1936.

¹⁹*Worker*, 7 April 1936.

how successfully militant united front principles were being applied.²⁰ Certainly, McLachlan was dismayed by how rapidly the discussion of unity had been transformed in Nova Scotia into a discussion of the terms for readmission of AMW members to the UMWA. In his view, one reason for this development was the party's inadequate support for the local strategy of joint action by rank and file committees. In his letter of resignation, McLachlan would charge that information about the democratic process by which unity was being negotiated in his province was "deliberately suppressed" in the CPC press. In the pages of *Unity*, events in western Canada were held up as a model: "the miners of the west were putting over 'stirring events' while Nova Scotia was doing nothing." And when the *Worker* did publish one item distributed by a labour press agency, which briefly reported the terms of unity under discussion in Nova Scotia, a final few lines were added stating "*That no one, however expected that Lewis would ever grant these points.*" To McLachlan these were deliberate efforts to misrepresent the situation in Nova Scotia and were intended to "spread despair and defeatism in the very middle of a fight."²¹ A similar complaint had been made as early as January by one key party member, AMW secretary Robert Stewart, who at this stage was working in close consultation with McLachlan. Stewart objected that some statements in the party press were giving the wrong impression: "it is looking like we are sending them back without any

²⁰There were two notable instances: the creation of the Lumber and Sawmill Workers' Union as a semi-autonomous section of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, and the reabsorption of the Industrial Union of Needle Trades Workers and the closely associated Toronto Fur Dressers' and Dyers' Union into the various international garment unions. In the first instance, the Lumber Workers' Industrial Union dissolved itself more or less democratically through a referendum vote (in which the party worked hard in favour of liquidation), only to be reconstituted as the LSWU with several leading Communists occupying executive or organizing positions. Equally effective, the unification of the red needle trades' unions had particular resonance for the coal miners, as the WUL encountered international union leaders scarcely less hostile than Lewis. The WUL nevertheless managed to hold most of its locals together, preserving a strong left-wing base, particularly in the Ontario locals of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, the United Garment Workers and the International Fur Workers' Union. The negotiations which saw the IUNTW dressmakers' section reconstituted as Local 72, ILGWU lasted into May, well after the party had capitulated to Lewis in the coalfields. See Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," 353, 515-21.

²¹For the offending reference, see *Worker*, 2 April 1936. The contrast with more favourable articles in January 1936 is notable. In the *Nova Scotia Miner*, 21 March 1936, McLachlan had objected to patronizing comments on the Nova Scotia situation and responded that "it is useless to say that Lewis will not agree to such proposals. Lewis can be whipped into line." McLachlan also continued to publish reports concerning the negotiations between the Lumber Workers' Industrial Union and the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, indicating that other unions were also attempting to negotiate from strength in establishing conditions for unity.

kind of democracy." Remarkably, on the very eve of the miners' crucial meetings in early February, Stewart still appeared to be agonizing over "the right method" to be followed in the drive for unity. In a revealing letter to WUL headquarters, Stewart expressed his confusion over the contradictory messages on CPC trade-union policy contained in statements by J. B. Salsberg and Charles Sims. Stewart's appeal to Sims at this critical juncture was revealing: "Who is right? you or Joe? Listen Charlie, is there two of you there who are of the same mind on unity?"²² Given this confusion about the implementation of party policy, it was not surprising that McLachlan and the local radicals were unable to control the course of events in Cape Breton and that some influential activists, such as the former AMW president John Alex MacDonald, spoke in favour of a return to the international union. McLachlan was bound to accept the results of the rank-and-file initiative which the radicals had strongly supported and he framed the issue clearly in terms of union democracy: "If there is one thing the miners of Nova Scotia are fighting, and have led all the workers in Canada, [it] is their struggle against this shoving the rank and file into a corner." Indeed if the ultimate outcome was a return to the UMWA, this was not totally unacceptable to McLachlan, provided suitable terms for a merger could be reached. The existing unity agreement was less far-reaching than that the radicals had proposed in January and in March McLachlan still had not ruled out the possibility of a new union. Readers of the *Nova Scotia Miner* were reminded that a principled basis of unity was more important than a return to the UMW: "the miners of Nova Scotia should unite on the basis set forth by the unity committee, with Lewis if they may, without him if they must."²³

