

## **Introduction**

### **The Unitarian Sermons of Ramsay MacDonald**

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 1892 a young man stood up to lead worship in the pulpit of Canterbury Unitarian Church. His name was J. R. MacDonald, he was 25 years old and he was described as a Journalist from London. His service was well received and he was invited to return. Which he did, leading worship in Canterbury more than 20 times over the next two years. He also led worship at Richmond, Croydon and Southampton Unitarian Church on various occasions during that period, and at the beginning of 1895 he was invited to take up a post as leader and ‘temporary minister’ of the newly launched ‘Ramsgate and Margate Unitarian Circle of Religious Fellowship’. J. R. MacDonald, of course, became better known to the world at large in 1924 when, as Ramsay MacDonald, he became the first Labour Prime Minister of the U.K.

Yet the fact that Ramsay MacDonald, still one of the most controversial and influential figures in the political history of this nation, was active for a decade as a passionate and prolific Unitarian preacher, conducting at least 500 services in more than 15 different Unitarian churches between the ages of 25 and 35, has not troubled the history books. The many volumes that deal with MacDonald and his life concentrate almost exclusively on his politics.

It is perhaps not so mysterious that this aspect of his formative years has been left unexplored. There are countless thousands of files and documents relating to Ramsay MacDonald hidden away in public and private archives around the country, and only one of them, in a sealed envelope inside a larger file, contains material directly and wholly relevant to Ramsay Mac’s time as a Unitarian preacher. And no one who had not spent many days in the Unitarian College Manchester Archives held by Manchester University and in the reading rooms at Dr Williams’ library in London poring over copies of the ‘Christian Life and Unitarian Herald’ and ‘Inquirer’ from the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century would have recognised that a footnote in one archive referring to an entry in another archive that stated: “Ramsgate and Margate conferences prominent” had no connection whatsoever to politics but referred to the period in 1895 when he was leader and temporary minister of the Ramsgate and Margate Unitarian Circle of Religious Fellowship. During that period, he regularly conducted a morning service in Margate followed by an evening service in Ramsgate, and on Mondays and occasional Tuesdays he would hold lectures and seminars on Unitarian related subjects. These gatherings were advertised as ‘Conferences’.

I am the minister of Doncaster Unitarian and Free Christian Church and I was in that post in 2012 when we celebrated the centenary of continuous worship in the current building. As part of the celebrations I conducted research in Doncaster Council archives and in the local newspaper archives in Doncaster Central Library, where I discovered that when the Church opened its doors for worship on August 22<sup>nd</sup> 1912 it was, in fact and in effect, a Christian Socialist Church. This is a story all of its own which will be added to this website soon enough, but anyone sufficiently interested in the subject to be reading these words will readily understand why I came very close to committing a breach of the peace in the archives. It was all I could do to prevent myself from jumping up and down and shouting ‘Hallelujah’ when I came across the text of a letter that was read out when the agreement to amalgamate an ejected Congregational minister, his loyal followers and the existing Unitarian Church as ‘Doncaster Free Christian Church’ was announced. This letter roundly denounced the reactionary forces who had caused the problem, warmly congratulated those who had successfully opposed them, and concluded “I wish your venture every success. Yours Sincerely, Keir Hardie”.

I knew I was onto something then, and began to read and research more widely on the links between Unitarianism and Christian Socialism. The first book to refer to MacDonald as a Unitarian was ‘God’s Politicians: the Christian Contribution to 100 Years of Labour’, by Graham Dale. He attributed the clashes between Ramsay Macdonald and Arthur Henderson to the fact that Henderson was a Methodist and MacDonald was a Unitarian. “One source of this contentious relationship was religion, since MacDonald was a Unitarian.” Dale cites his source for this as David Marquand’s 1977 biography ‘Ramsay MacDonald’. On page 53 Marquand quotes an extract from a letter written to him by his future wife, Margaret Ethel Gladstone on 2 July 1896:

“There is one important thing though you say the gulf between us is more apparent in our religion. *You told me you were a Unitarian*. I dare say I am – I leave out the earlier sentences about Christ in the creed if I think about it”

The letter in its entirety appears in the book ‘A Singular Marriage – A Labour Love Story in Letters and Diaries’ 380 pages of primary sources; i.e. the letters and diaries of Ramsay and Margaret MacDonald edited by Jane Cox.

