



CITC

CANADIAN ISSUES
THÈMES CANADIENS

Thomas H. B. Symons
Desmond Morton
Donald Wright
Bob Rae
E. A. Heaman
Patrice Dutil
Barbara Messamore
James Daschuk

A-HISTORICAL Look at
JOHN A. MACDONALD?

Seeing Canada's First Prime
Minister in the Context of
His and Our Times

Summer 2015





SUMMER 2015

- 3 *Introduction*
Macdonald's Makeover
Randy Boswell
- 6 John A. Macdonald:
A Founder and Builder
Thomas H. B. Symons
- 11 John Alexander Macdonald:
A Man Shaped by His Age
Desmond Morton
- 14 A biographer's flawed portrait
reveals hard truths about history
Donald Wright
- 19 A time for reflection,
truth and reconciliation
Bob Rae
- 22 Macdonald's push for prosperity
overcame conflicts of identity
E. A. Heaman
- 26 Macdonald's Enduring Success
in Quebec
Patrice Dutil
- 32 Formidable, flawed man
'impossible to idealize'
Barbara Messamore
- 39 Acknowledging patriarch's failures
will help Canada mature as a nation
James Daschuk



PRÉSIDENT/PRESIDENT

Jocelyn Letourneau, Université Laval

PRÉSIDENT D'HONNEUR/HONORARY CHAIR

The Hon. Herbert Marx

SECRÉTAIRE DE LANGUE FRANÇAISE ET TRÉSORIER/
FRENCH-LANGUAGE SECRETARY AND TREASURER

Vivek Venkatesh, Concordia University

SECRÉTAIRE DE LANGUE ANGLAISE/ENGLISH-LANGUAGE SECRETARY

Dominique Clément, University of Alberta

REPRÉSENTANTE ÉTUDIANTE/STUDENTS' REPRESENTATIVE

Celine Cooper, University of Toronto

REPRÉSENTANT DE LA COLOMBIE-BRITANNIQUE ET DU YUKON/
BRITISH COLUMBIA AND YUKON REPRESENTATIVE

Peter Seixas, University of British Columbia

REPRÉSENTANTE DU QUÉBEC/QUEBEC REPRESENTATIVE

Yolande Cohen, UQAM

REPRÉSENTANTE DE L'ONTARIO/ONTARIO REPRESENTATIVE

Eve Haque, Ryerson University

REPRÉSENTANT DE L'ATLANTIQUE/ATLANTIC PROVINCES REPRESENTATIVE

Jeanne-Mance Cormier, Université de Moncton

VICE-PRÉSIDENT EXÉCUTIF/EXECUTIVE VICE-PRESIDENT

Jack Jedwab

DIRECTEUR DES PROGRAMMES ET ADMINISTRATION/
DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMMING AND ADMINISTRATION

James Ondrick

DIRECTRICE DES PUBLICATIONS/DIRECTOR OF PUBLICATIONS

Sarah Kooi

COORDONNATRICE DES COMMUNICATIONS/COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR

Victoria Chwalek



RÉDACTEUR EN CHEF/EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Randy Boswell

DIRECTRICE À LA RÉDACTION/MANAGING EDITOR

James Ondrick

TRADUCTION/TRANSLATION

Victoria Chwalek

GRAPHISME/DESIGN

Bang Marketing : 514 849-2264 • 1 888 942-BANG
info@bang-marketing.com/www.bang-marketing.com

PUBLICITÉ/ADVERTISING

james.ondrick@acs-aec.ca/514 925-3097

ADRESSE AEC/ACS ADDRESS

1822, rue Sherbrooke Ouest, Montréal (QC) AECH3H 1E4
514 925-3096/general@acs-aec.ca



Patrimoine
canadien

Canadian
Heritage

Canada History Fund

Fonds pour l'histoire du Canada

Canadian Issues/Thèmes canadiens is a quarterly publication of the Association for Canadian Studies (ACS). It is distributed free of charge to individual and institutional members of the ACS. Canadian Issues is a bilingual publication. All material prepared by the ACS is published in both French and English. All other articles are published in the language in which they are written. Opinions expressed in articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the ACS. The Association for Canadian Studies is a voluntary non-profit organization. It seeks to expand and disseminate knowledge about Canada through teaching, research and publications.

Canadian Issues/Thèmes canadiens est une publication trimestrielle de l'Association d'études canadiennes (AEC). Elle est distribuée gratuitement aux membres de l'AEC. CITC est une publication bilingue. Tous les textes émanant de l'AEC sont publiés en français et en anglais. Tous les autres textes sont publiés dans la langue d'origine. Les collaborateurs et collaboratrices de Thèmes canadiens sont entièrement responsables des idées et opinions exprimées dans leurs articles. L'Association d'études canadiennes est un organisme pancanadien à but non lucratif dont l'objet est de promouvoir l'enseignement, la recherche est les publications sur le Canada.

Canadian Issues/Thèmes canadiens acknowledges the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada History Fund of the Department of Canadian Heritage for this project.

Canadian Issues/Thèmes canadiens bénéficie de l'appui financier du Gouvernement du Canada par le biais du Fonds pour l'histoire du Canada du ministère du Patrimoine canadien pour ce projet.

LETTERS/COURRIER

Comments on this edition of Canadian Issues ?

We want to hear from you.

Write to Canadian Issues – Letters, ACS, 1822A, rue Sherbrooke Ouest, Montréal (Québec) H3H 1E4. Or e-mail us at <james.ondrick@acs-aec.ca> Your letters may be edited for length and clarity.

Des commentaires sur ce numéro ?

Écrivez-nous à Thèmes canadiens

Courrier, AEC, 1822A, rue Sherbrooke Ouest, Montréal (Québec) H3H 1E4. Ou par courriel au <james.ondrick@acs-aec.ca> Vos lettres peuvent être modifiées pour des raisons éditoriales.



@CanadianStudies

ISSN 0318-8442 (print) | ISSN 2368-9773 (online)

INTRODUCTION MACDONALD'S MAKEOVER

John A. Macdonald was, in his own era, a magnet for controversy. Serving as prime minister for nearly 19 tumultuous years, from Canada's infancy at Confederation to its late-Victorian adolescence, guaranteed that the Glasgow-born, Kingston-raised, Ottawa-ensconced political titan would engender a love-hate relationship with the citizens of the country he'd played a central role in creating.

Two centuries after his birth and nearly 125 years since his death, Macdonald is again at the centre of a storm: Was he, in fact, irredeemably racist? Was he corrupt? Or was he merely imperfect, a great visionary with minor flaws worth noting but not dwelling upon? We wonder these things because, being Canadians, we not only take our history seriously, but are especially wary about marking such milestone moments as a 200th birthday without at least pausing to reflect on whether an upbeat, patriotic *celebration* — or a more reflective, subdued *commemoration* — is called for.

The passage of time has quelled certain conflicts that once raged over Riel, the railway, the National Policy and Confederation itself. A hagiographic Macdonald gradually emerged in the public imagination, where the picture of a charming, crafty, harmlessly boozy rogue took hold and hints of darker sins were mostly brushed out of the portrait and left for future scholars to illuminate. But the magnitude of the man's impact on Canada during its formative years, and the greater embrace in recent decades of a probingly critical approach to re-understanding Canadian history, ensured that no clichéd, one-dimensional Sir John A. would survive very far into the 21st century.

The contributors to this volume were asked to assess aspects of Macdonald's life and career in the context of his times, to gauge how his ideas and actions might have been seen by his contemporaries in the lantern light of that age. Wide latitude was granted in the interpretation of the task, and the writers have offered fresh insights



from various vantage points, each one peering back through more than a dozen decades in search of that elusive historical figure standing behind the all-too-familiar mythologized Macdonald. The resulting collection of essays from this array of distinguished thinkers adds much to the deeper, increasingly nuanced perception of Canada's founding prime minister that has emerged at a time when the 200th anniversary of his birth might have produced only a superficial, stamp-worthy icon.

Among our essayists is University of Regina historian James Daschuk, whose multi-award-winning 2013 book *Clearing The Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, And The Loss of Aboriginal Life* helped ignite the ongoing public debate over Macdonald's legacy. (University of Ottawa historian Tim Stanley, whose writings on Macdonald's treatment of the Chinese-Canadian community have equally fueled this re-evaluation, published an earlier article on that subject in *Canadian Issues*.)

University of New Brunswick professor Donald Wright, who explores Macdonald through the eyes of The Old Chieftain's renowned biographer Donald Creighton, shows how powerfully our impressions of a distant subject can be distorted by a historian's lens. The publication of Wright's essay coincides with the launch this year of his highly anticipated new book, *Donald Creighton: A Life in History*.

Ryerson University's Patrice Dutil, co-editor of the recently published essay collection *Macdonald at 200: New Reflections and Legacies*, unpacks

Macdonald's remarkable electoral record in Quebec, a success shown to have been built on key alliances and the unerring instincts of a master politician well attuned to public opinion in that province.

In her essay, McGill University historian Elsbeth Heaman examines how Macdonald eschewed identity politics and grasped power by rallying propertied Canadians around his national quest for prosperity. And fellow McGill historian Desmond Morton highlights the way Macdonald mastered "the cultivation of gratitude" — the critical political skill of his age — to make sure early Canada's farmers and factory workers understood their financial fortunes were yoked to his on the hustings.

Meanwhile, Macdonald is granted the "grudging admiration" of University of the Fraser Valley historian Barbara Messamore, who credits Canada's first prime minister with unmatched tactical nimbleness but calls him out, too, for a kind of creative flexibility that extended, unfortunately, to ethics and morality.

Former Ontario premier and retired MP Bob Rae, who in January engaged in a bicentennial debate about Macdonald's legacy with Immigration Minister Chris Alexander, argues in his essay that Canadians should resist simplistic absolutes when judging Sir John's place in history, insisting on a characterization that embraces both his leadership in forging a new nation and his tragic failure to find a just and humane accommodation of the country's aboriginal peoples.

Finally, Professor Tom Symons, founding president of Trent University and revered champion of Canadian Studies, acknowledges that critical appraisals abound but pays tribute to Macdonald as Canada's ultimate founder and visionary, placing him among the world's greatest statesmen and nation-builders of the 19th century.

A recent nationwide survey of 1,500 people commissioned by the Association for Canadian Studies found that respondents who were more knowledgeable about Canada's historic treatment of aboriginal peoples were also most likely to exhibit

pride in the country. It's a reassuring result. While some defenders of Sir John A. have lamented that his recent 200th birthday bash was impolitely crashed by critics, it isn't likely that having a less flattering image of Macdonald in our minds — one that better reflects his failings and limits — will erode our patriotism or sense of attachment to Canada. Possessing a deeper, more balanced appreciation of the past, including a sharper picture of the country's leading patriarch, is also a point of pride. 🍁

Randy Boswell
Guest Editor, *Canadian Issues*



JOHN A. MACDONALD: A FOUNDER AND BUILDER

Professor **THOMAS H. B. SYMONS**, a teacher and writer in the field of Canadian Studies and public policy, has written extensively on intellectual, cultural, and historical issues, and on international academic and cultural relations. The Founding President of Trent University, he served as its President and Vice-Chancellor from 1961 to 1972, and since that time as Vanier Professor and Vanier Professor Emeritus. Appointed to the Board of Directors of the Ontario Heritage Trust in 2006, he became Chairman in 2010.

It is natural, as the 150th anniversary of the creation of Canadian Confederation approaches, that a good deal of public interest should focus on the beginnings of the country and, in particular, on the Fathers of Confederation. It is natural, too, that much of this interest should focus on the key person in the creation and building of Confederation, John A. Macdonald – all the more so as this current year, 2015, marks the 200th anniversary of his birth. It is also natural that the examination of Macdonald's life, as with any life, should produce a variety of opinions as to his merits, character and achievements. Like any mortal, and most of the gods, he has his detractors. What may be a little surprising is the extent and vehemence of some of the negative assessments that are surfacing. In some instances, the reputed failings and weaknesses of the subject may lie in the eye of the beholder as much as in the nature and record of the man under scrutiny. Nonetheless, critical assessments or re-assessments of political leadership should be welcomed and are useful.

Some of the critical appraisals are of long-standing, while others are of more recent origin, at least in their emphasis. They include the old charges of drunkenness and corruption, and now the more recent charges of racism and sexism, to name a few. No doubt, naysayers and detractors will build on these and find more.