It soon became clear that the international union was not prepared to be governed by the outcome of the local negotiations in Nova Scotia. Indeed they

²² Stewart to Sims, 30 January 1936, File 4, Box 52, Communist Party of Canada Papers. In the latest issue of the WUL magazine *Unity* (January-February 1936), which Stewart had just received, J.B. Salsberg was recommending "organic unification with the A.F. of L."; this meant that radical unionists must be prepared to enter even the most reactionary-led unions and win the support of members from the inside, they must even be prepared to accept the break-up of industrial unions into AFL jurisdictions in order to advance the cause of organization and industrial unionism. By contrast, Charlie Sims, another WUL leader, offered a more skeptical endorsement of the reform movement which Lewis had launched so dramatically at the AFL convention in October 1935. Sims pointed out that in many respects the UMW itself hardly was a model union: "unless a union follows a militant policy of working-class struggle, unless a union introduces real trade union democracy and rank and file control, then the vital spark of trade unionism is missing, and the industrial union structure will mean little or nothing. The United Mine Workers of America is a case in point. Its industrial structure existed while John L. Lewis and his henchmen were carrying out the rottenest policies of class collaboration, wage reductions, expulsion of militants like J.B. McLachlan, expulsion of whole districts, suspension of district and local charters, etc. No man can deny this. And no miner can forget this either."

²³ *Nova Scotia Miner*, 21 March 1936.

would do no more than absolutely necessary to absorb the AMW membership. "As far as the A. M. W. is concerned here, there is no activity at present on their behalf," District Secretary-Treasurer A. A. McKay wrote complacently to Washington at the end of March. "It appears that the men who were members of the A. M. W. would like to return again to the U. M. W. en masse, and within a short period a large number of those who left the organization will again become members of the U. M. W."²⁴ Shortly afterward, Lewis responded gingerly to the unity agreement of March 1936, commending it as "meritorious and constructive" while reiterating that all policies and procedures must be in accordance with the UMWA constitution. Indeed all local arrangements would be subject to Lewis' approval, but in the interim he had delegated the authority to a two-man commission consisting of his trusted local lieutenants, Dan Willie Morrison and Silby Barrett, both longtime adversaries of McLachlan.²⁵ Meanwhile relations between AMW and UMWA officers were hardly fraternal: Stewart himself had been sued for his public allegations that UMWA officers had helped prepare a blacklist in 1932; he was found guilty of slander and fined \$1.00 in damages plus costs.²⁶ These were alarming signs and several key AMW leaders, announcing their dissatisfaction with the response from Lewis, brought forward a new list of eleven points for discussion. But it was too late to call a halt to the process and at a meeting on 26 April the AMW voted itself out of existence. The original local agreement had been replaced by a set of conditions which were modest in the extreme: AMW members would be accepted in the UMWA without initiation fees or penalties and would have all the rights and privileges of members.²⁷ Even at this late stage there were additional demands: a group of former AMW leaders were asked to sign pledges of loyalty to the international union. Although this number was later reduced from 27 to five, former AMW officers Clarie Gillis denounced the demand as an instance of "bad faith" and Joseph Nearing pleaded in vain with Barrett to "come together for the good of the district and bury the hatchet." For his part, Barrett claimed that the loyalty pledges were necessary

²⁴Alex A. McKay to Thomas Kennedy, 28 March 1936, Secretary-Treasurer's Papers, UMWA Archives (Washington DC). McKay himself had been an active "McLachlanite" in the early 1920s, originally elected to the District 26 executive as a member of the radical executive in 1924. He is referred to in disparaging terms in McLachlan's letter of 13 June 1936 as the local party member who Communist Party leader Jack MacDonald assigned in the 1920s to "watch and report on McLachlan."

²⁵*Sydney Post-Record*, 18 April 1936. In early May 1936 District 26 President Morrison reported to a local union meeting in Springhill that "the District would be 100% in the near future & they were coming in according to the International constitution"; a proposal to hold an open meeting was rejected and the local agreed that those who had left the UMWA must "go through the proper channels, to regain their membership": Minutes, Local Union 4514 (Springhill), 9 May 1936, Dalhousie University Archives.

