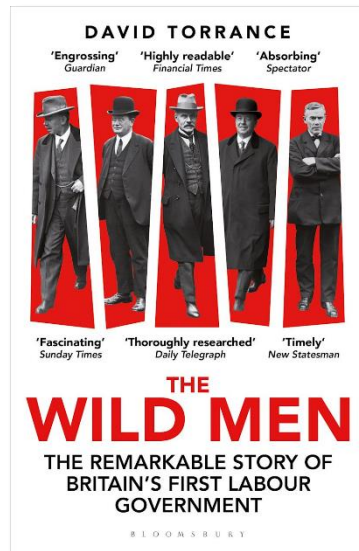
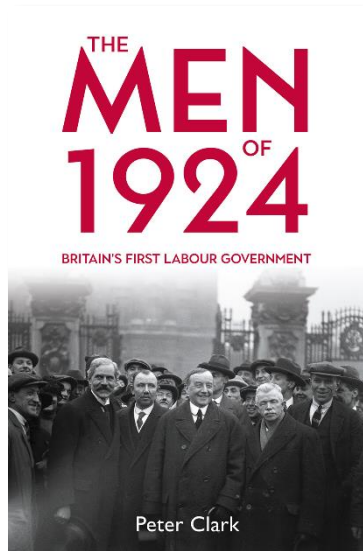




Peter Clark

The Men of 1924.
Britain's First Labour Government

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David Torrance

The Wild Men.
The Remarkable Story of Britain's First Labour Government

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reviewed by

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Labour governments with a fragile hold on power are not new. Britain's first Labour government had no majority and was in office only for 287 days from January to November 1924. In December 1923, a snap election sought by the Conservative Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin had produced a »hung parliament« with no majority for any party. The Labour Party, led by Ramsey MacDonald, had won fewer seats than the Conservatives, but it was about authority:

The Conservatives had lost their majority, Labour had gained the most seats, and together with the Liberals' had enough to govern, albeit precariously. Herbert H. Asquith as Liberal leader effectively allowed for a Labour minority government, likely hoping to replace MacDonald when inevitably he proved himself inadequate.

A century ago, this government was an electoral and governing phenomenon. Yet, insofar as any governments are remembered a hundred years on, this one isn't. History is usually the most common undergraduate degree of Members of Parliament in Britain, yet seldom does an appreciation of political pasts seem to inform the public present. Labour MPs are better suited than most, given the propensity for the labour movement to celebrate its heroes and denounce its traitors. Yet there has always been almost a year zero: 1945, and the triumph of welfarism. That New Jerusalem remains uncontested as Labour's crowning moment. The history of pre-war Labour, insofar as it appears at all, tends to be focused on the 1931 »great betrayal«, when MacDonald, two years in his second tenure as Prime Minister, effectively abandoned his party to form the »National Government« with the Conservatives. The 1924 government is almost always overlooked. But one particular is consistent, and may point to 2029: when Labour loses office, a civil war – or at least a protracted skirmish – ensues within the party over the reasons for its failure (as invariably it was seen). Contrasting judgements tend to hinge on the extent to which the government had been socialist enough – or »labourist«, Britain's parliamentary variant. It was a measure the 1924 government did much to define.

Prior to the centenary year of 2024, there had been only two book-length accounts of the 1924 Labour government: Richard Lyman's »The First Labour Government, 1924« published in 1957, and John Shepherd's and Keith Laybourn's »Britain's First Labour Government«, published in 2006. Lyman's book, adapted from his PhD thesis, was a very straightforward, very solid analysis. Sound job though he did – the 1924 government was fortunate to have such an authoritative monument for so long – Lyman necessarily was still constrained by the unavailability of many archival sources. No such issues inhibited the renowned labour historians Shepherd and Laybourn, who convincingly emphasised the importance of the short-lived administration as being »vital in legitimising the new post-war democracy« and in »reshaping British parliamentary and local politics during the inter-war years«; it was »in terms of its long-term impact and influence« that the ministry's significance should be judged.¹