The most familiar of these is the charge of drunkenness, to which Macdonald himself would have pleaded guilty on occasion, while noting, with his usual wit and perspicacity, that the voters preferred John A. drunk to his opponents sober. Much is made of his heavy drinking, of course, and it is clear that the regularity and amount of his consumption was, indeed, notable. But, given the sadness of so much of his personal life, and the weight of his public burden, as well as the widespread drinking habits of the day, his reliance on liquor as a solace and a refuge, may at least be understandable. It is remarkable how little it impinged on the discharge of his heavy responsibilities, and it has left the country a legacy of vignettes and anecdotes which enliven our political history.

The charge of political corruption is also well known. But the foundation for it is open to question. The principal example given is the so-called "Pacific Scandal" in which it became clear that Macdonald, in the midst of a hard-fought election, appealed for financial help directly to the entrepreneur who, all going well in the election for the Macdonald government, would hold the contract to build what was to be the Canadian Pacific Railway. His *cri de coeur* in a famous telegram begged for "another \$10,000, will be the last time of asking". It was not the first time a politician fighting for the life of his government and public policy solicited financial support and it will not be the last! Debate raged then, as it still does, about things of this sort which occur in virtually every major election, perhaps

in every country in which the basic infrastructure is being built to hold it together. Railways, canals, roads and transportation were the prime area of such interaction between government and the private sector. Indeed, one of Macdonald's predecessors put it simply, noting that: "Railways are my politics." There is no evidence that Macdonald personally benefitted financially from this solicitation, or, indeed that he ever did benefit, or sought to benefit personally from any other. It may be argued that his request was a part of the political reality of the needs of the day, and of the public morality of the times and place. Nonetheless, it was, at best, a problematic and questionable practice. Does it mean that Macdonald was politically corrupt? Perhaps the somewhat pious conclusion of one of his great historical critics, Professor Frank Underhill, is the kindest response: "Not guilty, but don't do it again."

The charges against Macdonald of racism, sexism and other discriminatory views and conduct are currently somewhat in vogue. They need to be examined with care. It is easy to throw mud and sometimes very hard to wash it off. What is the evidence and how does it fit in terms of his day? On the other side, there is abundant evidence of his habit of genuine kindness to many people – men, women, and children regardless of age, occupation, status, faith, culture, or race. It was in the camp of his opponents that one often found bitter attitudes towards French-speaking and Catholic fellow citizens. Macdonald's empathy for country folk and urban working men and women laid the foundations



for the Tory democracy which continues to be from time-to-time a significant strand in Canada's political fabric. The extraordinary affection felt by so much of the public for John A., sustained over a long political lifetime, has so far never been equalled by any other Canadian political leader in the national arena.

There are, of course, other criticisms of Macdonald, some of which have not yet found much public expression. It could be argued, for example, that although Macdonald believed passionately in the British parliamentary system, ironically, by his pre-eminence as Prime Minister, he set the stage for the Prime Minister's Office to become at times semi-presidential in its style and exercise of power on the American model.

In trying to assess Macdonald's place as a statesman, it is useful simply to note some of his extraordinary achievements. To reach a conclusion, I will note only six. The list could be much longer and more detailed.¹

First, I would put the sense of community and of shared interests which he built between French-speaking and English-speaking Canada. This found expression in his friendship and close working relationship with George-Étienne Cartier. It was this which made Confederation and the concept of a transcontinental Dominion of the North possible. He spoke out fiercely against movements in English-speaking Canada intended to restrict or eliminate altogether the use of the French tongue.² His vision of a country with two operationally official languages

remains the best and strongest statement on the subject: "I have no accord with the desire expressed in some quarters that by any mode whatever there should be an attempt made to oppress the one language or to render it inferior to the other. I believe it would be impossible if it were tried, and that it would be foolish and wicked if it were possible..."³

Second, I would put his leadership in the creation of Confederation and in the building of the Canadian nation which ensued. He was the prime mover of the project forward at each of the three conferences – Charlottetown, Quebec and London – at which the terms of Confederation were hammered out and the country prepared for launching on 1 July, 1867. Having successfully brought together the four British colonies that became the founding Provinces of Canada – Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec and Ontario – he then worked steadily at completing the assembling of almost the whole of what is now Canada, adding the vast lands of the Hudson's Bay Company, Rupert's Land and the Northwestern Territory, in 1870, British Columbia in 1871, Prince Edward Island in 1873 and, finally, arranging the transfer to Canada by Britain of its huge foothold and claim, dating from the time of Sir Martin Frobisher's two great voyages in 1576-1578 searching for the North-West Passage, to the littoral territory, islands, and continental shelf in the Arctic stretching from what was then Canada to the North Pole.⁴ All this was accomplished peacefully and with remarkable tenacity and efficiency. When he died, the transcontinental country touching on

three oceans and so rimmed with blue, like the Shield of Achilles of which he and Thomas D'Arcy McGee had dreamed and spoken, was a reality.

Third, while the concept and vision were shared with others, the clockwork inside the new nation, the constitutional and federal arrangements and the extensive and involved negotiations, were primarily Macdonald's work.

Fourth, the creation of Canada as a crowned parliamentary state in which British connections, traditions and institutions survived and prevailed, subject to future modifications, were a fulfillment of the aspirations at the heart of Macdonald's vision and, indeed, that of all the Fathers of Confederation regardless of their province or linguistic culture.

Fifth, by his timely efforts and success in creating Canada, Macdonald achieved his goal of preserving the larger half of North America as a country of its own, which was not a part of its powerful neighbour, the United States.

Finally must be noted Macdonald's success in the building of a great transcontinental railway to link and tie together the very broad transcontinental country that he had created. This was in itself a politically fraught undertaking, burdened with financial uncertainties, physical challenges for the



builders, and strong opposition from many quarters, including two rebellions and much political, financial and administrative conniving. It was Macdonald's steadfast determination, for which he paid a heavy price, that saw the project through.

There is, of course, much more to be said about Macdonald's vision, character and achievements. But even these few basic points may be enough to substantiate the claim that Sir John A. Macdonald was indeed a considerable statesman, with the vision, knowledge, wiliness, character, and courage to accomplish great things. He was, as his most recent biographer, Richard Gwyn, has noted "The Man Who Made Us".⁵ He was a nation-builder in an era of great nation-builders: Cavour in Italy, Bismarck in Germany, and, next door, Lincoln seeking to maintain and re-build a dis-united United States.

Macdonald belongs in this pantheon of great nation-builders who re-shaped the history and nature of their countries in the 19th Century – and he did so without bloodshed, but by the power of his personality, by capturing to an unprecedented extent the hearts and confidence of his colleagues and fellow British North Americans. His first major biographer, G. Mercer Adam, publishing a year after John A.'s death, called him "Canada's Patriot Statesman".⁶ It is a valid assessment and a well-deserved epitaph. ♣



NOTES

- ¹ The life of Macdonald has been superbly chronicled in the magisterial biography by Donald Creighton, *John A. Macdonald* Vols. I and II. Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada, 1952-1955.
- ² Thomas H.B. Symons, "Ontario's Quiet Revolution," in *One Country or Two: 173-174*, ed. R.M. Burns, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1971.
- ³ Canada, Parliament, House of Commons, *Debates Official Report*, 1890, XXIX: 746-748.
- ⁴ *Meta Incognita: A Discourse of Discovery* Martin Frobisher's Arctic Expeditions, 1576-1578, ed. Thomas H.B. Symons, Ottawa: The Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1999.
- ⁵ Richard Gwyn, *John A.: The Man Who Made Us*, Volume I of the Life and Times of John A. Macdonald. Toronto: Random House Canada, 2007.
- ⁶ G. Mercer Adam. *Canada's Patriot Statesman: The Life and Career of the Right Honourable Sir John A. Macdonald, G.C.B., P.C., D.C.L., LL.D.*, Toronto: Rose Publishing, 1891.

JOHN ALEXANDER MACDONALD: A MAN SHAPED BY HIS AGE

DESMOND MORTON is the Hiram Mills Professor of History Emeritus, McGill Institute for the Study of Canada.

Sir John A. Macdonald was a creation of his 19th Century. Most Scottish immigrants to Canada brought two enormous assets in a young country. Their homeland's Presbyterianism required its members to be literate enough to read the Christian bible. Once they had acquired that skill, they were customarily apprenticed to a trade. When they landed in the New World, they were prepared to earn a living and to communicate with their new neighbours. They possessed advantages often lacking among immigrants from England and Ireland until much later.

Young John Macdonald arrived in Upper Canada too young to have acquired either literacy or a profitable trade. He had both the drive and the talent to overcome his liabilities and to enter the profession of law and to develop his considerable talents on his own. Then and, perhaps, even now, law was the profession that led to power in a political system steered by oratory and argument. Macdonald learned to master a political skill essential in a society where the vast majority of people were desperately poor: the cultivation of gratitude.

Voters, like other Canadians, expected a return on their investment, be it in an acre of swamp, a piglet or a politician. An honest man repaid his debts and a vote was a loan, to be reinforced by a job or a contract or some other repayment of a voter's investment. The promise of grand visions was as useless to a farmer or an urban labourer as the warm air from a politician's mouth.

As prime minister, John A. Macdonald patiently collected the votes that launched Upper and Lower Canada into a partnership in 1841, resented at first and then profitable enough to spread to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, both of



them nervous about the vague threat of the Irish-Nationalist Fenian Brotherhood and equally eager to be connected to a much larger Confederation by a railway from Montreal to Halifax.

True, the Intercolonial Railway had too many stations and cost far more than it should have, but it created gratitude almost everywhere its squiggling track wandered. It would be joined by a vastly longer and more expensive railway to the Pacific, pushing west across a Great Lone Land of allegedly unimaginable wealth if Macdonald could keep his Confederation together.

In the event, he could not. Depression struck and an awkward Scottish stonemason, Alexander Mackenzie, replaced Macdonald, but only for four years of unemployment, poverty and despair. Macdonald returned in 1878 with a National Policy designed to reward Canadians with opportunities for jobs to make whatever goods high tariffs would exclude from importation to the Canadian marketplace. Did the strategy work? Possibly not, but any Canadian who found a job could be reminded that he owed his income to Sir John A. Gratitude was a fair return.

The modern Macdonald has been denounced as a drunk. He was not an angel, either. Drink was the solace for the family tragedy of a crippled, mentally-disabled daughter, and a comfort in the long hours and late nights of political life. "Better Sir John A drunk than Alex Mackenzie sober," a partisan slogan had reflected Canadian opinion.

An angrier denunciation blames Macdonald for the residential schools, designed to extend both of Canada's dominant cultures to her First Nations. What were the alternatives? Could two conflicting cultures peacefully co-exist? Canada's American neighbours had concluded, as George Washington expressed it, that Wolves and Indians had to be removed if Americans were to push their frontier into the West. Thomas Jefferson had agreed, in terms that promised genocide for indigenous peoples. The alternative to genocide, Macdonald concluded, was assimilation through education. How could it be delivered by a government deeply in debt from railway construction? The answer, in the 1880s, was obvious and inevitable. If the explorers of New France had justified themselves by claiming to bring Christian civilization to Savage unbelievers, their task was both unfinished and enthusiastically supported by the vast majority of Christian Canadians. Who could have predicted or even described the behaviours that devout Christians would bring to the residential schools they established for their devout purpose? In Macdonald's lifetime, any other solution would have seemed a grotesquely political misjudgement.

Historians cannot easily evade "What if?" questions, though they should. When pressed to respond, I have learned to give the most pessimistic answer I can devise since my audience will almost always forget my gloom and, on its own, embrace a more optimistic outcome. What we can do is to report what happened and, when possible, offer as plausible an outcome as time has revealed. Yes,

Sir John A, Macdonald embedded the principle of gratitude in Canadian politics, such as offering a lawyer a generous pension for spending the rest of his or her career on the bench. Yes, Sir John A. sometimes drank too much, but the technology had not yet invented the machinery that would have allowed him to "drive under the influence." And, yes, Macdonald opted for the best instrument he or his age could conceive for helping the people of our First Nations to gain access to the European cultures that had and would dominate the country he had helped to create and to unite.

