

**Tom McEwen**

**An inventory to his fonds  
In the  
University of British Columbia Library  
Rare Books and Special Collections**

**Revised by:  
Donna Waye  
March 2004**

**Title:** Tom McEwen Fonds  
**Dates:** 1909 – [197-]  
**Extent:** .36m of textual material

**Biographical History:** Tom McEwen was born on February 11, 1891 in Stonehaven, Scotland which is located 15 miles south of Aberdeen.

<http://www.stonehaven.org.uk/>, <http://www.mearnsguide.com/>,  
<http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Stonehaven,-Scotland>

His parents were Agnes and Alex McEwen, both of whom died when they were young – his father during the Boer War of 1899-1901 and his mother of tuberculosis some years prior to that. After their deaths Tom was raised by guardians named Wishart and lived in Luthermuir with them until he was nearly nine. Luthermuir is situated roughly halfway between Aberdeen and Dundee in north-east Scotland.

<http://www.geo.ed.ac.uk/scotgaz/towns/townfirst5144.html>  
<http://www.mearns.org/luther.htm>

It was while under the guardianship of Annie Wishart that Tom's imagination grew and expanded. Through the stories told to him by Annie, Tom learned of Robbie Burns, Rob Roy MacGregor, and of other men and women who from days gone past whose songs and writings told of struggle and revolt.

Tom left the Wishart's at age nine to go live with an Aunt and Uncle in a little fishing village called Catterline, located on the Kincardine coast, five miles from his birthplace of Stonehaven.

<http://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/catterline/catterline/>, <http://www.earth-lights.net/scotland/index.html?row1col2=catterline.html>

Tom spent much time reading to his Aunt Susan, for while she was herself illiterate she possessed an insatiable hunger for knowledge and a profound respect for learning, plus a burning curiosity for the news. So Tom read to her from the paper and from books and magazines, writers like Shakespeare, Dickens and Thackeray.

Tom left Catterline at age thirteen for Aberdeen where he worked in a variety of odd jobs – baggageman on the Great North of Scotland Railway, an ostler (horse flunky), and an orra man (general roustabout) on a farm. During his second stint as a farmhand Tom decided to become a blacksmith. He began a four year apprenticeship with Geordie Moir at the smith of Uras, a small shop situated about halfway between Catterline and Stonehaven.

At age 19 he married his sweetheart Isobel Taylor. Following the birth of their first child, Jean, Tom sailed from Glasgow in May of 1912 to Canada. Isobel and Jean followed a little over a year later. Tom began his blacksmith career soon after arriving in Canada, at the Morden Blacksmith and Machine Works in Morden, southern Manitoba.

<http://www.mordenmb.com/>

In 1913 the family moved to Winnipeg, Manitoba where Tom had his first initiation into a union, the Blacksmiths and Horseshoers, but he wasn't very involved in it beyond paying union dues. Tom and Isobel's second daughter, also named Isobel, was born in June of 1914 and it was in that year that the family moved to Swift Current, Saskatchewan. By 1920 the family had grown to include two sons, Jim and Bruce. It was in that year that Tom's wife, Isobel, died in the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918-1920, which claimed more than 22 million lives worldwide. In Saskatchewan the figure was around 5,000 – the incidence of illness was one in four. Virtually every family in the province experienced the disease.

<http://www.usask.ca/communications/ocn/Oct17/archives.html>

In his autobiography, *The Forge Glows Red*, Tom credits the devotion, courage and love of his daughter Isobel in helping him hold the family together after the death of his wife. He says of "Touche" (her childhood nickname, from when she'd watch trains running past their home and mimic the engine sounds with "tuche, tuche") that she taught him "the simple characteristics of a good Communist by her great-hearted devotion, loyalty and love, not only to her own family, but to all of humanity, neighbour and stranger alike."

Tom's first active contact with the organized socialist movement was around the end of 1919. Prior to that he had been "reading all the socialist books and periodicals I could get hold of. There wasn't much planning or sequence in my reading, but that didn't bother me a great deal then. I was reading and learning, that a lot of the ideas about changing social systems and the evolution of man, which had been germinating in my mind almost since childhood, had all been worked out and elaborated upon by much greater minds than mine, long before my time." His childhood had been marked by extreme poverty and an instinctive class-hate for the gentry/aristocrats. He writes of that time, "My foster parents or guardians didn't teach me to hate the social division in our little world. They could not, nor did they have to. It was in the air we breathed, the humble fare we ate, the endless patching and makeshift to keep us clothed, the tenure of the roof over our heads, the poverty which was ever their lot, the search for fuels to fend off winter's cold; our need to 'crook the knee' to the gentry, to keep on the 'right side' of the laird – if we wanted the Lord to hear our prayers." This was only a generation after the mass and ruthless evictions of peasantry by the aristocracy (The Highland Clearances). Landless peasants were driven into unwilling emigration to the colonies, e.g. Nova Scotia ("New Scotland").