With more in the way of commercial sensibilities, the pitches of the present volumes, occasioned by the centenary, are significantly different from the earlier ones: both are personality-driven. Torrance selects the ten leading figures of the 1924 Labour government. Clark takes a largely conventional historical approach in framing his subject: what happened, and in the order with which it happened. Thus: what the Labour party was, how it got into government, its constituent parts in office, and what transpired when it got there. It is about the twenty-man government. Indeed, in the one chapter devoted to the actual government – as distinct from its members – he makes a virtue of a sequential approach: »to give an impression of what it may have been like at the time« (p. 207). This might have worked as a compelling month-by-month chronicle, but, alongside telling anecdotes, unrelated events are described (»Yorkshire won the county cricket championship [*sic*] for its third successive time«, p. 233) merely because they happened to have been taking place at the time. The book is too short for such indulgences.

Clark is a generalist, who has written books on a wide variety of subjects including Victorian London and Churchill, and for whom this book was something of a labour of love. Like Lyman seventy years before (but who had no choice), Clark draws entirely from published sources, and mainly secondary published sources at that; his primary sources are almost wholly memoirs, which are essential, but from public figures of this period tend to be rich in neither insight nor self-reflection. It is a work of synthesis, which has only to be done well to be of value to a lay

¹ Richard W. Lyman, *The First Labour Government 1924*, London 1957; John Shepherd/Keith Laybourn, *Britain's First Labour Government*, Basingstoke 2006 (quote on p. 199).

readership. Frequent sub-headings break up already short paragraphs. But much valuable historical context is provided – on the emergence of class-based politics during the industrial revolution, for instance, or on the role of Methodism. The rich associational culture that collectively constituted the Labour Party – comprising trade unions, the Fabian Society, the Independent Labour Party, the Social Democratic Federation, and the Labour Representation Committee – is well conveyed. It is all perfectly pitched for its likely readership. Torrance's is a research monograph. He has consulted all of the important manuscript collections, not least the Parliamentary Archives, as one might expect from a constitutional specialist at the House of Commons Library, and the Royal Archives, the latter of which are significant given the relationship between MacDonald and King George V, as well as between MacDonald and the King's private secretary Lord Stamfordham. It follows that Clark is more concerned with conveying what happened – no preface or lengthy introduction for him, or indeed a conclusion – whilst Torrance focuses more on the implications that can be drawn from it.

Both start with dress – because that is where assuming office starts, and it is also of symbolical significance. The Labour ministers of the 1924 government were in the main not of backgrounds where one had outfits to suit every occasion. In a minor, though major, insight into the endurance of the British monarchy, George V waived the requirement for formal dress for his country's first working-class government. As the monarchy tended to be, he was sage. This made it easier for the Labour men to drop their own alienating practises, such as singing »The Red Flag«. This exercise in majority rule – that is, a government representing the largest social class in the population – was very much one of accommodation on both sides. And through one man in particular: in his hankering for the »aristocratic embrace« MacDonald needed no second invitation to don his white-knee breeches, cocked hat, and sword. It would reputationally come to cost him. The contrast with Keir Hardie, the father of the Labour party who famously introduced the flat cap in Westminster but did not live to see his party in office, was both superficial and real.

MacDonald came to personify so much of the pre-1945 Labour party. The literature is otherwise of party histories; MacDonald dominates the life writing, with David Marquand's landmark 1977 exculpation most conspicuously (another biography was published even as this review was being written).² One who had it all – looks, eloquence, presence (and, if perhaps only known to the archival historian, quite beautiful handwriting) –, MacDonald is held conventionally as having squandered it all. Emotional, highly-strung, MacDonald was clearly temperamentally unsuited to the office of prime minister, but to be fair, he was very far from being the first or the last in that respect. Yet he was dominant, and Viscount Haldane – the Lord Chancellor and one of the few experienced politicians in his government – thought MacDonald a better cabinet chair than Asquith. An »illegitimate« child (as orphans were then called), MacDonald delighted in the recently-bequeathed prime ministerial country retreat Chequers. His main limitation was that he could not delegate, even looking up train timetables himself, opening every personal letter – hundreds daily – himself; he worked unsustainably long hours (made himself his own Foreign Secretary). How both Clark and Torrance handle the presiding presence of the government is instructive.