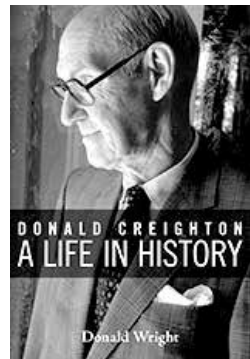
Macdonald was a talented and a principled Canadian who surrounded himself with some of the ablest men of his time. His time would not have expanded his circle to women, but he was the dutiful subject of Victoria, the longest-reigning British queen, and the devoted husband of Isabella Clark and, after her early death, of Susan Bernard.

In any democracy, an elected politician is a person of his time and a victim of its myopia. Democracy, as Winston Churchill confessed in 1947, "is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." ♣





A BIOGRAPHER'S FLAWED PORTRAIT REVEALS HARD TRUTHS ABOUT HISTORY



DONALD WRIGHT teaches in the Department of Political Science at the University of New Brunswick. "Donald Creighton: A Life in History" will be published by the University of Toronto Press in June 2015.

Historian Donald Creighton's two-volume biography of John A. Macdonald was a stunning achievement that, nevertheless, contains serious flaws and major blind spots, especially with regards to Louis Riel and the Métis, and the author's treatment of imperialism and the United States.

He has been called many things: "ambitious," "conscientious," "colourful," "adroit," "shrewd," "patient," "tolerant," "wily," "unprincipled," "corrupt," "drunk," and most recently, "intolerant," "despicable," "strange," "awful," and "racist." Proving just how malleable the past is, one scholar argues that Canada's first prime minister was a white supremacist at the same time as an Ontario t-shirt company markets him as our Che Guevara, the Marxist revolutionary, Third World nationalist, and anti-racist. One is tempted to ask, "Will the real Sir John A. Macdonald please stand up?" But that would be a mistake, because there is no real Macdonald to stand up: biographical truth is never final and always contested. In the same way that René Magritte's famous painting, *The Treachery of Images* (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*), isn't a pipe, biography isn't the person. It's a representation of the person, meaning one historian's Old Tomorrow will be another's dead white male. In a sense, the war for Macdonald's legacy has been fought since June 6th, 1891, when, after dominating Canadian politics for nearly four decades, he was carried "on and outward, past care

and planning, past England and Canada, past life and into death." Astute readers will recognize the distinctive prose of Donald Creighton, surely one of English Canada's finest historians and the author of a still-in-print two-volume biography of Canada's first prime minister.

Its publication in 1952 and 1955 confirmed Creighton's reputation as a brilliant writer. Oxford fellow Max Beloff described him as "one of the half-dozen best historians now writing anywhere in the English-speaking world," while even his harshest critic, historian Frank Underhill, conceded that *Macdonald* was an "artistic triumph." In *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence*, Creighton had written a story of Canada's origins: out of the St. Lawrence River valley and Great Lakes basin, out of the Laurentian Shield, came Canada. As the only waterway to reach into the interior of the continent, it had allowed successive generations of Montreal merchants to build a commercial empire based on the staples trade. "The river was not only a great actuality: it was the central truth of a religion. Men lived by it, at once consoled and inspired by its promises, its whispered suggestions, and its shouted commands." Describing it as "a force in history," Creighton did for the St. Lawrence River what Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven had done for Canada's northern landscapes — he mythologized it, and the Laurentian thesis entered the English-Canadian imagination.

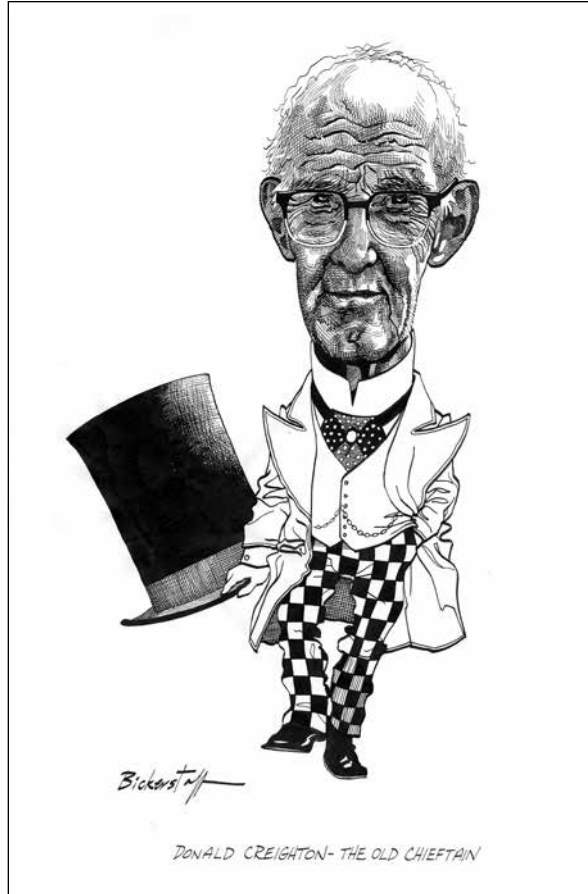
In *Macdonald*, Creighton gave that myth a hero. From the opening lines of volume 1 to the concluding sentences of volume two, a heroic Macdonald intuits

the logic of the Laurentian thesis, seeking first to unite British North America and then extend it west across the prairies to the Pacific Ocean. The St. Lawrence River becomes the book's leitmotif, appearing at key moments to summon both Canada's origins and its destiny. In fact, the biography opens with the river.

In those days they came usually by boat. A few immigrants may have made the long journey from Montreal by land, taking several weeks and stopping at a score of friendly farm-houses as they pushed their way through the green forest. But most people travelled westward by the river.

Not everyone appreciated Creighton's style. "In what days? Who came by boat?" asked one of the readers the press had commissioned to read the manuscript. Creighton was furious. If the reader didn't get the connection between Macdonald and the St. Lawrence River then, frankly, that was his problem. As an artist, Creighton traded in symbols and allusions and he knew that art was never made better by the insertion of an explanation. In *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence*, the river had opened the continent to explorers, adventurers, and traders; in *Macdonald*, it opened the continent to immigrants, including a young boy from Scotland who, like Moses, would one day deliver his people.

Literary critic Walter Benjamin once said that "all great works of literature either dissolve a genre



or invent one." *Macdonald* dissolved Canadian biography, a "solemn" collection of books written by "historical undertakers," according to Creighton. Envious of the novelist's ability to invent entire worlds out of mere words, Creighton pushed the limits of his form to bring Macdonald back to life.

But in the process, he broke some pretty basic rules: he fabricated dialogue; he invented details; and he put thoughts in Macdonald's head. "I have been reproached on occasion for putting particular thoughts, aims, and plans in the heads of my historical characters at particular moments," he once said. "How do I know, is the decisive question, that these specific ideas were passing through their minds at this exact point of time? The answer is, of course, that I don't know." He might have added that he didn't care either. He had set out to write a book, not, in his words, "two fat funereal volumes."

Macdonald remains a remarkable achievement. With no research assistance and limited teaching release, Creighton completed a 1,100-page biography in just 11 years that found readers across the country and earned glowing reviews. The *New York Times* called it "thrilling" while the *Economist* described it as "absorbing." One reviewer even compared its author to Ernest Hemingway. And when Prime Minister John Diefenbaker embarked on a 14-country world tour in 1958, he presented his many hosts with Canadian gifts, including Aboriginal handicrafts, maple syrup, and leather-bound copies of *Macdonald*. Nearly half a century later, the *Literary Review of Canada* included it in its list of Canada's 100 most important books.

Yet *Macdonald* is also deeply flawed. Creighton's treatment of Louis Riel and the Métis, for example, was not simply one-sided, it was appalling and represented a willful blindness approaching a moral failure. His publisher, the great John Gray, had urged

Creighton to rethink his treatment of the Métis, including the fact "that they are almost always referred to as half-breeds." Surely, he asked, "you have more sympathy for their confusion in a world they couldn't understand"? But Creighton held the line because, according to his historical calculus, Riel got what he deserved when the trap door opened beneath the Regina gallows and he "dropped to his extinction." There are other flaws, including the distorted picture Creighton paints of a predatory United States stalking British North America and, after 1867, the young dominion. The "fundamental purpose" of the United States, Creighton wrote, "was to starve Canada into annexation." His Macdonald, however, correctly perceived the United States as an existential threat and therefore worked to defend and strengthen the imperial connection. The imperial connection wasn't some antiquated piece of mid-Victorian plumbing. It was essential to Canada's survival on a continent dominated by a "truculent" United States. In effect, Creighton had constructed a usable Macdonald for a post-1945 Canada that found itself in a world marked by the decline of Great Britain and the rise of the United States. Quebec historian Guy Frégault was right when he said that the anti-Americanism and imperialism animating *Macdonald* said more about its author than it did about its subject.

Creighton always maintained that good biographies are never hatchet jobs, meaning biographers should treat their subjects with empathy. But he confused empathy for hero worship and, as a result, his Macdonald became unbelievable. After

all, we know that Canada's first prime minister wasn't a boy scout, and so did Creighton. As a young man, Macdonald was ambitious and on the make; later, he was a political animal who played the blood sport of politics better than anyone else, who knew a man's price and when to pay it, who understood that elections were won and lost with money, and who wasn't above gerrymandering or the judicious use of patronage. But Creighton either ignored or downplayed Macdonald as a politician, an odd strategy in a biography of a politician! Of course, he couldn't ignore the Pacific Scandal — a rotten affair even by 19th-century standards — but he forgave his hero: elections, he said, were fought with money and Macdonald needed money. Everything his Macdonald did was forgiven because it was directed at a higher purpose — the achievement of Canada's Laurentian destiny as a northern nation from sea to sea. If not written in the stars, a northern dominion had been foretold by the river, Creighton believed. All it needed was a hero.

For my money, the best biographical treatments of Macdonald belong to Ged Martin. Not being a Canadian, Martin didn't need to turn Macdonald into a vehicle of Canadian nationalism, meaning he could study him for what he was: a 19th-century politician with strengths and weaknesses. The Macdonald that emerges in *Favourite Son? John A. Macdonald and the Voters of Kingston* is not a nation-builder but a politician "hustling for votes." And in *John A. Macdonald: Canada's First Prime Minister*, Martin reminds us that 19th-century politics



was a pretty “rough trade,” that MPs weren't paid, and that elections were “violent and expensive.” Martin clearly admires Macdonald, but he also speculates that a breaking scandal involving a government contract to build a Kingston dry dock led to a series of fatal strokes in 1891. The charges were fantastic: a fictional businessman had “won” the contract for a corrupt contractor who predictably ran into a series of cost overruns that were billed back to the Department of Public Works. The whole thing stank and Macdonald knew it. He also knew that he couldn't survive politically. In a sense, he was lucky he died when he did because “there could be no come back for Old Tomorrow this time.”

Martin's *homo politicus* is a more believable Macdonald than Creighton's *homo laurentianus*. Maybe Martin's Macdonald is a usable Macdonald after all, the Macdonald we need for a more cynical era when cozy relationships between politicians and businessmen are the norm, not the exception. Take my province, for example. Ignoring the advice of its civil service, the New Brunswick government flushed \$70 million down the blow hole to prop up a collapsing business with Liberal connections, and yet not one member of the cabinet felt compelled to resign when faced with a damning auditor general's report. Martin's Macdonald reminds us that it has been always thus. ♣

A TIME FOR REFLECTION, TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

BOB RAE was elected eleven times to the House of Commons and the Ontario legislature between 1978 and 2013. He was Ontario's 21st Premier from 1990 to 1995, and served as interim leader of the Liberal Party of Canada from 2011 to 2013.

He is working now as a lawyer, negotiator, mediator, and arbitrator, with a particular focus on first nations, aboriginal, and governance issues. He also teaches at the University of Toronto School of Governance and Public Policy, and is a widely respected writer and commentator.

An author of four books and many studies and reports, Bob Rae is a Privy Councillor, an Officer of the Order of Canada, a member of the Order of Ontario, and has numerous awards and honorary degrees from institutions in Canada and around the world.

The conundrum with any figure, contemporary or from our past, is to get past the stereotype, past the mystery, past the spin, and past the tendency to try to sum up in one or two words, this elusive thing we call character. With the celebration of Sir John A. Macdonald's 200th birthday, the commentary is full of both hagiography and diatribe. He deserves neither.

