



The Great John A.

He was a practical dreamer who battled the narrowness of his times to build a unique new nation. Then he held it together almost alone. Canadians today owe more than they know to Macdonald. May his memory and spirit never die . . .

□ A few years ago a government agency conducted a poll of primary school pupils to determine how much they knew about Canadian history. Asked who was Sir John A. Macdonald, 70 per cent replied that he was the man behind a well-known hamburger chain. This response no doubt says much for the effectiveness of modern fast-food marketing. But it also shows how ill-informed Canadians are about their history, and how little recognition they give to the great figures of their past.

It is inconceivable that an equal proportion of American school children should think that Washington is merely the name of a city, or Lincoln a make of automobile. That is because their parents and teachers as a matter of course have equipped them with a reasonable knowledge of the historical figures who bore those names.

In Canadian terms, John Alexander Macdonald was George Washington and Abraham Lincoln rolled into one, and then some. Like the former, he was the principal founder of his nation; like the latter, he held the state together in times of stress and peril. He did more than either to build a nation from the rawest of materials. And yet the beneficiaries of his efforts today have only a cloudy notion of who he was and what he did.

At that, most of what we present-day Canadians know (or think we know) about Macdonald is apt to be misleading. He is remembered as an inveterate drunkard, a sly politician, a notorious procrastinator, and altogether a bit of a clown.



Yet here was a man who stood at the centre of Canadian affairs for 42 years, 29 of them as a head of government. He entered public life at a time when Canada was little more than a scattering of muddy towns and scrub farms with about 1 million residents. When his career ended on his deathbed, he headed a burgeoning industrial nation of 5 million occupying the second-largest land mass on earth.

His achievements as a nation-maker alone give ample cause to honour his name, but there is a further reason for Canadians to remember him with gratitude. For it was he, more than anyone else, who bequeathed us our political tradition of living with our differences and resolving the conflicts among us through peaceful conciliation and compromise.

His stature can only be measured by viewing it against the back-drop of his times. Born of Presbyterian parents in Scotland in 1815, he came to Upper Canada at the age of five. There were two separate Canadian colonies then, the lower one predominantly French-speaking and Roman Catholic, the upper mainly populated by Protestant settlers who were viscerally anti-French and anti-Catholic. To accomplish all he did, he had to rise above the parochialism and prejudice of his group.

A business failure had driven Macdonald's father across the Atlantic to join his wife's kinfolk in Kingston. A lazy man with a weakness for drink, the elder Macdonald proceeded to fail in business twice more. Young "Ugly John", so called

for his extraordinary nose, attended school as such for only five years, then became articled to a lawyer. Such was his legal ability that he had already formed his own practice when he was called to the bar in 1836.

By that time political unrest was reaching a boiling-point in both the Canadas as the relatively powerless elected representatives struggled against the pseudo-aristocratic ruling cliques that had clustered around the British governors. It exploded into armed rebellion the next year.

The rebellions stimulated the formation of bodies of armed American volunteers intent on "liberating" the lands north of their border from British domination. In November 1838 a small force crossed the St. Lawrence River near Prescott and fought a brief losing battle. Macdonald defied public sentiment by assisting in the defence of one of the American invaders.

At heart he was anything but sympathetic to the aims of the invasion. Some historians have suggested that, on the contrary, the incident provided him with his mission in life — to ensure that the people of the northern portion of the continent were sufficiently united under the British Crown to resist the expansionist impulses of the U.S.

His personal life was a day-to-day tragedy

The chief upshot of the rebellions was the political union of the two colonies, which were re-designated Canada East and Canada West. In 1844 a group of Kingston citizens petitioned Macdonald to run for the local seat in the Legislative Assembly of the new united Province of Canada. He was then 29, a successful lawyer, and a loving husband, having married his Scottish half-cousin Isabella Clark the year before.

An amiable, cheerful and amusing campaigner who could disarm a hostile crowd, he carried the election handily. Once in the Assembly he gained respect as an incisive debater who refused to adopt the then-fashionable flowery style of oratory. He was promoted to the cabinet in 1847. Typically, the first bill he introduced was to reconcile the competing interests of the various Protestant and Catholic churches by establishing a three-campus ecumenical university in Canada West.