Also included is a ‘Newspaper cutting July 1985’ relating to the press coverage of the Southampton election in which MacDonald stood:

“During the election, reports have been assiduously and scurrilously circulated that he is an irreligious and illiterate man, and my object now is to refute these base and untrue reports. It will probably surprise many to hear that for three months previous to his campaign here he was conducting religious services and preaching the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man twice every Sunday, in connection with religious bodies at Ramsgate and Margate.”

C. A. Woodlands. P.50

Armed with a place and a date I attacked the archives and soon uncovered the evidence: from the Christian Life and Unitarian Herald of Feb 9 1895 “Mr J. R. MacDonald (of London), having received an invitation to take charge for three months of the new centre of work in Thanet, has accepted the invitation, and will begin his work next Sunday morning, February 3<sup>rd</sup>, when his subject at Margate will be - ‘Religion and Fellowship’, and in the evening at Ramsgate Mr. MacDonald will give an address on ‘Heredity and Responsibility.’”

These services were also advertised in the local press:

**UNITARIAN CHRISTIANITY.**

**S**ERVICES are held EVERY SUNDAY at 3 MARINE TERRACE, MARGATE, at 11.15 a.m., and in the ROYAL HOTEL, RAMSGATE, at 6.30 p.m.

Preacher To-Morrow, March 3<sup>rd</sup>,  
MR. J. R. MACDONALD.

Morning subject : “The Nature of Religious Proof.”  
Evening : “The Dominion of Man.”

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**A CONFERENCE**

Will be held NEXT MONDAY EVENING, MARCH 4<sup>th</sup>, at Eight o'clock, at 3, DANE JOHN TERRACE, Grange Road, Ramsgate.

Subject: “THE BIRTH OF JESUS.”  
MR. J. R. MACDONALD will preside.  
A Welcome to all.