He was a man of his time, a man of unusual political gifts, and yet a man of weaknesses and limitations. He did not fully transcend the prejudices of his time, and at important times he personified them. He was an indispensable Father of Confederation. He turned a fragmented political party into the dominant political force in Canada for over fifty years. He survived scandal and defeat to stage a comeback that made him the preeminent political figure of the last quarter of the 19th century. He wielded power with a combination of charm and toughness, and took his vision of a country united from sea to sea and put it into action.

And yet the political skills that Macdonald possessed, and the powerful vision that allowed him to inspire so many, did not mean that he could transcend his



political base. Two issues, the hanging of Riel, and his active participation in the marginalization of the aboriginal peoples of Canada, exacerbated hatreds that were already deep, and perpetuated a legacy of division that is still with us today.

It is wrong for our historical memory to lose sight of either truth. We should not excuse his conduct, because there were those who took a different position, and pointed to another way. The argument that Macdonald “had no choice”, or that he was simply reflecting the politics and mores of his time, is too simplistic. He had choices, and he more than any political figure gave full expression to the values of his generation. He shaped opinion as much as he was in turn shaped by it.

When the young lawyer from Kingston surveyed the political scene after the debacle of the Rebellion of 1837 and Lord Durham’s visit and report, he would have seen the conservative forces in his own provinces in danger of retreating to the politics of reaction pure and simple. Macdonald did not have a high regard for the world of Reform, but he understood that Conservatism had to avoid the temptation of a frontal assault on the principle of parliamentary accountability. He was not a democrat, but he could read the public mood and the temper of the times.

Similarly, Macdonald’s exposure to the politics of the United Canada created by Lord Durham quickly taught him that a respect between French and English had to become the hallmark of Canadian

politics. He realized that the partnership created between Baldwin and Lafontaine had to find its counterpart in his own party, and while his base was firmly entrenched in Ontario, he knew he needed to go even further to create a winning majority.

He knew that partisanship was the key to his electoral success, but at the critical juncture in the country’s life he also understood the limits of simply sticking to party and faction. While more than a tip of the hat has to go to George Brown, Macdonald swallowed deeply but knew that forming the Grand Coalition was an essential step in the creation of a wider federation.

All practitioners and observers of political life see the life force behind Macdonald’s survival and return from political defeat and deep embarrassment. A lesser mortal would have slunk off the political stage feeling humiliated by the exposure of the infamous “send another ten thousand” telegram at the centre of the Pacific Scandal. But not Macdonald. His endurance was based on his resilience, and by his commitment to his own career and the success of his party. He knew defeat, but he knew there was nothing permanent in it. Politics was his vocation, his craft, and his calling. He felt it deeply, and so did his peers in assessing his practice of the art.

In one of Canada’s most famous speeches, Sir Wilfrid Laurier summed up Macdonald’s life in his House of Commons eulogy. He was, said Laurier (who could hardly be called a slouch in this department) a man who loved power, who knew how

to attain it, and how to keep it. His charm and grace were coupled to a deeper sense of public purpose, and he applied his skills with a tenacity and resilience that made him, above all, the greatest political leader of his time.

And yet there are these two major flaws, the decision to hang Riel and to persist in an Indian policy that produced long-term, disastrous results. Macdonald could certainly have resisted the first decision, and there were many in his inner circle who urged him to do so. On the second, there were warnings of the consequences of a narrow vision on the triumph of the white majority, but again Macdonald chose to ignore them because he felt he had a winning hand, and did not fundamentally disagree with those who argued that the best aboriginal policy was to plan for the disappearance of a people’s culture that had no prospect of survival in the modern world. The only way to make sure the children did not become savages was to remove them from a savage environment. Hence the residential schools. The only way to ensure stability and harmony in the population of the Prairies was to negotiate Treaties that would increase the jurisdiction of the Crown. The best way forward for a people doomed to inferiority was to create reserves and make-believe governments and trust in the full impact of industrialization to complete the job of extinction.



Using this language might seem harsh, but in reality these are words that Macdonald would have used himself and would also have heard around him. Alexander Morris, an Indian Commissioner and Treaty negotiator, warned his contemporaries that the interpretations being put on the Treaties were too narrow, and were being used in the wrong way. He was sidelined, and replaced by successors more compliant in understanding the real political will of the majority.

Was there another way? There was, but its voices and advocates in the non-aboriginal community were few and far between. Macdonald regarded them as moralistic and tiresome, and chose to ignore them.

The best that can be said is that Macdonald had, to borrow a phrase, a nation of willing accomplices in this journey to disaster for First Nations. He was not alone, and he was not the sole instigator.

Cromwell famously told his portrait artist to paint him “warts and all.” We should do the same with Sir John A. He was a triumphant party politician who became, in the judgment of his peers and of most historians, a true statesman. But he had his faults and limitations, and it does not serve us well to ignore them, to minimize them, or to excuse them. Rather we should be using this moment of reflection to reflect on both the source of his greatness, and the consequences of the choices of his government and its successors. That is what truth and reconciliation is really all about. ✻



MACDONALD'S PUSH FOR PROSPERITY OVERCAME CONFLICTS OF IDENTITY

Professor **E. A. HEAMAN** is a McGill University historian of early Canada, particularly the 18th and 19th centuries. She is currently developing a project on the history of authority in early Canada, and its relationship to imperialism and science. The goal is to understand how the scientific revolution reshaped political discourse, taking knowledge about Canada for the basis of a case study. This work builds upon an earlier monograph on the 19th-century public sphere in Canada: *The Inglorious Arts of Peace: Exhibitions in Canadian Society during the 19th Century* (Toronto, 1999).

Right from the beginning of his political career, John A. Macdonald offered voters a clear choice between a politics of wealth and a politics of identity. In 1844, when he published his platform in the Kingston *Gazette*, Macdonald declared: “In a young country like Canada, I am of opinion that it is of more consequence to endeavour to develop its resources and improve its physical advantages, than to waste the time of the legislature and the money of the people in fruitless discussions on abstract and theoretical questions of government.”¹ Macdonald always took the view that quarrelling could not resolve Canada’s differences but development might. He backed those arguments with a personal warmth and bonhomie that extended even to political opponents. Maybe Canadians really *could* get along! But Macdonald’s platform had a built-in bias in favour of wealth that fuelled economic polarization in the “gilded age” politics of late-Victorian Canada. The growing gaps between extremes of wealth and poverty added new fuel to old tensions and made classic Macdonaldian accommodations anachronistic.

Macdonald’s attack on identity politics rested upon an underlying appeal to a shared British civic identity. He backed Confederation on grounds that it would reinforce rather than loosen the bonds between mother country and colony, and he campaigned to the end on the slogan “A British subject I was born and a British subject I will die.” But British identity, for Macdonald, did not go much deeper than the British formula for economic and political success: parliamentary supremacy, liberal economics and a property franchise. Under force of circumstance — the rise of American protectionism — he abandoned liberal economics without much obvious regret and introduced a protective tariff that enriched both government and party coffers. He celebrated the achievement of a national property franchise in 1885 as his greatest achievement.

Ambitious Canadian politicians learned an enduring lesson from Macdonald’s arguments against identity politics. While Grit and Liberal rivals tended to ramp up their anti-Catholic and anti-French diatribes, Macdonald drew French-Canadian support by continually damping down such appeals. In 1856, in a famous letter to the editor of the Montreal *Gazette*, he read the riot act to the Anglo-Protestants of Montreal, telling them to stop being so damn superior, so much like Northern Ireland’s Anglo-Protestant governing classes. Montreal’s Anglo-elite must, he argued, make an effort to appeal to the French-Canadian voters who were, after all, the majority in that region. Watch out, he warned, or they would notice just who *really*

controlled most patronage. That imbalance would lessen in subsequent years as Macdonald’s alliance with French-Canadian political leadership, above all George-Etienne Cartier and Hector Langevin, sent substantial public spending to Quebec. But even Macdonald could not really circumvent identity politics entirely. Macdonald couldn’t do without the bellicose, Protestant, Orange Order, though it, too, received the riot-act treatment. Ethnic and religious communities were represented at the highest levels in Macdonald’s government on condition that they moderate their demands. Canadian politics remained deeply infused with ethnic and religious resentments, but those resentments rarely broke out into open violence. A lifetime of reading that riot act must, over the long term, have helped to keep the body count down in Canada.

Macdonald was, in many respects, a man of the eighteenth rather than the 19th century in his distrust of popular nationalism. He resisted violent nation-building projects whether within or without colonial, national, or imperial structures of legitimation. He didn’t like to pledge support to imperial armies and insisted that he had done his bit for troop movements by building a transcontinental railway. Nor did he like ordering out the troops at home, though he did it. His new federal government barely got around to creating federal mechanisms for law enforcement, and largely as an afterthought. At the outset, Macdonald’s was a remarkably non-violent political vision of nationhood, although of course that didn’t last long. At the time of the first



Riel uprising, he sent British troops to Red River but he managed to negotiate a peaceful end to the crisis. “A long way to come,’ remarked a lieutenant, ‘to have the band play *God Save the Queen*.”² Soon afterwards, a national, quasi-military police force was created to keep the peace in western Canada. And when Riel led a violent insurrection for the second time in 1885, Macdonald was forced to choose between Ontario’s Orange Order and Quebec’s French Canadians, and he definitively sided with the former. By this time, Macdonald was losing control of the French-Canadian wing: Cartier was dead and Hector Langevin seemed to be grasping for support by inciting rather than quelling violent excesses. Late in 1885, as the world waited on tenterhooks to hear Riel’s fate, Montreal newspapers under Langevin’s influence came perilously close to urging open insurrection against a Liberal mayor who was trying to contain a devastating smallpox epidemic by imposing compulsory isolation and vaccination. Under such strains, the moderate and moderating French-English alliance foundered.

Macdonald’s governing project always had a centre: not identity but property. What Churchill said of democracy, Macdonald might have said of rule by property: that it was the worst except for all the others. If you privileged the propertied classes, you had the best chance of avoiding the kind of ethnic and religious demagoguery that Macdonald accused his old enemy, George Brown, of unleashing in the *Globe*. Macdonald realized that rule of property could rest relatively lightly on the

shoulders of the propertied because most households were sufficiently propertied to enjoy the franchise in Canada around the time that he entered politics. Because property in Canada was cheaper and more readily available than in Britain, a British franchise of forty shillings freehold enfranchised far more than the 3% who voted in British national elections at the time. Appealing to a broad swath of population as propertied interests enabled Macdonald to frame a new constitution around a transcontinental interest in economic development and prosperity. Surely *everyone*, whatever their background, sought economic development and prosperity. The BNA Act, therefore, devolved social politics — education, religion, other elements of cultural identity — to the local governments so as to let the federal government focus on economic development.

But as the century progressed, growing numbers of unpropertied people, including an emerging urban proletariat, women, and racialized minorities such as Chinese immigrants, Metis, or status “Indians” made rule by property less palatable and more coercive, not to say openly violent. These people were more or less left out of the national prosperity project and their sufferings were more or less terrible as a consequence. In Montreal, for example, both infant mortality and smallpox struck the urban poor very hard and the resultant mortality statistics showed all too clearly that death tended to have a particular religion and ethnicity. Skilled at deflating ethnic tensions, Macdonald was much less able to deflate socio-economic tensions. You might credibly claim

to mitigate the former by throwing heaps of money at businessmen, but not the second, and the claim became especially threadbare as leftist critiques of Liberal-Conservative rule began to gain traction across the country. The widespread success of the Knights of Labour — a radical coalition of skilled and unskilled workers — in the 1880s largely confounded Macdonald. A Royal Commission on the Relations of Capital and Labour was created in 1886 as a temporary sop, but it raised more concerns than it resolved. The Knights began to decline, but people were still embracing unorthodox political organizations — ranging from socialist parties to farmers’ associations to tax-reform clubs — in droves. Strong ethnic and religious leanings in some of these organizations worked to thrust old resentments back into federal politics. Provincial premiers yoked provincial rights campaigns to such grievances and when Macdonald brandished the federal veto, they took their complaints to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, the highest court of appeal, where the premiers tended to win their causes.