²⁶*Sydney Post-Record*, 14, 15, 16 April 1936.

²⁷Locals from the Sydney Mines district did not attend this final meeting and continued on independently until 1938.

to secure the readmission of the AMW members; to humiliate the radicals further, he vowed that under no conditions would he ever approve the admission of Stewart into the UMWA. With these arrangements, subsequently approved by the international executive board, the road to unity was completed.²⁸

In the meantime, the transformation of John L. Lewis was little short of miraculous. Before Lewis took charge of the battle for industrial unionism at the October 1935 AFL convention, he had always stood in the first rank of labour "fakirs"; in the radical labour press Lewis was not just a redbaiter and political reactionary, but a blood-stained thug who ruled his union by the gun. His image changed dramatically once he had placed the resources of the UMWA and his own personal charisma behind the causes of industrial unionism and the organization of the unorganized.²⁹ At the WUL's Toronto sessions in November 1935, Lewis was identified as an "important leader" who had displayed "significant signs of change in the direction of progressive trade union policies." Tom McEwen was astute enough to add that Lewis had been forced into this position by the militancy of the rank and file, but it was obvious that Lewis' past was not going to be held against him. Accounts of the UMWA international convention in Washington reported that Lewis now stood in the vanguard of "progressive industrial unionism" and his speeches were reprinted in the party press; by June, Lewis was being acclaimed as

²⁸*Sydney Post-Record*, 11, 14, 25 May 1936. Stewart himself was subsequently reinstated in the UMWA and was elected as a district board member in 1938; he played a leading part in district politics during the 1940s. Meanwhile in 1936 there was another indication of the bitterness accompanying the collapse of the AMW. Barrett announced he was launching libel proceedings in connection with comments in the most recent issue of the *Nova Scotia Miner*: *Sydney Post-Record*, 18 May 1936. Simultaneously, the newspaper was also receiving criticism from the district CPC organizer, Bill Findlay. This issue was the last to appear before McLachlan's resignation and was probably the final issue to have been published. Unfortunately no copies appear to have survived.

²⁹At the October 1935 meetings of the AFL, John L. Lewis had strongly defended the cause of industrial unionism and delivered his widely-advertised blow to the jaw of the carpenters' union president William Hutcheson. Together with other dissident leaders Lewis had formed the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO), which was still operating within the AFL. On the wave of a massive organizing drive, especially in mass production industries such as steel and auto, the CIO unions would establish a new labour central in 1938. In Canada, the Trades and Labour Congress was slower to discipline the new industrial unions, but under pressure from the AFL they were expelled in 1939 and the Canadian Congress of Labour was established in 1940. These upheavals created a moment of opportunity for radical unionists in North America which coincided with their own adoption of the united front policy. For a useful summary of these developments, see Harvey Levenstein, *Communism, Anticommunism and the CIO* (Westport, Conn. 1981), Chapters 1-2. The Canadian context is discussed in Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," and Irving Abella, *Nationalism, Communism and Canadian Labour: The CIO, the Communist Party, and the Canadian Congress of Labour, 1935-1956* (Toronto 1973).

the "fighting leader" of the CIO.³⁰ McLachlan, for his part, welcomed the prospect of a massive industrial union drive but warned that attitudes towards the UMWA should not become uncritical, especially where someone with John L. Lewis' record was involved. Specifically, he pointed out that Lewis was no friend of independent political action — he had threatened to withhold a promised contribution of \$100,000 from the United Automobile Workers unless the union repudiated its recent decision to support a labour party in preference to endorsing Franklin D. Roosevelt. Nor could McLachlan ignore the fact that Lewis had forced a roll-call vote at the UMWA convention to secure for himself as president the unilateral power to depose district officials, power he had exercised, of course, since the early 1920s, albeit apparently without sufficient authority. It is important to emphasize here that McLachlan was not repudiating the cause of trade union unity or the CIO in particular. His basic theme was simply expressed in the title of one article in the *Nova Scotia Miner*: "Everything Charged Against AFL by Lewis He Does in UMWA — Only More So."³¹ At the very least, McLachlan was pointing out that Lewis could not be trusted to defend union democracy: "No man on earth is good enough, just enough, or wise enough to have such power over the democratic rights of men, and no man on earth except a swollen, impudent, aspiring fascist would accept such power even handed to him on a gold plate." In the last surviving issues of the *Nova Scotia Miner* McLachlan continued to drive home his basic message concerning John L. Lewis, whom he regarded as the dictator of a once-democratic union: "To lower the flag of trade union democracy now in the face of the flushed and victorious Lewis would be treachery to all who suffered in the past. We are for unity, but not as beaten and conquered slaves who actually kiss their chains to get into the UMW."³²