The administration in which he served was swept out of office in 1849. In the meantime his personal life had become a day-to-day tragedy. Struck down by an illness which has never been satisfactorily identified, his beloved Isabella was now a chronic invalid. She had given birth to a boy who, to his doting father's sorrow, died shortly after his first birthday. Isabella was usually bed-ridden, and was growing addicted to the opium she took to ease her constant pain. In his desolation, Macdonald's own addiction to alcohol grew worse.

The Conservative coalition to which he belonged was replaced by a group of Reformers who introduced legislation to compensate Lower Canadians for property losses sustained in the 1837-38 rebellion. This gave rise to virulent anti-French feelings, since it seemed to condone disloyalty to the Crown. When it was signed into law in April 1849, a furious band of Tory protesters rioted and burned down the Assembly buildings in Montreal.

There was enough to do to keep the union from flying apart

The feeling of abandonment by the mother country resulting from the removal of colonial tariff advantages and the confirmation of the Rebellion Losses Act found its expression in a manifesto calling for Canada to join the United States. Macdonald reacted by throwing in his hand with the British American League. The league held a convention at which it adopted a program of maintaining the British connection while levying tariffs to shelter the growth of domestic industries. These policies set the broad course which Macdonald was to follow later on.

Another proposal made at the league's convention seemed to him premature if not downright impractical. It called for a federal union of all the British North American colonies: the two Canadas, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, and Prince Edward Island. (The Hudson's Bay Company then governed the North West and the future British Columbia on behalf on the Crown.)

In Macdonald's view there was more than enough to do to keep the Province of Canada from flying apart from its own internal tensions. While in opposition he led an informal campaign to find

common ground among moderate English-Canadian Conservatives like himself and non-aligned moderate French-speaking members. This was in line with his belief that "no man in his senses can suppose that this country can for a century to come be governed by a totally unfrenchified government." As his biographer Donald Creighton put it, "He was prepared to accept the cultural duality of Canadian life."

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Canada might not now exist*

His image of Canada was the dead opposite of that of George Brown, his strongest adversary. Brown believed in British ascendancy over the "conquered" French. He advocated representation by population, which would have meant that the more numerous English would swamp the French at the polls. To Macdonald, "rep. by pop." could only mean the bitter and perhaps violent break-up of the union.

Brown's anti-Catholic and anti-French policies formed the rallying-point for Macdonald's French-English alliance. He called his bicultural group the Liberal-Conservative Party, a seemingly ambiguous name which actually made sense because it was composed of moderates of both the left and right.

The most important ally he acquired in his genial and no doubt boozy canvassing of French-speaking support was a former Lower Canadian rebel named Georges Étienne Cartier. Macdonald and Cartier were to alternate as first minister and chief lieutenant over the next few years. The first Macdonald-Cartier administration was formed in 1857. Three months later the long agony of Isabella Macdonald ended, leaving her husband the widowed father of their second child, a six-year-old son.

Cartier was Macdonald's friend both politically and personally. "That such a friendship was possible," commented the historian W.L. Morton, "revealed how far Canada had travelled from the politics of ascendancy towards the concept of a dual culture in one political nationality."

The realization of this concept was partly made possible by the fact that the province had a parliamentary system. This perfectly suited Macdonald's genius for balancing off the interests of different political camps. He could, wrote Stephen Leacock, "control two factions at a time as easily as a circus rider goes round on two horses." According to Leacock, he did this "by having no principle — or rather being content with one — the allegiance of a contented people under the British Crown."

One oft-cited instance of Macdonald's lack of principle was his tricky manoeuvre to overthrow George Brown in 1858 in what was known as the "double shuffle." But it must be said that if Macdonald had been more rigid in his principles, the continental nation of Canada might not now exist. It called for a great deal of political flexibility and adroitness to hold the union together. Macdonald was a man for his times.