<http://www.usask.ca/communications/ocn/Oct17/archives.html>

Tom joined the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC) in 1920. "I had chosen the "Holy Grail" of Communism because I had already been convinced, a conviction which began in my childhood days, that a new and brighter future must inevitably follow this economic, social and political chaos which brought recurrent tragedy and ruin to the great majority of mankind. To choose, as the immortal Georgi Dimitrov, put it, whether to be the 'hammer' or the 'anvil' in human affairs; to pound or be pounded upon? I have never had occasion to regret that choice when I took up the 'hammer'."

In the fall of 1920 the McEwen family moved to Saskatoon where Tom joined the newly-formed branch of the Saskatoon Workers Party, later the Communist Party. He led much of the activities of the Party for nearly 7 years, becoming its branch secretary and leader, a post which he held until 1927 when he left Saskatoon to take on wider Party responsibilities. In 1927 he moved to Winnipeg and became a full-time Party functionary, serving as organizer for District 7 which then comprised Manitoba and Saskatchewan, with headquarters in Winnipeg. In the spring of 1929 the Party National Executive moved Tom to Toronto to take over the position of national Industrial Director, previously held by Tim Buck until Tim's election to the post of National Secretary of the Communist Party.

Tom was general secretary of the Worker's Unity League (WUL) which formed in 1930. It's mandate was: "to charter union locals, councils and regional federations; to organize the unorganized, employed and unemployed alike, to establish group forms of organization to correspond with the needs of all workers involved, and to work at all times for the maximum unity of the Canadian trade union movement under one revolutionary trade union centre. To provide a trade union structure, organization and policy, designed to mobilize the full strength and maximum unity in any and all economic and political struggles. And to regard the strike as labour's key weapon in determining the social and economic returns for the sale and use of its creative labour power." After only a few months after its inaugural conference in Toronto in 1930 the WUL counted amongst its affiliate membership the Mine Workers Union of Canada locals in

British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia; the Lumber Workers Industrial Union locals in B.C., northern and western Ontario, and organized lumber worker groups in Quebec. Added to this was the Industrial Union of Needle Trades workers in Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg; the Fishermans Industrial Union in B.C., forerunner of today's United Fisherman and Allied Workers Union; Metal trades, Marine workers, Domestic, Hotel and Restaurant Workers, together with multiple groups of organized unemployed workers. It was through the Industrial Union of Needle Trades that Tom met Annie Buller, one of Canada's great pioneer Communist women.

The first WUL conference of southern Ontario, May 24 & 25, 1931. At this conference it was decided that a delegation would be sent to the Fifth Congress of the Red International Labour Unions (RILU) in Moscow. Tom was elected Chairman of this delegation.

Tom also helped in the preparation and organization of the Ontario and eastern Canada contingents of the On To Ottawa Trek of June 1935. With the Vancouver and Western contingent had already halted in Regina he had made arrangements to meet with the Trek leaders from Regina at North Bay. This delegation, headed by Arthur "Slim" Evans, leader of the B.C. and Western contingent, had been promised an audience with Prime Minister R.B. "Iron Heel" Bennett on condition that the main body of jobless trekkers remained in Regina. While Tom was not present at the historic meeting with the Prime Minister, the audience did not go well. The Prime Minister made it clear to the delegation that, instead of work and wages and bread, persecution and prison awaited the Trekkers. In the confrontation with Bennett, Arthur Evans referred to him as "not being fit to be the chief in a small Hottentot village." Competent political observers of the day drew the conclusion that the historic confrontation between Arthur Evans and Prime Minister Richard Bedford Bennett marked the 'nodal point' of the latter's rapid down-hill slide into political oblivion.

On Dominion Day, July 1, 1936, a few days after the delegation had returned to report on their reception at the hands of the Bennett Government, Bennett ordered the peaceful assembly and temporary stay in Regina 'broken up', an order which involved the brutal police attack upon the assembly, resulting in the death of trekker W.T. Shaak and City police detective C. Millar by RCMP, as well as the wounding of scores of unemployed workers.