These were the circumstances which brought McLachlan to his break with the Communist Party in May 1936. Looking back over this course of events, McLachlan was appalled at what he perceived as a lost opportunity to achieve guarantees for union democracy and local autonomy in a newly reorganized union. Even if the ideal of a new union was not realistic, the prospects for reforming the UMWA were not. Until the end of January 1936 McLachlan believed that a principled basis of unity could be negotiated and that a new, united organization

³⁰*Toward A Canadian People's Front*, 120, 125; *Unity is the Workers' Lifeline*, 13; *Worker*, 6 February 1936; *Daily Clarion*, 18 June 1936. The rehabilitation of Lewis did not sit well with many Canadian radicals, especially among the coal miners; see the complaint by one Alberta miner in a letter to *Unity* (January-February 1936): "It was a bombshell to me to see John L. Lewis as one of the star contributors for "Unity," both in the November and December numbers." The publication of such frank comments not only suggests the persistence of opposition to unity but also underlines the relative openness of the debate at this time.

³¹*Nova Scotia Miner*, 8 February, 29 February 1936.

³²*Nova Scotia Miner*, 8 February, 21 March 1936.

of the coal miners would be established. Given the rise of the CIO, it may have been unrealistic to believe that the union would have remained independent of the UMWA for long, but it was reasonable to expect that there would be some concessions for the AMW in the new district. McLachlan championed the process of joint action by the local miners to establish a unity agreement in the coalfields. In supporting this movement, he believed he was loyal to the wishes of the coal miners and to the principles of the united front. The last thing he expected was capitulation to the UMWA. But as the events unfolded, the AMW had stumbled from one concession to the next and completed its dissolution with few guarantees for the future of the miners' union. The enormous rhetoric in support of trade union unity, widely supported by the coal miners, had made it impossible to turn back at this stage. But the road to unity had ended in frustration and McLachlan saw the outcome as an unnecessary defeat for the coal miners. A policy of "unity at all costs" had delivered the Nova Scotia coal miners into the hands of the UMWA without any significant concessions or agreements concerning the future of the union. The CPC's tactical priorities and the UMWA's intransigence had left the Nova Scotia miners little choice. Abandoned by his party and outmanoeuvred by the UMWA, McLachlan had been overtaken by events. George MacEachern has given us a short description of McLachlan's final appearance at a meeting of the party district bureau: "When the party organizer Bill Findlay charged him with causing confusion among the miners with his articles in the *Nova Scotia Miner*, Jim didn't answer very much but he was grumbling. I know he was upset. He admitted that what he was writing was bound to cause confusion."³³ Shortly afterward, McLachlan resigned.

In the letter to Buck several weeks later, McLachlan spelled out his reasons. It was an emotional and articulate statement. As he went over old ground, bitter feelings rose to the surface and there were frequent references to previous disputes and differences.³⁴ But throughout the letter, McLachlan focused sharply and consistently on the developments of the preceding year, the events which had precipitated his resignation. McLachlan ended on a stern note of regret for the party and comrades he had known: "I refuse to follow the party in Canada in its sad march to the right in order to secure its blessing for the *Nova Scotia Miner*, and I am not going to give up my activity in the working class movement while I live."

One further piece of evidence can be added to this account of McLachlan's resignation. At a public meeting several months later, in September 1936, Mc-

³³*George MacEachern: An Autobiography*, 96. MacEachern's perspective was that of a younger generation of local radicals who considered McLachlan's attacks on Lewis to be understandable in the light of his victimization by the international union, but not fully in accord with the interests of local industrial unionists in the steel industry who wished to share in the construction of new unions in the CIO. As MacEachern recalled, "I felt Lewis had changed. And I felt we had to trust him. We *had* no bloody choice there."

