

FOOT, MICHAEL MACKINTOSH (1913 - 2010), politician, journalist, author

Name: Michael Mackintosh Foot
Date of birth: 1913
Date of death: 2010
Gender: Male
Occupation: politician, journalist, author
Area of activity: Politics, Government and Political Movements; Literature and Writing
Author: D. Ben Rees

Michael Foot was born on 23 July 1913 at 1 Lipson Terrace, Plymouth, Devon, the fifth of seven children of Isaac Foot (1880-1960) and his wife Eva (née Mackintosh, 1877-1946). Isaac Foot was a solicitor in Plymouth and was the Liberal MP for Bodmin, Cornwall 1922-1924 and 1929-1935. Michael's siblings were also well-known, namely Sir Dingle Foot (1905-1978), Hugh Foot (Baron Carodon, 1907-1990), John Foot (Baron Foot, 1909-1999), Margaret Elizabeth Foot (1911-1965), Jennifer Mackintosh Highet (1916-2002), and Christopher Isaac Foot (1917-1984).

He was educated at Forris School in Swanage and Quaker High School, Leighton Park, Reading, from where he went to Wadham College, Oxford to read Philosophy, Politics and Economics. He made an impression at Oxford and was elected president (the youngest ever) of 'the Oxford Union Society'. He graduated with second class honours in 1934 and got a job with a shipping company in Liverpool.

He changed his allegiance from his father's party to Labour after seeing the poverty on the streets of Birkenhead and Liverpool. At the age of 22 he stood as Labour parliamentary candidate for Monmouth in the 1935 general election. **Aneurin Bevan** agreed to speak on his behalf and this was the first meeting in a lifelong partnership between the two. Foot had already begun a career as a journalist on the *New Statesman*, and when Bevan established the weekly *Tribune* in 1937 he invited Foot to join as a reporter, but Foot resigned within a year after the editor William Mellor was sacked. On Bevan's advice, Lord Beaverbrook gave him a job on the *Evening Standard* and in 1942 made him editor. He moved to the *Daily Herald* in 1945, and then in 1948 he returned as editor of the *Tribune* until 1952, and again from 1955 to 1960.

Foot won Plymouth Devonport for Labour in 1945 and retained the seat in 1950 and 1951 but lost it in 1955. In 1949 he married the film producer Jill Craigie (1911-1999). They did not have any children, but Jill had a daughter, Julie, from a previous marriage.

Foot was an eloquent and powerful orator, and during his time as MP for Plymouth Devonport he became a prominent advocate of the left-wing movement associated with Aneurin Bevan, which was also supported by a number of Welsh MPs, such as **George Thomas**, **Tudor Watkins** and **Cledwyn Hughes**. However, a bitter disagreement arose between Foot and Bevan on the question of nuclear weapons. As editor of the *Tribune* Foot had adopted the slogan, 'This is the paper leading the campaign against the hydrogen bomb'. When Bevan lent his support to the retention of nuclear weapons in a future Labour government in 1957, Foot was enraged and turned his back on his great friend. In the 1959 general election Bevan was too ill to support Foot's candidature for the Plymouth seat. At the end of the year when Bevan underwent an operation a reconciliation took place and Bevan urged Foot to consider the nomination for his seat. After Bevan's death, Foot won the by-election in Ebbw Vale in November 1960. The voters took to him because he was such a good friend of Nye's and he succeeded in winning with a majority of 20,000 in the elections of 1964, 1966, 1970, 1974 (February and October), 1979, 1983 and 1987. He bought a cottage in Tredegar so that he could regularly visit his constituents. But he and his wife were almost killed on one of the trips to his constituency in October 1963. His wife was driving when their car collided with a lorry, and Foot suffered damage to his lungs, ribs and left leg. The accident left him looking fragile and needing a walking stick.

Foot joined the House of Commons in 1960 as one who wore the cloak of Aneurin Bevan, the conscience of the left wing. He was a rebel from the start and had little admiration for the leader of his party, Hugh Gaitskell. He was a republican but still became very friendly with the Queen Mother. She called him by his first name and praised the controversial duffle coat he wore at the Cenotaph in Whitehall in 1981, which the press insisted on calling a 'donkey jacket'.