As for Macdonald’s attempts to improve conditions for Indigenous peoples by civilization and enfranchisement, these deteriorated into a travesty of paternalism. Continued resistance led officials in the Department of Indian Affairs to expand



rather than reduce the imbalance of power between themselves and “Indians.” The result was predictable according to the kinds of classic political theories that Macdonald generally respected. Power, it turned out, corrupts. Macdonald should have known better. But he simply had no formula for dealing with poverty and that absence gave new strength and impetus to the radical critiques of Macdonaldian governance. As new kinds of social investigators began to emerge in university departments, philanthropic organizations, and provincial and municipal institutions, they began develop a wide range of conceptions of and remedies to resolve the problem of poverty. At their worst, they made poverty a function of biological identity, inaugurating a new kind of racism in early 20th century Canada. In such a world, Macdonald’s classic mid-Victorian formula for a government of, by, and for generalized prosperity and clientelism could not but be anachronistic. ♣

NOTES

- ¹ Donald Creighton and P.B. Waite, *John A. Macdonald, The Young Politician, The Old Chieftain* (Toronto : UTP, 1998): 97.
- ² John Herd Thompson and Stephen J. Randall, *Canada and the United States : Ambivalent Allies* (University of Georgia Press, 2010): 46.



MACDONALD'S ENDURING SUCCESS IN QUEBEC

PATRICE DUTIL is an author, commentator and occasional activist as well as a professor in the Department of Politics and Public Administration at Ryerson University. Professor Dutil was a visiting scholar at Massey College, University of Toronto in the last half of 2013 and visiting professor at the George Mason University *School of Public Policy* during the winter term of 2014. His main research interests are political and public sector leadership, the process of political development, and the study of elections.

Macdonald's relationship with Quebec has always been something of an enigma. His unbending support for Confederation and its constitutional dedication to "promoting the interests of the British Empire" was easily seen as nothing less than the projection of Lord Durham's assimilationist vision for French Canada.¹ It could have been, for him, a political disability in 1867. Long perceived to have been dependent on George-Etienne Cartier for political insights and support, he was practically muted upon his friend's death in 1873, just as the government was falling apart under the crushing weight of evidence pointing to corruption. Twelve years later, Macdonald again was considered particularly vulnerable after the hanging of Louis Riel in late 1885. Not least, Quebecers left in droves under his watch—anywhere between 20% and 30% of the population left in order to find work, mostly to the United States. Already 400,000 had established themselves in New England by the mid-1870s.² Holding Macdonald and his government responsible for economic mismanagement, people voted with their feet more than they did with their ballots. Finally, Macdonald spoke no French and hardly campaigned in Quebec. About 20% of the population of Quebec in this period was Anglophone.

And yet Macdonald remained popular in Quebec during the entire period from 1867 to his death in 1891. He faced the electorate seven times, won a majority of seats five times (the exceptions were the debacle of 1874 and the rise of Wilfrid Laurier in 1891) and the popular vote in the province on every occasion. In fact, Macdonald

proved to be generally far more in step with the ideas and attitudes of his Quebec contemporaries than commonly believed. He was always more popular in Quebec than he was in Ontario (only in the election of 1887 did his score of the popular vote in Ontario beat that of Quebec), and his support in the province proved far less volatile than in the rest of the country.

How did he do it?³ Politically, Macdonald was adroit. His protectionist message clearly resonated, at least for those who stayed. He avoided intrusions into the province's affairs. He disallowed only four statutes of the Quebec legislature (compared to seven in Ontario, thirteen in British Columbia and eighteen in Manitoba!) and only once openly intervened in provincial politics. He did that in 1879 by removing a partisan Liberal lieutenant-governor so that, in turn, the controversial Liberal government could be dismissed. His respect for French Canada, in contrast with the anti-French attitude of George Brown, earned him steady support both at the local and the provincial level. His good-enough government, it seems, was more than sufficient for a plurality of the voters against Liberals led by Alexander Mackenzie, Edward Blake and even Wilfrid Laurier. Macdonald brilliantly allied himself with a creative assortment of key political opinion leaders, local political entrepreneurs and, not least, the Catholic Church, an institution in which he had no interest or tie. The eulogies of Macdonald in the House of Commons, not surprisingly in light of this particular popularity, were led by two French Quebecers, his friend Hector Langevin and his adversary, Wilfrid Laurier.

How was this success expressed? A close look at the very detailed electoral results in Quebec provided by the Parliament of Canada offers some clues.⁴

In part, Macdonald was lucky in his adversaries. In 1867, the issue put before the people was Confederation itself. The shell-shocked opposition of essentially nameless Liberals were informally led by Brown, a man who detested French Canada. In that first election, 14 Conservatives were acclaimed as were five Liberal-Conservatives—almost a third of the 65 seats—while the Liberals were acclaimed in only four ridings. Macdonald's Conservative Party took 37 of the 65 seats in the province and 29% of the vote while the Liberal-Conservatives won 11 seats and 12.1% of the suffrage, for a combined total of 48 seats and 41.1% of the vote. The Liberal party, in contrast, only took 17 seats and 28% of the vote. Their putative leader, Antoine-Aimé Dorion, won Hochelaga, the large district that encompassed the eastern part of the island of Montreal, with only a handful of votes to spare against a total unknown. The Conservative coalition and the Liberals scooped all of the province's seats, hiding the fact that another 31.8% of the votes had gone to a wide variety of independent candidates, though none were actually elected to office. Support for non-affiliated candidates was part of a national trend at the time: Ontario voters gave 37.6% to a mixture of independents, New Brunswick 39.3% and Nova Scotia 24.4%.⁵



Facing a tougher opposition in the informal leadership team of Blake (who was premier of Ontario) and Mackenzie in 1872, Macdonald emphasized the enormous accomplishments of his first mandate and pleaded for more time to complete the job of Confederation. As in 1867, 19 ridings were uncontested in Quebec — nine went to the Conservatives, five to the Liberal-Conservatives and five to the Liberals. For the rest, the campaign in Quebec turned on Macdonald's position of neutrality regarding New Brunswick's withdrawal of funding for Catholic schools. That issue enflamed the rising ultramontanes and the increasingly confident Liberal leadership of Louis-Amable Jetté, who renamed his party the Parti national. Jetté ran against Cartier himself in Montreal East, and beat him. Macdonald's coalition of Conservatives, Liberal-Conservatives and one Independent Conservative (in the riding of Beauharnois, which elected either an "independent" Conservative or a Conservative tout court in six of seven elections) still took 38 seats and increased its share of the vote to 44.3%, though it lost ten seats, most notably in Montreal and along the south shore of the St. Lawrence. As in the first national election, almost one in four electors voiced their support for local, unattached candidates (in this last vote before the secret ballot was introduced in 1874).

The shockwave of the Pacific Scandal rocked Macdonald's party in Quebec in the debacle of 1874. Facing a much stronger united Liberal party under Mackenzie and Dorion, and deprived of Cartier's help, Macdonald's vote collapsed in Quebec. His Conservative/Liberal-Conservatives still won by

acclamation in 14 ridings, but the Liberals tripled their acclaimed victories and took 16 seats. In the ridings with contests, Macdonald's coalition collected 38.1% of the vote, more than a 20% drop, and only 29 seats. This disastrous result, all the same, was comparable to what the Liberals managed. They collected 36.7% of the vote but took 36 seats — more than the Conservatives for the first time. Over 25% of Quebec voters again chose a wide variety of independents.

Macdonald came roaring back in 1878, capturing 48 seats and 50.9% of the vote, while the Liberals dropped to 17 seats and 21.2% of the vote. While the ballot for independent candidates continued to drop elsewhere, in Quebec it climbed again, reaching over 27% of the votes — more than a quarter of the voting public could not commit to supporting a party. Macdonald's coalition won by acclamation in only three ridings, while the Liberals took just one without a contest — another dramatic change in Quebec politics. All the same, the gains were impressive as Quebec voters manifested their disapproval of the Mackenzie government and tripled their bets on Macdonald's proposal for a National Policy. Macdonald's provincial team was, now headed by Langevin (who lost his seat, ironically, and would have to run in a by-election to return to cabinet) and Israel Tarte, the master organizer.

The popularity of the Macdonald government continued into 1882, and no less than 16 of his partisans were elected by acclamation to the House of Commons. The Liberals only took one seat in this

manner. Elsewhere in the province the Tories fared well before the opposition led by Blake. Macdonald's coalition of Conservatives, Liberal-Conservatives, Nationalist Conservative and Independent Conservative increased its take with 52 seats and 50.3% of the vote. Finally, the support for no-label candidates in Quebec was beginning to erode, translating into even more support for Macdonald. The Liberals lost three seats and their share of the popular vote dropped to 24.1% — almost 4% less than the vote for the candidates with no party labels at all. It was, for them, their most humiliating defeat of the Macdonald era.

Macdonald's popularity was riding high when the troubles of the insurrection in the West in 1885 and the subsequent hanging of Louis Riel that November threatened to destroy his name in Quebec. The timing could hardly have been worse for the government, but Macdonald called an election to be held fifteen months after Riel was executed.

Facing Blake again, Macdonald could have expected a drubbing in Quebec in February 1887, and he got one in terms of seats, losing 16 of 52 (he collected 23 seats among Conservatives, eight among Liberal-Conservatives, and two Independent Conservatives for a total of 36). Three Liberals were acclaimed, while three more Conservative seats were taken without a contest. For the rest, what was remarkable was the Macdonald coalition's take of the popular vote: 50.1%, a rounding error of a drop over the 1882 result! All the same, the Liberal gains could not be dismissed. Blake, with Laurier increasingly

taking a visible place in the Liberal party leadership, more than doubled the Liberal vote, seeing it climb to 41.5%, and practically wiping out the independent vote. Macdonald lost what he might have expected in terms of seats (though he still won overall), but his dominance of the popular vote must have surprised even him.

Macdonald's remarkable resilience was confirmed four years later, in 1891, his last election. Once again, that contest turned on the National Policy and the Liberal alternative of a more free-trading form of commercial exchange with the outside world. It was Macdonald's last campaign, the one run on the banner of "The Old Flag, the Old Policy, the Old Leader"—Macdonald reminding his Quebec voters that he was running in favour of the empire, on an economic platform that had hardly brought prosperity to the land. Somewhat hurt by the allegations of corruption around Langevin and his Quebec-West backbencher Thomas McGreevy, Macdonald faced no less a figure than Laurier, Quebec's native son, as leader of the opposition. Honoré Mercier, the Quebec Premier and leader of the Parti nationaliste, also campaigned against the Tories. The situation was made worse by the fact that one of Macdonald's most promising Ontario backbenchers, D'Alton McCarthy, was leading an anti-French crusade. The aging Macdonald could not muster much of a campaign in Quebec, and the Conservatives lost another six seats as a result. Before the votes were counted, one Conservative had been acclaimed, and both Langevin and McGreevy





had been reelected. When the votes attributed to the various independent “Conservatives” were counted, Macdonald had collected an astounding 49.1% of the vote, a loss of 1% on the result of 1887. The Liberals took 33 seats — three more than Macdonald — and had finally taken the Quebec stronghold, not because more people had supported the party, but because its vote had been more efficiently distributed.⁶

Macdonald was successful in attracting solid, if sometimes lackluster, candidates, and he seldom lost a cabinet member from Quebec in a general election. Cartier, certainly, was of the highest rank, putting his friends in the service of the conservative cause. Cartier cemented a strong base in Quebec that allowed Macdonald to show himself — and his administration — as friendly to Quebec. The first cabinet contained three French Canadians (all from Quebec): Cartier (Militia and Defence), Hector-Louis Langevin (Indian Affairs, then Public Works) and Jean-Charles Chapais (Agriculture and Statistics, followed by Receiver

General). Others would join Macdonald in cabinet over the evolution of the mandate with various degrees of success, including two former premiers of Quebec, Joseph-Alfred Mousseau and Adolphe Chapleau, and others such as Theodore Robitaille, Louis F.G. Baby, Rodrigue Masson, Adolphe Caron.