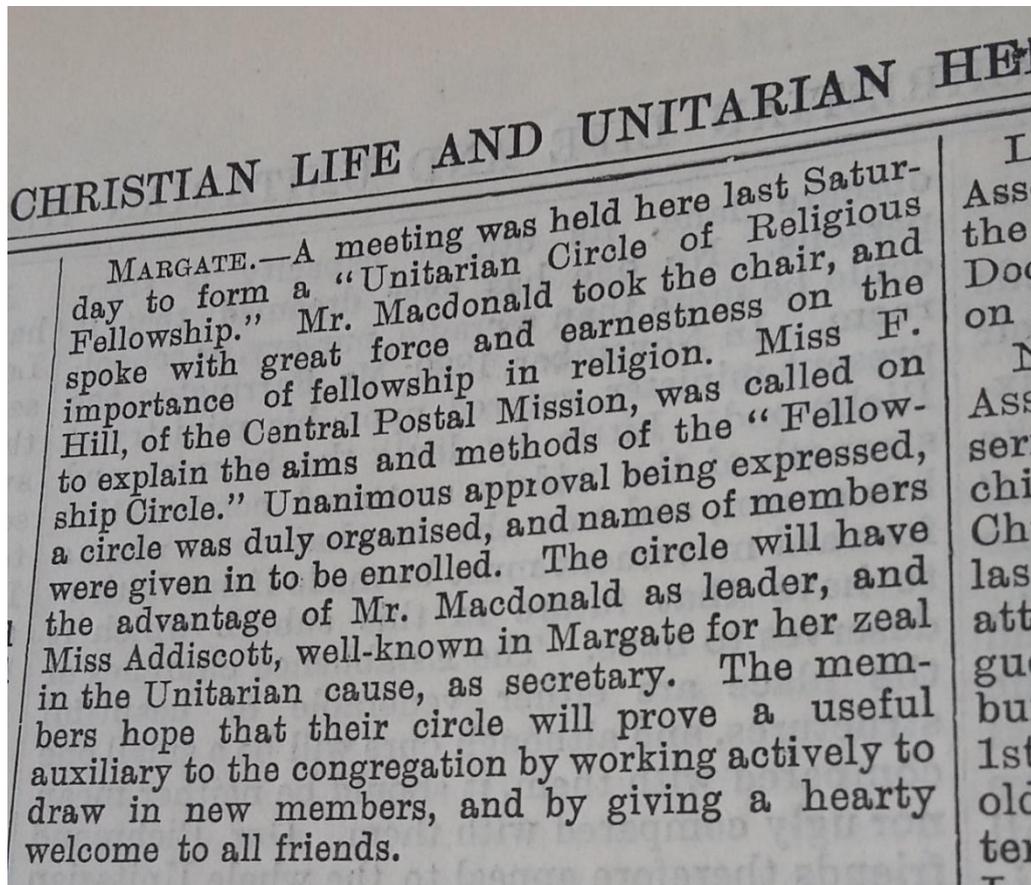
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**M**R. J. R. MACDONALD will LECTURE in the ASSEMBLY ROOMS (Balcony Room), MARGATE, NEXT TUESDAY, MARCH 5<sup>th</sup>, on  
“Unitarianism and a State Church: A Plea for Disestablishment.”

ADMISSION FREE. Reserved Seats, 6d.

*From the Thanet Advertiser March 2<sup>nd</sup> 1895*

On February 16<sup>th</sup> 1895 the following appeared in the Christian Life and Unitarian Herald:



This was the start of the journey which led, by a mixture of stubborn persistence; meticulous, painstaking, time-consuming diligence; and a healthy dose of sheer luck, to my discovery of the Ramsgate and Margate Archive. The Unitarian Prayers and Sermons of Ramsay MacDonal. Twenty-five complete or near complete sermons with copious pages of notes and prayers, all handwritten, and all presented here. And all relating to his period as leader of the Ramsgate and Margate Unitarian Circle of Religious Fellowship.

The central concern of these sermons is the attempt to express an authentic form of Christianity that is fit for the times, based on a reasoned refutation of the traditional understanding of salvation and the articulation of a credible alternative; one that is sustainable in the face of the massive political, social, and philosophical changes that were gathering at the time MacDonal was writing and preaching; at the hinge of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

As such, Ramsay Mac's theological reasoning is astonishingly modern

I am sometimes tempted to puzzle over why this archive was not found before; or exactly why this aspect of MacDonald's early life is not better known; or why it has been ignored or neglected. I would like to think that there is a better reason than the fact that both Socialism and Unitarianism have, at different times, been deeply unfashionable, and may have held themselves aloof from each other because each regarded the other as unfashionable

It is utterly futile and fruitless, but equally irresistible, to speculate that the hand that gathered up those twenty-five sermons and some fifty pages of prayers, and sealed them into an envelope that I opened a lifetime later, was the hand of Ramsay MacDonald himself. And if it was, did he hide them away to be forgotten? Or did he hide them away with the inkling that one day they would be found by someone who would know what they were and would appreciate their significance?

David Marquand's 1977 biography of Ramsay MacDonald is an outstanding piece of work. Easily one of the finest political biographies of the last century. Yet before we reach the end of page two we find the statement: "He emerges from the literature of the last twenty years as a bundle of contradictory attributes rather than as a credible human being."

Now we know why. The missing link has been found, and here, displayed in the prayers and sermons he wrote as a young man working out his own salvation, is the hidden heart of Ramsay MacDonald.