³⁴He was particularly critical of two earlier district party organizers, James Barker (1929-30) and Phil Luck (1934), who were removed from the scene after previous disputes with McLachlan.

Lachlan briefly discussed his resignation from the party. This occurred in connection with his attendance at the speech by a visiting British Communist MP, Willie Gallacher, who had been elected in 1935 from the Scottish coal mining constituency of West Fife. Gallacher also was a member of the Executive Committee of the Communist International and a key spokesman for the united front; no doubt he had been briefed on local conditions and his visit was expected to enhance the party's prestige in Nova Scotia. According to the local press, Gallacher spoke generally concerning the struggle against war and fascism and in support of the united front. The highlight of the meeting, however, was an emotional exchange concerning McLachlan's resignation. In response to questions about McLachlan, Gallacher replied that McLachlan was not expelled from the Communist Party but "left of his own accord." This interpretation was hotly disputed by several members of the audience and the uproar continued for several minutes. Then McLachlan asked permission to speak. The most complete account of his comments is contained in police reports of the meeting:

McLachlan declared that at a recent National Conference of the C. P. of C. it was decided to organize and lead the working class movement by taking up the main demands of the workers. In Cape Breton the miners wanted complete autonomy which John L. Lewis would not grant but reserved to himself dictatorial powers. McLachlan said that he knows John L. Lewis is a skunk as he and several others have been tramped into the mud by Lewis. McLachlan said that he was partly thrown out of the party because he would not support Lewis and he partly left the party so as to have greater freedom to express himself. For this reason Bill Findlay and local party members killed the "N.S. Miner."

McLachlan declared that he loved the C. P. of C. and would die for it, but he would not accept orders contrary to his beliefs and feelings. McLachlan was heartily applauded by the crowd present.

Gallagher answered McLachlan. He said that a Communist while disagreeing with a Party decision must loyally carry it out if the majority votes for it.³⁵

This speech confirmed publicly what McLachlan had written earlier to Buck. Despite his resignation from the party, McLachlan was not prepared to repudiate the class struggle. There was a bitter division over policy and principle between McLachlan and the party, and McLachlan claimed the virtue of consistency on his side. His loyalties had never changed and he had resigned in disagreement and regret.

In Communist Party historiography the principal response to McLachlan's resignation has been silence. At the time of his death in November 1937, Mc-

³⁵"J.B. McLachlan" (report dated 11 September 1936), RCMP Files. For an account of the meeting which stresses McLachlan's hostility to the Communist Party, see MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*, 189-90; the accuracy of MacEwan's account, when it was first published in a newspaper column, was challenged at the time by George MacEachern in a letter to the editor: *Cape Breton Highlander*, 26 June 1968.

Lachlan was treated with enormous respect. To the extent that his break with the party has been discussed at all, McLachlan's position has been inadequately portrayed as a form of personal and local exceptionalism and there has been no effort to assess the significance of his view of the united front. As the letter makes clear, however, his criticism of the party came from the left and he did not regard his resignation as a repudiation of basic principles. Certainly there is little substance to the view that McLachlan was undergoing a conversion to a less-radical form of socialism at the time of his resignation. Although he had enjoyed a long and occasionally fraternal relationship with J. S. Woodsworth, McLachlan never had been a supporter of the CCF. In 1936, when the Communist Party was attempting to win Woodsworth's support for a "Canadian People's Front", McLachlan was continuing to criticize Woodsworth in the *Nova Scotia Miner*.³⁶

Nor is it accurate to conclude that McLachlan was a staunch opponent of the united front who was finally driven to leave the party because he was unable to support this new policy. He had supported the move toward the united front both internationally and domestically and continued to do so throughout the period. There were, however, real differences among party leaders in their interpretations of the united front. The Toronto meetings in November 1935 had helped to establish consensus around the importance of trade union unity, but failed to reconcile differences about how to apply the policy. In retrospect, Stewart Smith's report to the Central Committee typified a policy which critics described as "unity at all costs." McLachlan's response, stressing the principle of "unity in action", offered a less-simplistic vision of building the united front, which he considered to be consistent with the decisions of the International. McLachlan had fully articulated his views at a very early stage in the implementation of the united front and it would be misleading to conclude that his objections can be reduced to a personal inability to accept a return to the UMWA. In McLachlan's view, the excessive adulation of Lewis was only symptomatic of a larger difficulty facing the party in 1936. The preference for building unity from the top down rather than through local struggle betrayed the principles of the united front. As McLachlan concluded in his letter to Buck: "The core of true unity is found in the plain demands of the great rank and file, whatever these demands may be, the core of the activity of the party has been the wishes of the top leadership."