For 110 years, in the heart of Dominion Square in downtown Montreal, a monument in memory of John A. Macdonald has stood. It was funded by local citizens and unveiled by the Governor General on June 6, 1895. It is still today the most elaborate commemoration of Macdonald, as he is dressed as Knight of the Order of the Bath and stands under a stone baldachin topped by a female figure carrying a horn of plenty (representing Canada). People may wonder why such an imposing cenotaph stands in the heart of the second-largest Francophone city in the world, but it stands as an eloquent reminder of how popular the man was in Quebec in his time. ❁



NOTES

- ¹ *Constitution Act, 1867*, preamble.
- ² House of Commons *Debates*, 1 May 1888, column 1096.
- ³ This issue has not been addressed. The federal elections in Quebec from 1867 to 1891 are mentioned in passing in Arthur Silver, *The French Canadian Idea of Confederation, 1864-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982) and in Ramsay Cook, *The Maple Leaf Forever* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1971), particularly chapter 5. The meta-treatments do not give Quebec particular attention. See John Duffy, *Fights of our Lives* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2002) and Lawrence Leduc, Jon Pammatt, Judith McKenzie, André Turcotte, *Dynasties and Interludes: Past and Present in Canadian Electoral Politics* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2010).
- ⁴ The statistics used in this study are drawn from the Parliament of Canada's "History of Federal Ridings Since 1867" website: <http://www.parl.gc.ca/About/Parliament/FederalRidingsHistory/HFER.asp>. These results are far more detailed than the commonly used figures provided by J. Murray Beck, *Pendulum of Power: Canada's Federal Elections* (Toronto: Prentice-Hall of Canada, 1968).

- ⁵ Remarkably little has been written about the 1867 election in Quebec. Marcel Bellavance underscores the high level of abstention but neglects the high level of support for "independents" in his study of the 1867 election in Quebec. See *Le Québec et la confédération : Un choix libre ? Le clergé et la constitution de 1867* (Sillery : Septentrion, 1992). Bellavance argues that clergy were heavily involved in the election. An opposing view is Walter Ullman, "The Quebec Bishops and Confederation", an article that originally appeared in the *Canadian Historical Review* in 1963 and reprinted in Ramsay Cook (ed.) *Confederation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967). The period is broadly discussed in Michel Brunet, « Les Canadiens français face à la confédération (1867-1966) » in Michel Brunet, *Québec-Canada Anglais : Deux itinéraires, un affrontement* (Montréal : Editions HMH, 1969).
- ⁶ The campaign is well described in Christopher Pennington, *The Destiny of Canada: Macdonald, Laurier and the Election of 1891* (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2011).



FORMIDABLE, FLAWED MAN 'IMPOSSIBLE TO IDEALIZE'

BARBARA MESSAMORE is a professor at the University of the Fraser Valley in British Columbia. Dr. Messamore's research interests include Canadian political and constitutional history, the role of Canada's governors general, historical biography and Canadian migration history. She is currently Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Historical Biography*, an international peer-reviewed journal devoted to all aspects of historical biography.

A few years ago, I was asked to take part in a *Maclean's* magazine exercise to rate Canada's prime ministers. "Demonstrably corrupt," was my only quoted comment about John A. Macdonald.¹ It is undeniably true, yet Macdonald was so much more.

How did Macdonald dominate Canadian political life until his death in office in 1891? It is tempting to idealize "statesmen" of the past in comparison to "politicians" of today, to leave our critical faculties at the threshold when we travel back in time. Despite what we sometimes imagine, Macdonald did not survive and thrive by dint of steely convictions and far-seeing vision. Instead, the very qualities of nimble pragmatism — and sometimes slippery evasion — that we are apt to deplore in politics today account for his longevity. Macdonald was no more able to boldly bend events to his will than are contemporary politicians; the same sort of impediments stood in his way. But he was a master of what Otto von Bismarck called "the art of the possible." He was nothing if not canny, seldom tipping his hand and revealing his strategy too soon. And the most decisive factor in his success is the hardest one to quantify. Macdonald had a gift for friendship, an enormously natural and appealingly human quality. He mixed easily with people of all ranks, as pleasantly congenial with Dukes as with tavern-keepers. Even over the distance of time, his letters radiate charm.

Macdonald's myriad successes might create the impression that he had things all worked out in advance. But opportunism was more often the factor. He would take what he could get now, trusting to tomorrow for the details. Even Confederation was, he admitted, not "the best plan but the only practicable plan." He would have preferred a simple union of the British North American colonies, but consoled himself that governments at the provincial level would organically wither away over time. "This is as plain to me as if I saw it accomplished," he wrote privately, "but of course it does not do to adopt that point of view in discussing the subject in [French] Lower Canada."²

We can observe Macdonald at close hand through the prosaic issue of tariffs. History has rendered Macdonald's tariff policy more consistent and coherent than it really was. Today, we remember Macdonald's Conservatives as devoted protectionists who implemented the National Policy to shelter Canadian industry amid the economic downturn of the 1870s. But it was not that simple.

For Macdonald, the protectionist National Policy was Plan B. During the 1871 Washington Treaty negotiations, Britain, Canada, and the United States sought to resolve a number of outstanding issues. As the Canadian delegate, Macdonald hoped for a renewal of reciprocity, or free trade, with the United States, using access to Canada's inshore fisheries as leverage. But the Americans proved

unwilling. They had suffered trade deficits under the old Reciprocity treaty, and the diplomatic climate was chilly after the Civil War. Some Americans even hoped that refusal might force Canada into political union. Macdonald knew the British were eager to repair American relations, and saw an opportunity to exploit this and get compensation from the British for accepting the disappointing treaty. His tactic to win this was Machiavellian in its conception, but slapstick in its execution.

Macdonald tried to convince the British that his cabinet colleagues were intransigent, refusing to accept the treaty terms. To prove it, he supplied copies of his "private" correspondence with them to the governor general, Lord Lisgar, with the request that he pass the letters along to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Kimberley. But Macdonald appears to have blundered, and passed along one letter that laid bare his scheme. Amid the Washington negotiations, Macdonald wrote to his Finance Minister, Francis Hincks, to tell him that he had "worked out a plan in my head." If, he wrote, the cabinet implied they would not ratify the treaty, Britain "in her desire to close every possible cause of dispute," would "make us a liberal offer. We should lose all this advantage if we showed any symptoms of yielding." Lisgar obediently passed the letter along to Kimberley, adding a puzzled P.S.: "I cannot however think it was written with the intention that it should be placed in my hands."³



Kimberley was outraged at Macdonald's "knavery,"⁴ but Lisgar nevertheless persuaded him to provide a railway loan guarantee as compensation for Canada. The Conservatives were facing a tough battle in the upcoming election and could have trouble over the terms of the treaty, Lisgar urged, although he admitted that Macdonald should not "play fast and loose" with the imperial government as he did with "intriguers in local politics."⁵ He admitted privately that one "unpleasant part of what is going on is that I am almost sure we have not Sir J.A.M.'s real opinion.... [H]e is so Protean one cannot say what he may be at from day to day."⁶

As Lisgar predicted, Macdonald's Conservatives did indeed struggle to win the 1872 election in the wake of the treaty's ratification. They held on to power with a scant margin of six seats and a razor-thin edge in the popular vote — 49.9% to 49.1%.⁷ Macdonald's desperate strategy to win as many votes as possible came back to haunt him, and in 1873 he would be compelled to resign amid scandal — more on that in a moment.

Alexander Mackenzie's Liberal administration (1873-78) had the misfortune to preside over a period of economic depression, with their own promising free trade negotiations with the Americans foundering at the stage of U.S. Senate approval. Liberal finance minister Richard Cartwright candidly admitted in 1877 that they were as powerless to affect economic cycles as "any other set of flies on a wheel."⁸

Macdonald's Conservatives offered a much more optimistic message to win the 1878 election: that protection for Canada's infant industries — the National Policy — would bring a return to prosperity. While in opposition, Macdonald had hectored Mackenzie over his allegedly uncertain tariff policy. Macdonald claimed that Mackenzie had endorsed free trade during a speech in Dundee, but promised protection to Montreal's manufacturers: "He was a Free Trader in Scotland, and a Protectionist in Montreal."⁹ Macdonald opted for a metaphor to describe his own policy: if you build a wall, he said, it would be like a dam "which backs up the water of a stream until it overflows the country and does a great deal of mischief." But if a moderate amount of water was allowed to go over the wall, "that water can be used for fertilizing, manufacturing," and other good purposes. "Do you want to dam protection?" a testy Mackenzie countered. Macdonald playfully scolded him for swearing in the House.¹⁰

In later years, Macdonald proudly trumpeted the success of protectionism. In an 1881 speech to the workmen of Toronto, he congratulated the crowd on having better looking hats and coats than before the 1878 election, when all had "sinking hearts, empty pockets, and empty larders." As a "bloated" office holder, he himself was "not a bit the worse for my three year's salary," he remarked. He encouraged the crowd to be sceptical of Liberals' promises that they would not interfere with manufacturers but "educate them to free trade by slow degrees" and

show them the fallacy of protection. He likened it to a farmer's experiment to gradually reduce his horse's feed to eliminate extravagance. The farmer succeeded in reducing it to a wisp of straw, but, despite the successful experiment, the horse died.¹¹

His later claims notwithstanding, Macdonald's own plan for tariff policy was far from transparent when he returned to power in September 1878. Britain's cabinet wished to be informed about what direction Canada would be taking; in theory, Britain could still veto measures implementing differential duties affecting the mother country. But the governor general had difficulty communicating Macdonald's intentions. A couple of months after the 1878 election, the Marquis of Lorne wrote privately to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Sir Michael Hicks-Beach, that Macdonald assured him that the "English papers were entirely mistaken" in their idea that Canada planned to implement a protective tariff. "It would be a Revenue Tariff."¹² Even as late as February 1879, a month before the budget, Lorne reported that, according to Macdonald, the policy was for a "strictly revenue tariff."¹³ Lorne's predecessor, Lord Dufferin, who had sworn in the new Macdonald administration just before his departure, had been no more certain. He admitted that Macdonald's "utterances on the subject [of the tariff] have been so purposely vague that I have been hardly able myself to gather his intentions."¹⁴ Macdonald promised



to submit any financial proposals to the British government in advance,¹⁵ but only in the very week that the budget was to go before the house was Lorne able to hurriedly telegraph the proposals to Britain, leaving no time for any meaningful discussion.¹⁶ Hicks-Beach privately admitted that any British veto was effectively a dead letter—"it would be useless for us to try."¹⁷ Macdonald seldom opted for direct confrontation with British authorities, but this would not be the only time in which he gained his point through procrastination and equivocation.

And what about that demonstrable corruption? The nadir of Macdonald's political career was undoubtedly the Pacific Scandal that broke in April 1873: damning revelations that, during the 1872 election campaign, the Conservatives had sought funds from Sir Hugh Allan in exchange for the contract to build the railway to British Columbia. In early July 1873, the Liberal *Globe* published the sordid details, including a memorandum from Macdonald's Quebec wingman, George-Etienne Cartier, listing the monetary "requirements" of each politician, including \$35,000 for Macdonald himself. Macdonald's own published telegrams to Allan promised support for his bid to lead the CPR consortium, but cautioned that "the whole matter [is] to be kept quiet until after the elections." In one particularly candid message, Macdonald pleaded that he "must have another ten thousand. Do not fail me."¹⁸



During the 1872 campaign, Macdonald had been compelled to hurry back to Kingston to fight for his own seat. The city had been drained of its lifeblood with the withdrawal of the imperial garrison, and prominent merchant John Carruthers was running a spirited Liberal campaign. But Macdonald's return to the hustings in his own hometown may not have given him the boost he hoped. He wildly and implausibly accused Carruthers of a far-reaching conspiracy to inflate the price of fuel oil. When Carruthers denied the accusation, Macdonald slapped his face and tried to grab him by the throat. He was evidently "much excited," according to a local newspaper — a description that historian Ged Martin decodes as a euphemism for "drunk." Macdonald hung on to his seat by 131 votes.¹⁹

Cartier, despite his efforts, was defeated in Montreal East, and had to be parachuted into a seat for Provencher, Manitoba. But as the details of the railway scandal began to seep out, the fifty-eight-year-old Cartier suddenly succumbed to Bright's disease while away in London. Macdonald received the cable on the morning of 20 May 1873 and announced the news in the House of Commons that afternoon. He burst into tears, and stood mutely reaching toward the empty seat Cartier once occupied.²⁰

Macdonald was left behind to weather the storm that was growing over the course of the summer. By early August, he had repaired to Rivière du Loup on a drinking binge, beyond the reach of friend or foe. The *Globe* speculated that he had committed suicide.²¹

Parliament was due to resume sitting in mid-August, and the governor general agreed to an immediate prorogation of the house on August 15, despite a delegation of MPs bearing a 92-signature petition of protest. Macdonald had hoped to avoid a new session until February 1874, but Dufferin insisted on a shorter break.²² In the event, the prorogation only delayed the inevitable, and when the house began a new session on October 23, it became evident that Macdonald had lost crucial support. By November 5, he tendered his resignation to the governor general, and began five years in the wilderness of opposition.