<http://www.ontoottawa.ca/home.html>

[http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied\\_history/tutor/calgary/onottawa.html](http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/calgary/onottawa.html)

[http://radio.cbc.ca/programs/thismorning/lfnsound/moments\\_in\\_history/moments\\_in\\_history\\_021800.html](http://radio.cbc.ca/programs/thismorning/lfnsound/moments_in_history/moments_in_history_021800.html)

Tom did have a confrontation with Prime Minister Bennett, but it was not during the On To Ottawa trek of 1935. In 1930 a nation-wide delegation of WUL affiliates and other workers went to Ottawa to place before the Bennett government a brief demanding, among other things, the enactment of legislation providing for a system of non-contributory unemployment insurance. When this brief was presented to Bennett he 'exploded' – "Never will I or any government which I am a part, put a premium on idleness or put our people on the dole." RCMP herded the delegation out of the meeting.

Tom served time in a number of prisons for his Communist beliefs: the Don Jail in Toronto, Kingston Penitentiary, Headingly Prison in Manitoba and the Hull Concentration Camp in Hull, Quebec. His first arrest was on December 27, 1930 and the subsequent incarceration was for 15 days in the Don Jail on a charge of "obstructing traffic" when addressing a street corner meeting during a civic election campaign. The initial arrest and sentence was the first of many to follow during the historic "Free Speech" struggles of the late 20s and early 30s in Toronto. During this time local police authorities, led by Police Chief Draper a former Brigadier-General with a determination to wipe out every vestige of Communism from Toronto, sought to bar the left-wing movement from the use of public halls. Public speech in any language other than English was prohibited. Operators of licensed halls were warned by the police that if they rented their

premises to the Communist Party or an organization which supported the Party, without first securing permission from the police, would be liable to lose their license. His "Red Squad", a group of zealous police officers, used violence and brutality, combined with extreme intimidation tactics, upon anyone suspected of being a Communist. The conditions of Tom's first arrest were brutal and typical of the lengths to which the police went in their zeal to eradicate Communism. He was badly beaten by police and thrown into a cell, where he was removed and taken to the General Hospital for emergency treatment.

<http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/canada/buck-tim/30years/ch03.htm>

His second arrest, in 1931, occurred after Prime Minister Bennett, with the cooperation of the RCMP/Ontario Provincial Police, Toronto City Police and the notorious Red Squad launched their major offensive: the national offices of the Communist Party of Canada and the WUL were raided and smashed, and all papers, cards, documents and other materials seized, boxed up and carted off. Those materials were examined in the weeks following in order to produce 'evidence' that the Communist Party was a 'foreign-dominated conspiracy aimed at the overthrow of constituted authority in Canada by force and violence.' In this initial attack Tim Buck, national secretary of the Communist Party and seven others were arrested, including Tom McEwen (eight days later). These 8 men were sentenced to 5 years in Kingston Penitentiary for being members of an organization now declared illegal under the terms of Section 98. Eventually they were released beginning in June 1934 with the last prisoner, Tim Buck, being released November 24.

<http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/canada/buck-tim/30years/ch06.htm>

In 1938 Tom was elected by the Central Executive to work in the apparatus of the Communist International (CI) with headquarters in Moscow. He served on this body for nearly two years, mainly on what was then termed the "Anglo-American" Secretariat. During this time, 1938 – 1940, Tom's daughter Jean, a trained nurse, was working in China with Canadian surgeon Norman Bethune, to aid in the field of medical work of the Eighth and Fourth Route armies of the Peoples Liberation Army of Republican China. His sons, Jim and Bruce, were fighting in Spain with the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion of the International Brigades, as part of a coalition to stem the first flood-tide of German-Italian-Japanese fascism.

In 1940 Tom returned from Moscow and in the fall of that year he was arrested and charged with "continuing to be a member of the Communist Party, contrary to the provisions of the Defense of Canada Regulations." On November 8, 1940 he was sentenced to two years less a day at hard labour in the Manitoba provincial jail at Headley, Manitoba. He was ordered released in October of 1941 but two months previously, on Sept 9, 1941, the Minister of Justice, Honorable Ernest Lapointe, issued an 'Order for Detention' for Tom. So regardless of what the Manitoba Court of King's Bench might decide, the Order for Detention stated that "unless otherwise ordered by me he shall be transferred and detained in an internment camp and held under the conditions prevailing in such camp." Thus Tom was released from Headley but when he walked out he was picked up by Lapointe's RCMP officers and taken to the Hull Concentration Camp, where he served a few years.