Clark's MacDonald is a »challenge« to write about (p. 89) (which does not discourage him from comparing him to Sean Connery); Torrance's MacDonald is an »enigma«, a »mass of contradictions« (p. 36), which might have been true, but also goes for most public figures about whom we know much, yet cannot explain everything. In MacDonald's case, however, the critical matter was indeed personal. The embrace of no aristocrat could be as precious as that of the King himself. George V and MacDonald needed each other, the former to connect with the people, the latter because George V was »His Majesty«. More radical Labour politicians suspected MacDonald not to be what he ought to have been: Beatrice Webb, whose husband Sidney Webb sat in cabinet, was prominent among those who were establishing a trope for

² David Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, London 1977; cf. *Walter Reid, The Cancelled Prime Minister. The Extraordinary Rise and Tragic Fall of Ramsay MacDonald*, London 2026.

Labour in government – not for her was it »betrayal«, since MacDonald had not been a socialist in the first place. Clark's MacDonald cannot help but be the more recognisable in this respect, because the material he uses is already known; Torrance's is the more revealing because most readers will not have spent time at Durham University Archives consulting the papers of MacDonald's son Malcolm. Moreover, Torrance, a Scot, has a clear understanding of, and writes empathetically about, MacDonald's quite distinct Scottish background, life, and outlook.

The authors largely align in on who else it is worth focussing: Arthur Henderson, Philip Snowden, Jimmy Thomas, John Wheatley, William Adamson, Viscount Haldane; Clark (rightly) also privileges J. R. Clynes, Noel Buxton, Charles Trevelyan, and Josiah Wedgwood; whereas Torrance takes a closer look at Sir Patrick Hastings. Clark's characters are the more recognisable because again they're hewn from already known sources; Torrance's have the ability to surprise, in detail if not in general. Clark groups, effectively, by the significance of the men, and whence they came to the party: »Old Labour« vs. »New Labour«. Their political pasts are as significant as their 1924 present. The reputation of Snowden, MacDonald's Chancellor of the Exchequer, provides almost as much scope for re-evaluation as MacDonald's. Clark gives him three and a half pages, Torrance a chapter which more fully appreciates the particular embrace to which Snowden succumbed: the plutocratic. His Treasury officials were as happy with him as the Royal Family was with the Prime Minister. Snowden's gaunt inflexibility as Chancellor would come to characterise also the second Labour government from 1929 to 1931, amidst the turmoil of the Great Depression, but no others after that: thanks to John Maynard Keynes Treasury orthodoxy was soon to become unorthodox.

Men, »wild« or not, clearly predominated the 1924 government. Margaret Bondfield was made a Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Labour, but had to wait until Labour's second tenure, in 1929, to become Britain's first woman cabinet minister. Both Clarke and Torrance are conscious of women because this is largely a story of men. In the 1923 parliament, of 615 MPs only eight were female. Labour had three of them. It would be another five years until all women even had the right to vote. It is difficult to leverage the subject without suspicion of tokenism. Labour's minimalist party manifesto was committed to »equality between men and women«, but it is hard to glean a gendered dimension, even in policy terms: Bondfield's efforts at trying to provide to women benefits from unemployment schemes is about the extent of it, and that, by her own admission, was lost to the weight of other government activity and the ministers' own inexperience. Though not even an MP, Beatrice Webb, with whose caustic criticisms of the MacDonald ministry both authors pepper their texts (»chicken-hearted« Snowden; Adamson with »neither wit, fervour nor intellect«; Thomas »the quintessence of gross vulgarity«), is by far the most prominent woman in these pages.

The Labour government soon disappointed even its own members and supporters. Asquith and the Liberal Party having given life to it, brought about its end on a confidence vote. Clark's book ends with this, but Torrance devotes a chapter to the consequential general election in October 1924, one that was quite unlike any other. It was the first broadcast election, which placed MacDonald, the greater platform orator, at a disadvantage to the more conversationally relatable Baldwin, the leader of the Conservatives. But the other innovation of this election campaign was the more consequential. »The Daily Mail« – whose aversion to communism would lead it to embrace fascism a decade later – invented a scandal to discredit Labour: the so-called »Zinoviev Letter«, a forged »Soviet directive« in support of the Labour Government, falsely attributed to Grigory Zinoviev, the head of the Communist International. In the election the Conservatives restored their majority. Labour lost 40 seats, but the Liberals lost 118, including Asquith's (never should a politician have been more careful what they wished for); Labour had, effectively, replaced the Liberals as the dominant political party to the left of the Tories. British democracy could now be defined by class politics, as it would be the case until the emergence of Tony Blair and »New Labour« in the 1990s.

