

**John A, The Man Who Made Us  
The Life and Times of John A.  
Macdonald  
Vol. One: 1815-1867**

By Richard J. Gwyn

## INTRODUCTION

“The spirit of past ages never dies—

It lives and walks abroad and cries aloud”

Susanna Moodie, *Victoria Magazine*, 1847

-0-

If an international competition were ever to be staged to identify the world’s most complex and contradictory country, Canada would be a serious contender. The winner, surely, would be India, with its 16 official languages and more than 200 local languages, its sacred cows and its cutting-edge computer software, its combination of being both the world’s largest democracy and the only nation-state with a caste system. Canada might well come in second. It’s become a commonplace to describe the country as ,”the world’s first post-modern country”, given its unparalleled ethnic diversity, its decentralization (exceeded, if at all, only by Switzerland and Belgium.), the in-rush of immigrants (the largest proportionately among developed nations), the expanding population of Aboriginal peoples (second only to New Zealand), and the ever-increasing number of “nations” within the nation-state, Quebec as the latest to join the list.

In quite a few ways, we were post-modern before we ever became modern. That was the way we were in John A. Macdonald’s time. In 1884, Goldwin Smith, the leading political commentator of his day, summarized Macdonald’s life-long mission as, “to hold together a set of elements, national, religious, sectional and

personal, as motley as the component patches of any ‘crazy quilt’, and actuated each of them by paramount regard for its own interest.”

Here, Smith identified exactly Macdonald’s supreme talent. This was that he knew how to herd cats.

No-one else in Canada came close to Macdonald; after him, perhaps only Mackenzie King did, his supreme art being that of doing as little as possible for as long as possible. At the time, few others anywhere could match him. Even without the spur of chauvinism, any reasonable ranking of 19<sup>th</sup> century democratic leaders would be: Abraham Lincoln, Benjamin Disraeli, William Gladstone, Macdonald, (Bismark, no democrat, would otherwise rank near to the top). Macdonald happened to perform on a stage that was small and threadbare. But in the primordial political tasks-- the managing of men (then, only them) and the winning of their hearts and minds, and so of their votes-- contemporary equals are not easy to identify. Nor were there many nation-builders like him in his day: Otto von Bismark, Guiseppe Garibaldi, and Simon Bolivar. His achievement may have been the more demanding because none of the others had to create a country out of a “crazy-quilt”.

Within the range of Macdonald’s accomplishments, there are sizeable gaps. The largest, surely, is that, unlike Lincoln, he never appealed to peoples’ “better angels”. He was a doer, not a thinker, although highly intelligent and omnivorously well-read. He lacked the certitudes of a moralist, instead taking human nature as he

found it, and turning it to his purposes. He was, that is, a very Scottish Scot. He of course drank too-much. And although he was in no way the first to use patronage and election funds for partisan purposes—the practice was a cherished and well-embedded Canadian tradition (which still thrives)—Macdonald gave the practice credibility and durability by his masterful exercise of it. That’s a shoddy legacy for the father of a country to leave behind.

Yet his accomplishments were staggering: Confederation above all, but, almost as much if not more so, by extending the country across the continent by a railway that was, objectively, a financial and economic insanity. Also, the National Policy of tariff protection that endured in one form or other into the 1980s. Also, the RCMP or, more exactly, its precursor, the North-West Mounted Police. The first immigration from outside the British Isles, and Canada’s first labour legislation. On the ledger’s other side, he was responsible for the CPR Scandal, for the execution of Louis Riel, and for the head tax on Chinese workers.

He’s thus not easy to scan. His private life was largely barren. Yet few other Canadian leaders—Pierre Trudeau, John Diefenbaker for a time, Wilfrid Laurier—had the same capacity to inspire love. One MP—a Liberal—wrote in a magazine article of Macdonald’s hold on his supporters: “They would go through fire and water to serve him, and got, some of them, little or no reward. But they served him because they loved him, and because with all his great powers they saw in him their own frailties.” The novelist Hugh MacLennan, in his

Scotchman's Return, caught many of the layers within him: "This frail-looking man with the immense and rueful patience of a Celt... This utterly masculine man with so much woman in him... this lonely man flashing gay out of his inner solitude... this statesman who understood that without chicanery statesmanship is powerless." Macdonald was complex and as contradictory as his own country.