Later, Tom was assigned the editorship of the *People's Advocate*, later the *Advocate*, then the *Pacific Tribune* in September of 1945 which he held up until his retirement some 25 years later. His editorial experience was 1928-29 when he did editorial work for the Toronto *Worker*; while working as a blacksmith-machinist had edited *The Furrow* in Saskatoon; also editor of *The Yukoner* during its brief career when a Communist party candidate in the 1945 general election. In 1970 Tom received the Lenin Medallion, given to individuals in other lands for outstanding achievements. In *The Forge Glows Red*, Tom says of this: "[The Lenin Medallion] is my proudest possession, because it confirms that I tried, if not always successfully, to apply the imperishable

science of Marxism-Leninism to the liberation of my fellow-workers from the galling chains of capitalism, and create for them a vision of a New Society, in a Socialist Canada, and in the great world beyond.”

For all his life, Tom McEwen fought tirelessly and passionately for both his beliefs and for the rights and civil liberties of his fellow working men and women. It was a trait he passed to all his children, as evidenced by their decisions to go out into the world and take up the battle for human rights. Tom wrote numerous essays and articles, as well as books, notably *The Forge Glows Red* (1974), and *He Wrote For Us: The Story of Bill Bennett, Pioneer Socialist Journalist* (1951).

Tom McEwen died on May 11, 1988 at the age of 97.

**Scope and Content:** Fonds contains personal correspondence, including numerous letters sent in support of Tom during his incarceration in the Hull Concentration Camp during the period 1941 – 1942, as well as correspondence addressed to Tom in his capacity as editor of *The Pacific Tribune*. Also included: materials relating to his Yukon election campaign of 1944 – 1945; a collection of essays and draft manuscripts written by Tom; numerous pamphlets, bulletins and other writings collected by Tom; materials related to various labour unions and labour union activity in general; and a large number of newspaper clippings.

**Restrictions on Access:** None

**Accruals:** No further accruals expected

**Related records in a different fonds:** Lily (Steinman) Greene, who worked with the W.U.L., was a close friend of the McEwen family for many years. The Lily Green Fonds contains a rich collection of 171 letters from Tom McEwen spanning the decades from 1944 to 1976, as well as 4 letters from his wife, Rose McEwen; her sister, Anne Belenkaya; and Norman McEwen, Tom and Rose’s son, and his family. The letters are mostly of a personal nature but many contain discussions of, or references to, issues important to the Communist Party in Canada and elsewhere, including Tom’s observations of and opinions on events occurring both at home and internationally, like the Vietnam war.

In this fonds are 22 photographs of Tom McEwen and various family members. A clippings file contains an assortment of newspaper clippings, some columns and opinion pieces written by Tom McEwen, with the majority on issues or events concerning a member of the McEwen family. The clippings cover the period from 1950 through to 2000. The fonds also contains two essays written by Tom McEwen and an audiocassette of a talk he gave in 1974 to a Grade 11 class taught by his grandson, Harry Ewen. The cassette also contains a recording of a CBC program “This Morning” that aired in 2000 and which incorporated that lecture as part of the program.

### **Series List – Tom McEwen Fonds**

**Title:** Correspondence – General

**Dates:** 1951 – 1972

**Extent:** 1 file folder, approx. 22 pieces of correspondence

**Scope and Content:** This series contains personal correspondence, mostly incoming (with one copy of an outgoing letter from Tom to Mr. Donald Evans, dated June 3, 1966).

Letters are both handwritten and typed, from a single page to multiple pages.

Series is contained in its entirety in Box #1, File #1.

**Source of supplied title:** Title based on content of series.

**Title:** Correspondence – Pacific Tribune

**Dates:** 1949 - 1966

**Extent:** 1 file folder, approx. 10 pieces of correspondence

**Scope and Content:** This series contains correspondence directed to Tom in his capacity as editor of the *Pacific Tribune*.

Letters are both handwritten and typed, from a single page to multiple pages.

Series is contained in its entirety in Box #1, File #2.

**Source of supplied title:** Title based on content of series.

**Title:** Correspondence – Letters of Testimony

**Dates:** 1941 - 1942

**Extent:** 1 file folder, approx. 59 pieces of correspondence

**Scope and Content:** This series contains correspondence relating to Tom's release from Headley provincial jail and subsequent internment in the Hull Concentration Camp in Hull, Quebec. The bulk of the correspondence are letters of testimony asserting the good character of Tom McEwen, solicited by Tom's family as support for the efforts to have him released. Series also contains correspondence from government departments and officials commenting on Tom's case.