Of the two accounts, Clark's is the breezier, briefer, and of unpretentious prose. Where rhetorical questions are posed, parties can go »from strength to strength« (p. 75), and there

could be such a fulcrum as »a turning point in British history« (p. 5). This is not a criticism of Clark's approach, but a corollary. His book does not contain any errors of fact or interpretation, and its judgements – if relatively limited in scope – are measured, and just. It is a highly educational and informative work. Torrance's book is at once the more scholarly yet also the more commercial, slick in its A-list quotation-festooned jacket and unhelpfully sensationalist title. That it is drawn from original research, however, gives it greater value to the more knowledgeable reader; its prose sinuous, its use of direct quotation much more effective. »The Wild Men« always gives greater detail, and not merely in number of words. Clark's Henderson, for example, is simply »Uncle Arthur«; Torrance's unpicks the inferences behind that ambiguously avuncular adjective.

The two books offer only one conclusion, and that is Torrance's. Gently revisionist, it defends the government from the »reductive chorus« that condemns or dismisses (p. 251), but still admits that the »government might have done its best, but that – even judged by its own standards – was not nearly good enough« (p. 127). That in economic, imperial, and industrial terms the government was not markedly different from those before, was consistent with its almost accidental nature. For Torrance »prolonged discussion of Labour's record in government obscures the fact that its most significant achievement was in taking office at all« (p. 256). An inconclusive general election had presented an opportunity that the party grasped. Notwithstanding the trauma of the next Labour government from 1929 to 1931 ending in the »great betrayal«, that Labour should be established as one of the only two parties of government for a century was due in no small part to the 1924 government. Clark has this as »crumbs of comfort« for a party »disappointed but not downhearted« (p. 236).

Before the centenary there were two book-length accounts of the 1924 government – and largely that remains the case. The present volumes are accounts of the personnel of the governments. Each offer only a single chapter as to what actually happened. Historians wishing to read about the first Labour government would be best served by going back to Lyman and Shepherd and Laybourn. The lay reader, however, will find the new books the more engrossing. They present human as much as political histories, but they are relevant to academic readers too: in their contrasting approaches, they show how the first Labour government is seen, and consumed, today. Neither book misrepresents its subject, as posterity might be accused absent-mindedly of having done, and will do much to inform and even entertain readers interested in this significant, and significantly overlooked, chapter in Britain's twentieth century political history.

In office, if not sufficiently in power, for those 287 days, Labour had at least hurdled the low bar set by Winston Churchill in 1920: that it was »fit to govern«. The Labour ministers in these pages were very far indeed from »wild men«. They were also very far from the at least partly much more revolutionary minded socialists to be found across the English Channel. Patriotism always prevailed over class war in the British labour movement. This provided a template for »parliamentary socialism«, for Labour in power, as stated in Herbert Morrison's famous, and possibly apocryphal, ordinance that »socialism is what the Labour government does«.

Not unlike the Labour government elected one hundred years later, that of 1924 was under-prepared; unlike that of 2024, however, it had no majority, if not to disguise, then at least to withstand this fact. MacDonald found himself consumed by foreign affairs, just as Sir Keir Starmer was, and as Andy Burnham may well soon be – and just as willingly. One other historical parallel presents itself to this reviewer: 1924 was the last time Britain had a new party of government. Given the current polling (as of early July 2026) of the far-right Reform Party, 2029, the most likely (and last possible) year of the next general election, may be the next. That feels like a potentially much more challenging electoral and governing phenomenon to have to explain, even a century hence.

Zitierempfehlung

Martin Farr, Double review: Peter Clark, *The Men of 1924. Britain's First Labour Government*, Haus Publishing, London 2023; David Torrance, *The Wild Men. The Remarkable Story of Britain's First Labour Government*, Bloomsbury, London 2025, in: *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* (online) 66, 2026, URL: <<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/afs/82149.pdf>> [13.7.2026].