The Pacific Scandal is well known, but Ged Martin has shed light on a later forgotten episode that might have ended Macdonald's long career in utter disgrace. Just as Cartier's sudden death in 1873 spared him from the consequences of the emerging Pacific Scandal, Macdonald succumbed to a fatal stroke in June 1891 as devastating new revelations were on the horizon. What Martin terms the Bancroft scandal has been "laundered out" of Macdonald's life story.²³

Macdonald's precarious hold on his home riding of Kingston had been cinched with a new dry-dock for the city, open to competitive bids in 1889. But shortly after Macdonald's triumph in the 1891 election, a parliamentary committee began investigations into deep-seated corruption on the part of Minister of Public Works Hector Langevin and contractor and MP Thomas McGreevy. This investigation threatened to uncover a wider story

entangled with the McGreevy scandal: awkward questions were surfacing about the successful bidder for the Kingston dry-dock project, an unknown called Andrew C. Bancroft, whose only address was a post office box. Bancroft, Martin reveals, was an invention, created to give the appearance of proper arm's length procedure in the awarding of the dry-dock contract when the real principals had links to Langevin's office. The 1891 investigations ended Langevin's cabinet career — along with his hopes to succeed Macdonald — and yielded jail terms for McGreevy, his brother, and other associates.

Was Macdonald aware of the fraud? Martin considers it a certainty. The prime minister paid close attention to patronage matters, even ascertaining the political affiliations of those who supplied firewood to Kingston's penitentiary. Further, he was likely to have taken an interest in the dry-dock project personally, since he had business experience with docks and wharves.²⁴ At fifty-eight, Macdonald had



passed through the ignominy of the Pacific Scandal. But by 1891, after a punishing election campaign, the 76-year-old prime minister no longer had the resilience to bear a fresh scandal.

Closer inspection, then, makes it impossible to idealize John A. Macdonald. He was a successful politician, and, as many idealists have discovered, long-term success demanded flexibility and compromise. He found ways to move forward, to embrace the possible, even if not precisely what he sought. Some of his compromises proved to be moral ones. After years in office and habits of association with party insiders and fixers, Macdonald crossed the line between when it was acceptable to yield and when it was not. But it is also impossible to study Macdonald, to read his letters, without developing an affection for him. Our fondness for Macdonald does not depend on his perfection — or even probity — and on the 200th anniversary of his birth, Macdonald still wins our grudging admiration. ♣



NOTES

- ¹ *Maclean's* magazine, 10 June 2011.
- ² As quoted by Ged Martin, "Archival Evidence and John A. Macdonald Biography," *Journal of Historical Biography* 1 (Spring 2007): 91.
- ³ Library and Archives Canada [LAC], Kimberley Papers, A 314, Lisgar to Kimberley 11 May 1871, enclosure, Macdonald to Francis Hincks, n.d. and postscript by Lisgar. It is ironic that historians subsequently blamed Lisgar for hampering Macdonald's diplomatic negotiations by passing on his private letters to British officials.
- ⁴ LAC, Kimberley Papers, A 314, Lisgar to Kimberley 11 May 1871, enclosure, Macdonald to Francis Hincks, n.d., Minutes by Kimberley, 23 May 1871; Gladstone 25 May 1871.
- ⁵ LAC, Kimberley Papers, A 314, Lisgar to Kimberley, private, 17 August 1871.
- ⁶ Library and Archives Canada, 314 Kimberley Papers, 30 August 1871 Lisgar to Kimberley, private.
- ⁷ The other 1% of the popular vote went to "other" candidates. Parliament of Canada, Electoral results, 2nd election, autumn 1872, <http://www.parl.gc.ca/parlinfo/Compilations/ElectionsAndRidings/ResultsParty.aspx?Season=0&Parliament=4190e40c-3fa8-409c-bab7-5a4008b89f47>
- ⁸ As quoted by Ben Forster, "Alexander Mackenzie," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/mackenzie_alexander_12E.html
- ⁹ John A. Macdonald, 7 March 1876, *House of Commons Debates*, 3rd Parliament, Third Session, vol. 1, 495. http://parl.canadiana.ca/view/oop.debates_HOC0303_03/536?r=0&s=2
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 493.
- ¹¹ John A. Macdonald, speech to the Workingmen of Toronto, 30 May 1881 <https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/primeministers/h4-4035-e.html>

- ¹² Lorne to Hicks-Beach, 3 December 1878, Lorne MS, A 717.
- ¹³ Lorne to Hicks-Beach, 8 February 1879, Lorne MS, A 717.
- ¹⁴ Dufferin to Lorne, 22 August 1878, LAC, Dufferin MS, A 416.
- ¹⁵ Hicks-Beach to Lorne, 31 December 1878, Lorne MS, A 717.
- ¹⁶ Lorne to Hicks-Beach, - [?] March 1879, Lorne MS, A 717.
- ¹⁷ Hicks-Beach to Lorne, 11 February 1879, Lorne MS, A 717.
- ¹⁸ As quoted in J.M.S. Careless, *Brown of the Globe*, vol II: *Statesman of Confederation*, 1860-1880 (Toronto: Macmillan, 1963): 305.
- ¹⁹ Ged Martin, *Favourite Son? John A. Macdonald and the Voters of Kingston, 1841-1891* (Kingston: Kingston Historical Society, 2010): 83-94.
- ²⁰ J.-C. Bonenfant, "George-Etienne Cartier," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/cartier_george_etienne_10E.html.
- ²¹ LAC, Dufferin Papers, A 407, Dufferin to Kimberley, private, 9 August 1873.
- ²² Dufferin to Kimberley, despatch 197, 15 August 1873, and enclosure "Memorial" presented 13 August 1873, William Leggo, *The History of the Administration of the Right Honorable Frederick Temple, Earl of Dufferin* (Montreal: Lovell Publishing, 1878), 160-168; LAC, Dufferin Papers, A 410, Dufferin to Macdonald, private, 31 July 1873; Barbara J. Messamore, *Canada's Governors General, 1847-1878: Biography and Constitutional Evolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), chapter 8.
- ²³ Ged Martin, *Favourite Son?*: 154.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*: 158.

ACKNOWLEDGING PATRIARCH'S FAILURES WILL HELP CANADA MATURE AS A NATION

Dr. JAMES DASCHUK is the author of *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation and the Loss of Aboriginal Life*, an assistant professor in the faculty of kinesiology and health studies at the University of Regina and a researcher with the Saskatchewan Population Health and Evaluation Research Unit.

In 2015, as the bicentennial of John A. Macdonald's birth is being marked, our first and most important Prime Minister has become a lightning rod for a debate over Canada's past but also over its present. As an historian, I am gratified to see such a thoughtful debate sustained over so long; it seems like Canadian history, and Macdonald's place in it, finally matters. The poles in the argument over his legacy were most succinctly staked out in the debate in the *Walrus* as the anniversary of Macdonald's birth in January 2015 grew near. On one hand, Stephen Marche described our first PM as a corrupt drunken racist deserving our "considered and active contempt."¹ At the other end of the debate, Macdonald's most recent biographer, Richard Gwyn, defended his protagonist portraying Sir John A. as "Canada's First Scapegoat," accused by 21st-century writers of being "a cover for our own failings" as a nation.² In his defence of "Old Tomorrow," Gwyn rightfully defended his hero on the charges of corruption (they were all corrupt in those days), on the alcoholism issue (he was sober for most of his time as P.M.), and on his racism (which Gwyn notes was surpassed in the case of the Chinese by Macdonald's Liberal successor, Wilfrid Laurier, who raised the notorious Head Tax by 500%).



The question driving the debate over Macdonald's legacy centres on the question of whether he was a proverbial "man-of-his-time" acting in accord with the prevalent beliefs and attitudes of the day, or whether he was exceptional, being either ahead or behind his time in his opinions and actions. I will admit my own bias in this controversy; I am skeptical about attributing the character of an age to a single individual. As Professor Donald Smith told me, "Biography is not history, the bonding of a writer and the central character is pretty intense," and that enthusiasm for their subjects should come as no surprise.³ I am also wary of interpreting thoughts or musings of historical figures such as Macdonald on their own. My graduate advisor warned that the study of ideas at the level of ideas was like nailing Jello to the wall.

Instead of the mushy ground of ideas, Macdonald's actions and the legacy of his policies provide evidence that can be assessed in a serious way. There is no denying the long shadow of his influence on our nation. Gwyn is right in presenting him as "The Man Who Made Us." Whether we would all be Americans without him as Gwyn suggested is counterfactual history and a matter of speculation. This discussion focuses on Macdonald's influence on the relationship between the state and its indigenous inhabitants, the most contentious legacy of his time in power. In a recent collection, *Macdonald at 200*, historian J.R. Miller wrote that on his return to power in 1878, the PM also served the longest term as Minister of Indian Affairs in

our history and "for good or ill, Macdonald was the architect of Canadian Indian policy. The foundation that he and his government laid would last largely unaltered until the middle of the 20th century."⁴ "Indian" issues were so central to his second stretch of time in office that Macdonald oversaw them personally, not entrusting the portfolio to anyone else until 1888, after the CPR was complete, the West was being settled on a massive scale and the subjugated indigenous population of the prairies was all but out of sight and out of mind in the Canadian consciousness.⁵ Gwyn wrote, "After Macdonald, early Canadian prime ministers took little interest in Aboriginal issues. History books about that period scarcely mention the actions of native peoples. We succeeded in making them invisible."⁶ From the time Macdonald gave up the helm of the Indian department in the late 1880s, the portfolio has been one of the least coveted positions in the cabinet, its Ministers very rarely coming into public prominence except for occasional debacles like the so-called white paper penned by Jean Chrétien in the first years of the Trudeau administration.

Scholars and biographers agree that during his tenure in charge of Indian Affairs, indigenous issues were an integral, if unstated aspect of western settlement. As Macdonald wrote to his Indian Commissioner Edgar Dewdney in 1881, "I have no intention of giving up my present Department so long as I remain in the Government. Routine matters may be attended to by the permanent Heads but Indian matters, and the land granting system, form so great

a portion of the general policy of the Government that I think it necessary for the Prime Minister, whoever he may be, to have that in his own hands."⁷ As historian J.R. Miller explained: "Without success in dealing with the Indians of the west, settlement would not occur, the railway would not flourish, and the future of a transcontinental Canada would be imperiled."⁸ The railway was of course completed. Canada's future as a transcontinental nation was secured. There is no denying that Macdonald's plan for white settlement was a success. By 1920, the population of Saskatchewan reached a million people, a number only surpassed after 2012. The question that remains is at the core of the controversy over Macdonald's place in our collective memory: What was his "success" in dealing with the First Nations of the west?

The first issue to consider in his relationship with the indigenous population was his opinion regarding race. The editors of *Macdonald at 200* were particularly diplomatic in this regard: "He was, like most people of his age, deeply suspicious of people who did have the same skin colour as his own."⁹ Donald Smith's contribution to *Macdonald at 200* stressed the positive nature of his relationship with First Nations people in the east, noting that, "Without question, Macdonald did care about individual Aboriginal people, particularly those anxious to make their way in the dominant society."¹⁰ In cataloguing a number of good relationships with western-educated indigenous professionals like Oronhytekhwa (Dr. Peter Martin), Professor Smith generalized about Macdonald's "optimism" in trusting his vision



of an integrated indigenous population into the new Canada to "the understaffed and underfunded Department of Indian Affairs, and the equally poorly funded Christian missionaries." In light of the failures of Indian policy and the residential school system, Smith's explanation of why Macdonald's hopeful vision was never realized seems out of place: "In fairness to our first prime minister, it only became known in the 20th century how slowly cultures change. The expansion of the new discipline of anthropology helped further understanding of how strong and resilient North American Indian cultures are."¹¹

Professor Smith's rationale for the failure of a century of Indian policy is questionable but his research shows that Macdonald was not driven by simplistic notions of racial superiority. Indeed, his friendships and professional interactions with indigenous leaders in the east point to "what might have been" on the issue of Indian Affairs. Instead, Macdonald took a different approach in the West, where he believed "you cannot judge the wild nomad of the North-West by the standard of the Indian of Ontario."¹² By the late 19th century, there had been more than a century of interaction and intermingling in Ontario and the two societies had long experience with each other. In contrast, Canadians were seen as invaders in the West, even to many in the Red River colony in the aftermath of the Rupert's Land Purchase in 1870. Canada's aggressive stance toward the West waned in the years the Tories spent in the political wilderness after the Pacific Scandal.