³⁶*Nova Scotia Miner*, 28 February 1936. It has been suggested that in the last year of his life McLachlan supported a noncommunist Cape Breton Labour Party candidate in the 1937 provincial election and that he was in favour of working nationally in alliance with the CCF; both of these positions, however, were consistent with the policy of the popular front. Interestingly, the 1937 Labour Party candidate, the Reverend William T. Mercer, stated in an interview in 1980 that he continued to regard McLachlan as a Communist and was not aware that he had left the party. The subsequent success of the CCF in Cape Breton, with the support of local Communists, is discussed in Michael Earle and Herbert Gamberg, "The United Mine Workers and the Coming of the CCF to Cape Breton," *Acadiensis*, XIX, 1 (Autumn 1989), 3-26.

McLachlan's resignation closed a chapter in local labour history, both in Cape Breton and across North America. There would be important gains for the causes of industrial unionism and labour radicalism. In Nova Scotia there would be significant victories for the united front — recognition of the steelworkers' union in Sydney and enactment of the Nova Scotia Trade Union Act in 1937, the election of labour candidates under the CCF banner to the provincial assembly and to the House of Commons in 1939 and 1940; in the 1940s there would even be a renewal of radicalism in the miners' union and District 26 would come under the control of radicals who had been associated with the AMW. All this was part of the broader movement which brought increased membership to unions across the country along with enhanced legal entitlements during the 1940s. These were not negligible achievements, but they were purchased at a price which may have reduced the local autonomy and internal democracy of unions and increased the reliance on union bureaucracies and state regulation.³⁷ At the time, there already were ample indications to show that leaders such as Lewis had not been fundamentally transformed and that in the long run the decision to endorse alliances of convenience with the established labour bureaucracy was an ambiguous legacy for the class struggle. In 1936 McLachlan had been overtaken by events, but given his own history he was in a position to perceive the difficulties more clearly than most of his contemporaries.

³⁷For assessments of the consequences of "industrial legality" in Nova Scotia, see Michael Earle and Ian McKay, eds., *Workers and the State in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Fredericton/Sydney 1989), especially 9-23. A long-term perspective is provided by Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, *The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms* (Toronto 1988).

Appendix One:

J. B. McLachlan to Tim Buck, 13 June 1936

Glace Bay, C. B.,
[June 13, 1936]

Dear Comrade Tim:-

I have been unable to find time to reply to your letter until now. I mean your letter of June 4th. You complain I did not reply to your last letter. That is true. However, I did write a reply just before that to certain criticism of two editorials; one on Lewis and one on Woodsworth, and I, too, got no reply to these. Instead there came more criticism of some other editorials which were not named.

Comrade Findlay was exactly right when he told you that I could not go on any longer working inside the party. I hope he also told you why. In case he did not, may I do so now?

You say in your letter: "Needless to say, we feel that your action can be based upon nothing less than a misunderstanding of the political line of the comintern." I can assure you that I have paid the greatest attention to the line laid down by the VII Congress, specially the part dealing with trade union work, and have read everything I could get my hands on. I am absolutely convinced, that in the "Nova Scotia Miner", I am following the line laid down by the party. On the other hand, I firmly believe the party in Canada has gone badly to the right. As proof, take these incidents: The Truckmen's Union in Toronto was granted by the Workers' Unity League, disaffiliation, *because the boss did not like the W.U.L.* Again, members of the party, without rebuke, in the Mine Workers' Union of Canada convention helped to put through a resolution to have miners over fifty years of age laid off work to make room for younger miners. In the resolution, the reason given for this, was that the older workers "could not produce as much coal *as the boss had a right to expect.*"

Again, the work done in Nova Scotia by the rank and file Unity Committee was deliberately suppressed. A record of this work was in the W.U.L. office at the very time an editorial was written in the last issue of the W.U.L. paper and sent all over this country showing that the miners of the west were putting over "stirring events" while Nova Scotia was doing nothing. The party had nothing to say about such an unfair proceeding of suppressed information. The "Worker" did at length publish an A.L.P. dispatch stating shortly and fairly what had been done about unity in Nova Scotia, including the Five Point Programme. But someone in the "Worker" office saw fit to add two or three lines to that A.L.P. item stating: "*That no one, however expected that Lewis would ever grant these points.*" This same A.L.P. story appeared in other labor papers without the defeatist lines.