But it was the dogmatic Brown who finally bent when the sectional and factional stresses became insupportable. He agreed to join Macdonald and Cartier in a coalition to seek a federation of the British North American colonies as the only alternative to the dissolution of the partnership between the present Ontario and Quebec. If this was a generous gesture on Brown's part, so too was it on Macdonald's. Brown was probably the only man he really hated, and the feeling was certainly mutual. Brown's Toronto newspaper, *The Globe*, never missed a chance to blacken Macdonald's character, running a "sick notice" every time he went on one of his notorious benders. Macdonald riposted that he knew the voters preferred him drunk to George Brown sober.

It is a fair assumption that Confederation could never have come about without Macdonald's free-and-easy personality and his peculiar mixture of talents. Glass in hand, he charmed the Maritime leaders into feeling that they were joining in an association of good fellows. With his keen grasp of constitutional law, he personally drafted 50 of the 72 resolutions which were to form the backbone of the British North America Act.

Few Canadians today realize how close we came to never having a nation. Nova Scotia and New Brunswick bridled and hesitated throughout the negotiations, while Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland turned their backs entirely on the

scheme. The ink was hardly dry on the BNA Act before Nova Scotia wanted to revert to its former status as a self-governing colony. Canada's security was placed in jeopardy by the bullying stance of the United States and the invasions by the Irish-American Fenian movement. When the Dominion took over the vast North West from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1870, it faced a ready-made insurrection led by Louis Riel.

He fought separatism by taking bold steps

As Canada's first Prime Minister, Macdonald grimly and almost single-handedly held the nation together. But he refused to go on the defensive; everything in his experience told him that it would be folly to stand still. Instead his government took the bold step of promising to build a railway to British Columbia as a condition of that colony's joining Confederation.

It was also very nearly Macdonald's undoing. He was caught red-handed appealing for campaign funds in the 1872 election from the man who stood to gain most from the railway franchise. For that he was thrown out of office, but his bitterest enemy could not dispute what he said in his own defence against charges of corruption: "...There does not exist in Canada a man who has given more of his heart, more of his wealth, more of his intellect and power, such as they may be, for the good of this Dominion of Canada."

It was true. His absences on political duty had precipitated the bankruptcy of his law firm, leaving him with enormous debts. He had tried to resign from office several times, only to be talked into staying on for the good of the country. He had continued to serve despite the trials and sorrows of his home life; the only child of his second marriage, Mary, suffered from a congenital defect and was permanently confined to a wheelchair.

He might have faded from the scene then if the new government had not challenged his vision of nationhood. It clearly had no intention of completing the railway on schedule, and British Columbia was threatening to secede. Aroused, the old warrior drew on his deep reserves of will to — as he saw it — save Confederation. He took his

message directly to the people in town meetings and picnics. Within five years he was back in office, determined that, against all obstacles, an all-Canadian railway would be built to the West Coast.

In his new government Macdonald doubled as Prime Minister and Minister of Indian Affairs, and there is clear evidence that in the latter capacity he neglected his duties. The procrastination which had earned him the nickname "Old Tomorrow" reaped a bloody harvest in the native uprising led by Louis Riel in 1885. Macdonald refused to save the Métis leader from the gallows despite Riel's evident insanity, preferring to stand by the court's decision. Riel's execution rekindled all the old racial animosities. For the next few years Macdonald was caught in a crossfire between extremists in English Canada and Quebec.

No Canadian politician was ever better loved

In the meantime he pursued his great dream of a continental nation bound together by the Canadian Pacific Railway which would be protected militarily by its alliance with Britain and economically by his "national policy" of tariffs. He fought his last election against the opposition platform of commercial union with the United States. He won, but the hard campaigning took its toll on his frail 76-year-old constitution. When he died of a stroke on June 6, 1891, there was an outpouring of sorrow among Canadians everywhere. He had said of himself that no man had ever loved a country more than he loved Canada. And no Canadian politician was ever loved more in return.

He was, as even his enemies admitted, indispensable. Four consecutive Conservative Prime Ministers tried to carry on his work and failed. Even today, almost a century after his death, the essential tone of moderation which Macdonald set for Canadian affairs is still with us. A voice once called out during an election rally: "You'll never die, John A.!" In the sense that his generous and reasonable spirit lives on among his countrymen, he never did.