On their return to power in 1878, the fate of Macdonald, his party, and the finances of the entire nation hinged upon the swift completion of the railway to the Pacific. The indigenous population of the plains, the nations of which had entered into the various numbered treaties between 1871 and 1877 when development of the region was thought to be decades away, soon came to be seen as the greatest impediment to the fruition of the National Policy. The completion of the “Numbered Treaties” and the surrender of land they entailed literally provided the legal foundation for the white, agrarian society that soon came to dominate the region. In exchange for access to all but the tiniest allotments of land held in trust by the Dominion for the benefit of the original people of the region (Reserves), Canada agreed to take on a series of legal obligations to compensate their treaty partners as their part of the equation. The treaties were not imposed upon impoverished communities of the West. Amendments to the original wording of the agreements came after serious and occasionally acrimonious negotiations.

When the bison disappeared in the spring of 1878, the balance of power between the treaty partners was irrevocably lost. Almost overnight, hunting communities that had relied on the herds for generations found themselves without food and in need of Canadian assistance. Some, like Chief Beardy of the Plains Cree, had foreseen the collapse and secured a promise of humanitarian relief as part of Treaty Six:

That in the event hereafter of the Indians comprised within this treaty being taken over by any pestilence, or by a general famine, the Queen, on being satisfied and certified thereof by Her Indian Agent or Agents, will grant to the Indians assistance of such character and to such an extent as Her Chief Superintendent of Indian Affairs shall deem necessary and sufficient to relieve the Indians from the calamity that shall have befallen them.¹³

In the early days of the famine, when the few Canadian authorities in the region scrambled to secure food for the hungry, correspondence surrounding the issue reveals a genuine concern for the welfare of the indigenous population on the part of the Northwest Mounted Police. The election of the Tories in the fall of 1878 brought a new imperative to famine relief. Food distribution took on an ever-increasing aspect of coercion as rations were used not just to sustain the hungry but to control them. An opposition politician called the new measures “a policy of submission shaped by a policy of starvation,” wherein only those who signed on to treaty and taken up their appointed reserves were provided with food. In the first year after the Tories returned to power, at least four Chiefs took up reserves near Battleford in exchange for food.¹⁴

Instead of honouring the spirit of the treaty, officials increasingly used food as a means to control the malnourished and increasingly sick indigenous

population. On May 3, 1880, Macdonald described the management of the ration program in the House of Commons:

*In some instances, perhaps, the Indians have been fed when they might not have been in an extreme position of hunger or starvation, and I dare say there have been instances of imposition; but as far as I can learn, the officers have exercised due supervision over the food supply. ... it is by being rigid, even stingy, in the distribution of food and require absolute proof of starvation before distributing it.*¹⁵

Two years later, Macdonald defended his officials from charges that spending on Indian relief were growing without proper oversight:

*In the case of apprehended famine, the matter is to be dealt with on the spot; but the whole matter is to be dealt with by Mr. Dewdney, who has charge of the whole reserves. When the Indians are starving they have been helped, but they have been reduced to one-half and one-quarter rations; but when they fall into a state of destitution we cannot allow them to die for want of food. ... I have reason to believe that the agents as a whole, and I am sure it is the case with the Commissioner, are doing all they can, by refusing food until the Indians are on the brink of starvation to reduce the expense.*¹⁶



Before the end of 1882, the last of the holdout Chiefs, Mistahi-maskwa or Big Bear, put his mark on Treaty Six in exchange for food for his starving people. Earlier, a police physician reported “it would indeed be difficult to exaggerate their extreme wretchedness and need.”¹⁷ J.R. Miller summarized the experience of Big Bear and the other holdouts as “effectively starved into signing.”¹⁸ In withholding food until the hungry signed on to treaty and took up their appointed reserves, the government perhaps cruelly but certainly efficiently eliminated any perceived threat to railway construction posed by a concentration of indigenous people in the Cypress Hills. Thousands may have been forced into treaty and onto reserves from hunger, but for many the situation worsened when they took up their reserves. Food intended for the hungry rotted in storehouses because of the meager portions doled out by government officials. Worse yet, any perceived resistance or even questioning of authority among the reserve population could result in the withholding of rations for entire communities for as long as eight days.¹⁹ Later, Macdonald shrugged off criticism of ration distribution, including charges of collusion between department officials and food suppliers to dole out spoiled food. “It cannot be considered a fraud on the Indians because they were living on government charity... and as the old adage says, beggars should not be choosers.”²⁰

Macdonald’s “success” in dealing with the indigenous people of the West as railway construction proceeded toward the Pacific was that he swiftly and permanently subjugated the original inhabitants



of the region, opening the land for the CPR and the flood of immigrants that came in its wake. After 1885, to use Gwyn's image, aboriginal people were "invisible."²¹ In the aftermath of the short-lived insurrection in Saskatchewan, the Dominion came down especially hard on the First Nations population of the region. Just three weeks after the Last Spike ceremony marking the completion of the CPR, the hanging of eight indigenous men at Battleford, the largest execution in Canadian history, signaled that marginalization of the reserve population was complete. To Edgar Dewdney's the hangings were to be "a public spectacle." To the prime minister, the killings "ought to convince the Red Man that the White Man governs."²² Soon, the intimidation was institutionalized with a series of draconian policies that have become so entrenched that they continue to haunt us as a nation today. Traditional religious practices like the Sun Dance and the Potlatch in British Columbia were outlawed until 1951, when the most oppressive aspects of the *Indian Act* were rescinded. The notorious "pass system" in place from 1885 until 1951, described by J.R. Miller as "extralegal", incarcerated Treaty Indians to their reserves, undermining mobility, economic opportunity and even the quest for food.²³ Indigenous institutions of governance were a special target for Canadian authorities such as Indian Commissioner Hayter Reed, who wrote: "The policy of destroying the tribal or communist system is assailed in every possible way."²⁴ What meager progress made during the arduous conversion to reserve farming was

destroyed with the implementation of the "peasant farming" system where commercial production was converted to subsistence agriculture which institutionalized poverty and food insecurity on reserves through the use of permit system, requiring written authorization of an Indian department employee to sell any produce grown on reserve.²⁵ According to Miller, "Officially, the rationale for this lunacy was 'science'" or what passed for it in the late 19th century."²⁶ In recent years, we have come to understand the implications of Macdonald's most enduring legacy, the establishment of a nationwide system of residential schools. The schools operated for more than 100 years with perhaps 150,000 children taken from their homes and placed into institutions whose stated goal was the destruction of indigenous language and identity. The violence experienced by generations of children, whose well-being was the responsibility of the government of Canada, is our greatest shame as a nation.

As overseer of Indian Affairs in its formative and most important decade, Macdonald's "success" in the portfolio was the elimination of the indigenous population of the prairies as a perceived threat to the establishment of a white agrarian society in the region, but also putting in place mechanisms that were so coercive that the reserve population was essentially "invisible" to our ancestors in mainstream society. As the head of the Indian Department, Macdonald was not driven by a misguided sense of benevolence. Rather the Canadian attack on indigenous communities, institutions and individuals

was undertaken to provide the settler population with the absolute minimum hindrance to its development. Recent serious and measured scholarship has begun to interpret the state-sponsored attack on indigenous communities as a form of genocide.²⁷

Two hundred years on, Macdonald's legacy should rightfully be debated. If, as Richard Gwyn asserted, "We are today one of the most successful nations on the globe. Virtually every comparative international survey puts us in — or knocking at the door of — the top ten in quality of life, governance, and of living peaceably,"²⁸ then how do we reconcile the fact that in 2014 similar indicators used for Indigenous Canadians place them at 73rd, on par with living conditions of Romania? Can our idea of the fundamental decency of Canadian society withstand that kind of inequity, especially when concentrated along racial lines? The part of Canada described by Gwyn with such pride was built at the expense of the health, well-being and even the lives of the original inhabitants of the country. The sooner we collectively acknowledge this, the sooner we can shed the burden of "success" of Macdonald's Indian policy and move forward together as a truly mature society. ♣

NOTES

- ¹ Old Macdonald : Sir John A. was a racist, a colonialist, and a drunk. Why are we celebrating him? *The Walrus*, Jan.-Feb. 2015 <http://thewalrus.ca/old-macdonald/>.
- ² Canada's First Scapegoat. *The Walrus*.
- ³ Donald Smith, Pers. Comm., Oct.19, 2013 (e-mail).

- ⁴ J.R. Miller, "Macdonald as Minister of Indian Affairs : The Shaping of Canadian Indian Policy." In Patrice Dutil and Roger Hall, eds. *Macdonald at 200 : New Reflections and Legacies* (Toronto : Dundurn, 2014): 311.
- ⁵ James Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains : Disease, Politics of Starvation and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* Regina : University of Regina Press, 2013.
- ⁶ "Canada's First Scapegoat."
- ⁷ Quoted in J.R. Miller, "Macdonald as Minister of Indian Affairs : The Shaping of Canadian Indian Policy": 323. For a view that the subjugation of the indigenous population was a essential if unstated component of the national policy, see Joyce Green, "Towards a Détente with History : Confronting Canada's Colonial Legacy." *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 12(1995): 85-105.
- ⁸ Miller, "Macdonald as Minister of Indian Affairs : The Shaping of Canadian Indian Policy": 324.
- ⁹ Patrice Dutil and Roger Hall, "Introduction : A Macdonald for Our Times." In Patrice Dutil and Roger Hall, eds. *Macdonald at 200 : New Reflections and Legacies*: 16.
- ¹⁰ Donald Smith, "Macdonald's Relationship with Aboriginal Peoples." Dans Patrice Dutil et Roger Hall, eds. *Macdonald at 200 : New Reflections and Legacies*: 76.
- ¹¹ Smith, "Macdonald's Relationship with Aboriginal Peoples": 81.
- ¹² Quoted in Miller, "Macdonald as Minister of Indian Affairs : The Shaping of Canadian Indian Policy": 324.
- ¹³ <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/fra/1100100028710/1100100028783>.
- ¹⁴ Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains*: 114.
- ¹⁵ Debates of the House of Commons, May 4 1880: 1942.
- ¹⁶ Debates of the House of Commons, April 27, 1882: 1186.
- ¹⁷ Hugh Dempsey, *Big Bear : The End of Freedom* (Vancouver : Douglas and McIntyre, 1984): 109.
- ¹⁸ Miller, "Macdonald as Minister of Indian Affairs : The Shaping of Canadian Indian Policy": 330.



- ¹⁹ For examples, see the *Saskatchewan Herald*, Feb.23, 1884 and May 31, 1884.
- ²⁰ Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains*: 140.
- ²¹ "Canada's First Scapegoat."
- ²² Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains*: 156-157.
- ²³ Miller, "Macdonald as Minister of Indian Affairs : The Shaping of Canadian Indian Policy": 331.
- ²⁴ Miller, "Macdonald as Minister of Indian Affairs : The Shaping of Canadian Indian Policy": 329.
- ²⁵ See Sarah Carter, *Lost Harvests : Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy* (Montreal : McGill-Queen's University Press 1990) and "Two Acres and A Cow : 'Peasant' Farming for the Indians of the Northwest, 1889-1897." *Canadian Historical Review* 70 (1989): 27-52.
- ²⁶ Miller, "Macdonald as Minister of Indian Affairs : The Shaping of Canadian Indian Policy": 334.
- ²⁷ Alex Woolford, Jeff Benvenuto, and Alexander Laban Hinton, Eds. *Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America* (Durham : Duke University Press, 2014).
- ²⁸ Gwyn, "Canada's First Scapegoat."
-