Foot was supportive of Harold Wilson's government (1964-1970) and welcomed the fact that the Labour Party had moved to the left. In 1972, Wilson appointed him Opposition Leader of the House during the Heath government. When Wilson became Prime Minister for the second time in 1974, Foot was given the opportunity to be Secretary of State for Employment. A personal blow to him during his time in that post was the closure of the Ebbw Vale Steel Works in 1975. Despite his ministerial position he was not able to save the jobs of his constituents, and he and John Morris had to address them in the midst of the immense disappointment. Nevertheless, he was responsible for significant changes to employment, repealing the trade union reforms of the Heath government and introducing the Health and Safety at Work Act and the Employment Protection Act. He was a leading spokesman for the 'No' campaign in the 1975 Referendum on membership of the European Union.

Throughout his time in Parliament, Foot took a great interest in the question of devolution for Wales and Scotland. When the Kilbrandon Report was published in 1973, he set out to persuade the Welsh MPs of the merits of the report, and to a large extent they listened to him. George Thomas, the opposition spokesman for Wales, announced that an elected council in Cardiff would be part of Labour's 1974 election manifesto. When **James Callaghan** became Prime Minister in 1976, he made Foot leader of the House of Commons and Lord President of the Council, and also put him in charge of devolution for Wales and Scotland. In his first statement Foot said there would be no compromise or missed opportunity. He and **Gwynfor Evans** soon began to work together, and over the period of the Callaghan government they became close friends. But they were both disappointed when there was strong opposition to the plans before the bill on devolution for Wales and Scotland reached the House of Commons, and it became clear that preparations had to be made for a referendum. Foot steered the bills through the House of Commons in 1977, although the only other member of the Cabinet who showed any enthusiasm for the Assembly was John Morris. The result of the referendum in March 1979 was a huge disappointment for Foot, but before that Cledwyn Hughes had paid tribute to his efforts in his diary on 22 February 1978:

He has made a greater effort to understand us, and to meet Welsh aspirations, than any other non-Welsh politician I have ever known. He has stood up to cruel attacks which would have daunted lesser men. Foot has won an honourable place in Welsh history whatever may come of this Bill.

When Callaghan resigned after losing the 1979 election to Margaret Thatcher, Foot was elected Leader of the Opposition in November 1980. He was by then 67 years old and quite frail. And he soon faced a major crisis in January 1981 when four stars of the Labour Party, **Roy Jenkins**, David Owen, Shirley Williams and Bill Rodgers, decided to leave and create a new party, the SDP.

Throughout Foot's leadership, the opinion polls insisted that he was not popular, and he was nicknamed *Worzel Gummidge* by politicians and the press alike. Labour's manifesto for the 1983 election reflected Foot's left-wing views, and was described by Gerald Kaufman as 'the longest suicide note in history'. The Conservatives won the election with a large majority over Labour, and Foot resigned as leader in June 1983. One of his admirers and MP for a neighbouring constituency, Neil Kinnock, was elected as his successor.

When Foot received an honorary D.Litt from the University of Wales in July 1983, he wrote to Cledwyn Hughes:

I really did feel honoured: nobody can match the Welsh when it comes to courtesy and I can assure you that we the Celts from elsewhere, from Cornwall in particular, appreciate the atmosphere all the more.

Michael Foot was the oldest member of the House of Commons from 1987 until his retirement before the 1992 general election. He wrote extensively from 1940 onwards, producing many notable books, including a comprehensive biography of his hero Aneurin Bevan published in two volumes in 1962 and 1973, and authoritative works on William Hazlitt, Thomas Paine, Lord Byron, Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift. He was a man of high principles who dedicated his life to socialism, democracy, devolution for Wales and Scotland, human rights and freedom for the individual and the nations.

Michael Foot died at his home in Hampstead, London on 3 March 2010 and his humanist funeral was held at Golders Green Crematorium on 15 March.

Author

D. Ben Rees

Sources

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Kenneth O. Morgan, *Michael Foot: a life* (London 2007)

Mervyn Jones, *Michael Foot* (London 1994)

D. Ben Rees, *Cofiant Cledwyn Hughes: un o wŏ·r mawr Mŏ·n a Chymru* (Talybont 2017)

Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Michael Foot](#)

Images

Geoff Charles, *Is-etholiad Glynebwy yn sgil marwolaeth Aneurin Bevan*, Michael Foot a etholwyd yn olynydd iddo

Leslie Gilbert Illingworth, *The white knight of the left*

Leslie Gilbert Illingworth, *Gaitskell as Hamlet*

Leslie Gilbert Illingworth, *Don't ban the bomb*

Leslie Gilbert Illingworth, *Inflatable Aneurin*

Leslie Gilbert Illingworth, *Gaitskell v CND*

Archives

NLW Archives: [Parliamentary Election - February 28, 1974: Message from Michael Foot](#)

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