

Case 8: James Ramsay MacDonald (1866-1937)

Elected as Britain's first Labour Prime Minister 22 January 1924

Born in Lossiemouth on 12 October 1866, James was the illegitimate son of Annie Ramsay and John MacDonald. From illegitimacy and poverty, his natural abilities led him first to Bristol and then to London. His poor health cut short his academic studies and a planned scientific career; his interest in politics led to him joining the Independent Labour Party in 1894. He became an MP in 1906 and, after a tempestuous period during World War I, which he opposed, he lost his seat in 1918; he was re-elected four years later and was eventually asked to form the 1924 government. He went on to serve three terms as Prime Minister, with his daughter Ishbel running the household at 10 Downing Street. There is more information about his life downstairs in The Glen Moray Case.

1. A travel rug gifted to JRM (date unknown).
2. A copy of the painting by John Lavery (1856-1941) showing JRM, his eldest daughter Ishbel, and a housemaid in the kitchen at 'The Hillocks', their home in Lossiemouth. The original hangs in the Speaker's House in the New Palace of Westminster, London, and is the first depiction of a British Prime Minister in a domestic setting. The MacDonalds had six children but the youngest son, David, died aged 6. The house remains in the family and the present room looks much as it does in the painting ~1930.
3. Postcard showing views of St Kilda, sent to JRM by the writer and photographer Alasdair Alpin MacGregor (1899-1970). This was included in the last postal service to leave Hirta on 26th August 1930 before the villagers were evacuated from the island.
4. Book 'Margaret Ethel MacDonald' written by JRM and published after his wife's early death in 1911. Margaret's maiden name was Gladstone: she was a feminist and social reformer but is not related to the Liberal Prime Minister, William Gladstone (1809-1898).
5. Smoking set belonging to JRM comprising: a metal stand, tray, tobacco tin and lid, match stand, and pipe stand.

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6. Certificate presented to JRM when he was given the Freedom of the Royal Burgh of Inverness on 13th June 1930.
7. Portrait of JRM's wife Margaret (1870-1911) by Ambrose McEvoy. JRM was painted by McEvoy at the same time; his portrait is in the National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh.

The family lived in London for much of JRM's working life and they also had a small weekend retreat at Chesham Bois in Buckinghamshire. There is more information about the MacDonald family on Amersham Museum's website: <https://amershammuseum.org/history/people/20th-century/mac-donald-family/>

With thanks to JRM's granddaughter and Museum Volunteer, Iona Kielhorn, for loaning objects for display.

Alison Wright March 2024