Letters are typed and range from a single page to multiple pages.

Series is contained in its entirety in Box #1, File #3.

**Source of supplied title:** Title based on content of series.

**Title:** Yukon Election Materials

**Dates:** 1944 - 1945

**Extent:** 5 file folders.

**Scope and Content:** This series contains materials relating to Tom's campaign as a candidate for the Labour-Progressive Party in the June 11, 1945 Federal Election. Included in the series are statistical and informational campaign materials, correspondence, and publications such as the Labour Election Campaign Bulletin and copies of *The Yukoner* and *The Dawson News*. There are also miscellaneous promotional materials relating to Yukon Carnival Week, including copies of the *Carnival Daily Bulletin*.

Series is contained in its entirety in Box #1, Files #4 - 9.

**Source of supplied title:** Title based on content of series.

**Title:** Written material - personal

**Dates:** n.d.

**Extent:** 1 file folder.

**Scope and Content:** This series contains a handwritten journal of notes relating to the development of Communism.

Series is contained in its entirety in Box #1, File #10.

**Source of supplied title:** Title based on content of series.

**Title:** Written material – draft manuscripts

**Dates:** 1936 - 1971

**Extent:** 5 file folders.

**Scope and Content:** This series contains drafts of books and essays written by Tom McEwen. Included in the series are drafts for a Labour History of Canada, "Prison Bars", "Vignettes of the Red Army", "Aviation Day in the U.S.S.R.", "Maoism – Now a Shameless Auxiliary to U.S. Imperialism", "The History of the U.L.F.T.A.", and "Men of the Forest – The Story of the Lumber Workers Industrial Union of Canada."

Drafts are both handwritten and typed, single page, on legal and letter-sized paper.

Series is contained in its entirety in Box #1, Files #11 – 12, and Box #2, Files #1 – 3.

**Source of supplied title:** Title based on content of series.

**Title:** Collected written material

**Dates:** [19-?]

**Extent:** 1 file folder.

**Scope and Content:** This series contains drafts of essays not written by Tom McEwen. Included in the series are: "The Mine Workers' Union of Canada and the Great Pass Strike of 1932" by Allen Seager; "Basic Highlights of the Labor History – Lakehead and Canada", by A.T. Hill; and a computer printout of an untitled work that describes events related to the confrontations between CPC Party members and Toronto police during the late 20s and 30s. The printout is dated September 4, 1976 and contains editing notes throughout. It is not known who wrote this piece.

Also contained in this series are political and union essays: "Some Notes of the AHT Indians" by Morris Swadesh, "Strengthen the Struggle Against the Right Danger! (Statement of the Political Committee, Communist Party of Canada)", and a few other writings which do not have titles.

Lastly, there is a collection of poems by Jake Bell which date from 1960 – 1965.

Materials are all typed, single page, on legal and letter-sized paper.

Series is contained in its entirety in Box #2, Files #4 – 6.

**Source of supplied title:** Title based on content of series.

**Title:** Pamphlets, Bulletins, Newsletters, Reports

**Dates:** 1909 – [197-]

**Extent:** 6 file folders.

**Scope and Content:** This series contains numerous publications and reports on a variety of subjects relating to Tom McEwen's Communist and socialist interests.

Series is contained in its entirety in Box #2, Files #7 – 12.

**Source of supplied title:** Title based on content of series.

**Title:** Labour Union materials

**Dates:** 1928 - 1977

**Extent:** 5 file folders.

**Scope and Content:** This series contains material relating to various labour unions and associated activities, as follows:

Workers' Unity League – History [Phillip Rankin]

Workers' Unity League – Executive membership list and minutes

The Marine Workers' and Boilermakers' Industrial Union – Survey Report

National Council for Democratic Rights – bulletins, pamphlets and proceedings

Labour Union – general correspondence and reports

Series is contained in its entirety in Box #3, Files #1 - 5

**Source of supplied title:** Title based on content of series.

**Title:** Press Clippings

**Dates:** 1914 - 1975

**Extent:** 3 file folders.

**Scope and Content:** This series contains numerous newspaper clippings from a variety of publications.

Series is contained in its entirety in Box #3, Files #6 – 9.

**Source of supplied title:** Title based on content of series.