You know, Tim, what would happen to a soldier who would preach such hopelessness, and spread despair and defeatism in the very middle of a fight, as these three fearful added lines were intended to do. He would have his useless brains blown out. Again, the very manner in which the "Worker" sometimes characterizes the objections of honest workers to the methods used to bring about unity shows how far to the right the draft had become. It was said these workers "got off a lot of hot air." "That they were blowing off steam, etc."

Tim, I can remember tory R. B. Bennett using these same terms about the workers. Take these statements about the workers and compare them with the evident frantic attempts to say as many nice things as possible about a traitor and scoundrel like Lewis and they show the extent the party has gone to the right. The core of true unity is found in the plain demands of the great rank and file, whatever these demands may be, the core of the activity of the party has been the wishes of the top leadership. Like a lightning flash Adolph Germer, Lewis' man, showed how far Lewis can be trusted in his C.I.O. drive when he demanded that the Motor Car Workers' Convention repudiate the resolution it had just passed favoring a workers' party and in its stead go on record in favor of the present President of the United States.

Lewis is a wrecker and would wreck that industrial union rather than see it take a political working class stand. Yet the party in Canada says we should love traitors like that. The party's statement in the "Clarion" of June 6th says: "We must be on the most friendly and brotherly relations *with all trade unionists.*" Such a statement is pretty good theology worthy of a Methodist Conference, but in the trade union movement where the labor lieutenants of the boss have assumed the role of dictators on a prince's income extracted from poverty stricken workers, one, if honest to his class, must use whatever power he may have to expose and fight the scoundrels. The "Nova Scotia Miner" is blamed for telling the miners the truth about Lewis. I refuse to deceive them either by my word or by my silence in regard to his dictatorship, his robbery or his treachery.

Therefore, you say the party cannot under such circumstances continue its support of the paper. Now, now, Tim, don't assume too much. The party never put a cent, in its life, into the paper, but over and over again the paper has given money to the party. The party or at least its representative here in 1929-30 did his best to destroy the paper, and today in 1936 the question of its destruction has been raised in group meetings and the D.B. In 1929, party leaders here said I was too old and out of date and should be out of the movement. In 1935 my age was given as a reason why I should be dropped and today the talk both here and in Toronto about ending the Nova Scotia Miner is just the same old story in another form to try and silence me. I am not going to be silenced, the paper won't die, nor am I getting out of the movement.

As I look back over the years it appears to me now that I was always more or less of a misfit in the party. I was always under a kind of humiliating supervision. You know this was true when the party had Sandy McKay "watch and report on

McLachlan" as Jack McDonald confessed in my presence. This was true when the party accused me, to others, of trying to get into the O.B.U. and had high party officials in other countries write me about this "crime." Party members knew they were slandering me to those high officials and were willing to send the slander on to these officials of the party and leave me in the dark until through these letters I learned of the "crime." To get me out of the movement was the one consuming ambition of Barker while he was here. You know that history pretty well. Luck thought I "should be shot" if there was no other way of silencing me. Bill Findlay being more humane only tries to liquidate the "Miner" so as to silence me for the good of the party. I cannot help but believe that present fault finding with the "Nova Scotia Miner" is not only a reaction from a rightest [rightist] movement but is also part and parcel of the policy followed down the years, almost without a let-up since the days of Sandy McKay, in an attempt, if not to get me out of the party, at least to silence me.

I refuse to follow the party in Canada in its sad march to the right in order to secure its blessing for the "Nova Scotia Miner", and I am not going to give up my activity in the working class movement while I live. Therefore, in order not to embarrass the party further, I resigned from it completely, as Comrade Findlay informed you. This matter is settled and ended insofar as I am concerned.

With Deepest Comradely Regrets,

[J. B. McLachlan]