Add a last, lesser, legacy of Macdonald's to the list. In writing this book, I have made a host of spelling mistakes, but have paid them no heed. Each has been signaled clearly by a red line that my text system inserts up beneath the offending word. The mistakes aren't really mine, though; they are Macdonald's. He had an Order in Council passed directing that all the government's papers be written in the British style, as with "labour" rather than "labor".

Discoveries of this kind have been for me one of the principal delights of writing this book, and even more so of researching it. All historians, professional or free lance like myself, are keenly aware that these small epiphanies are the joy that more than compensates for the later pain of trying to transfer from mind to computer screen whatever it is one wants to say. The discovery, for instance, that at least in parts of nineteenth-century, rural Canada, unmarried mothers were often regarded far less as sinners than as a "species of heiress", since, as one observer noted, their condition both confirmed their fecundity while as dowry they brought both proof of their fecundity and children who would soon be able to work on the farm. The discovery, one of slightly grander moment, that the principal reason the

Confederation Fathers spent almost no time discussing the respective powers of the national and provincial governments—the obsession of our politicians ever since—was that most Canadians then were self-sufficient farmers (even making their own clothes and soap and candles) and so didn't want governments to do much for them or to them. The discovery, most substantial of all, that the single-most important decision Canadians made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was not to become a Confederation, but, rather, not to become Americans. The phrase National Policy is always applied to Macdonald's policy of tariff protection for Canadian manufacturers; instead, his National Policy began with Confederation itself, with tariff protection as a later sub-policy, together with others such as building a trans-continental railway.

Macdonald made us by making a Confederation out of a disconnected, mutually suspicious, collection of colonies, and by later magnifying this into a continental-sized nation. He could not have brought off Confederation without the others of the 'Big Four'--George-Etienne Cartier, George Brown, Alexander Tilloch Galt. Among them, though, the irreplaceable man was Macdonald. He alone knew how to herd cats. He understood as well something more fundamental. The U.S. had emerged from out of its Civil War as a putative super-power. Britain, the global superpower, wanted to pull back from North America in order to attend to its empire. For Canada to survive on its own it had to demonstrate that it possessed the will and nerve that it took for a nation to survive. Confederation was the essential means to that end. What Macdonald understood as did no others, excepting perhaps Galt, was that Confederation was only a means, not an end.

I began work knowing precious little of any of this. My principal knowledge was negative. This was that while Macdonald was the most important of all our prime ministers, the last full-scale, critical, biography of him had been written more than half a century ago. It is, of course, the greatest biography in Canadian historiography— Donald Creighton’s two volumes, *The Young Chieftain*, and *The Old Politician*, in 1952 and 1955. They are magisterial and encyclopedic and are written with narrative flair. But times move on, new evidence emerges, attitudes and assumptions change and open doors—maybe trap-doors—to new interpretations of old givens. Anyway, why should the United States, where history was once dismissed as “bunk” each year publish anything up to a half-dozen biographies of historical figures or major studies of past doings that attempt to extract contemporary lessons from long-ago events, while Canada settles for so few—precariously close to none at all? Our history, as we know perfectly well, lacks the drama of revolutions and civil wars and of kings and queens losing their heads. But it is our history. It is us. It’s where we came from and, in a far larger part than often is recognized, it is why we are the way we are now no matter all the transformational changes since-- demographic, economic, technological, life-style. Moreover, as was always Macdonald’s core conviction, human nature itself changes little.

I came to this biography sideways. This book started out to be a slim one, then threatened to grow obese, then was sliced into two more or less manageable

halves. This is to say that I began boning up on Macdonald for a Brief Life series on historical figures being undertaken by another publisher. Out of this cramming came one, to me, unarguable conclusion: Macdonald deserves a new full-scale biography, and Canadians deserve the chance to re-discover him. With quite considerable daring—in Canada, history really is often now treated as “bunk”—Random House of Canada accepted the challenge, eventually taking the double-dare that an originally-planned single volume should be sliced into two. This book is the result of that dare.

A last note on my work habits. Early on, Carol, my wife, found a large-scale poster of Macdonald created originally to promote Macdonald’s cause in the CBC-TV’s *Greatest Canadian* contest. She installed it in my attic office. Throughout my labours, he’s looked down, quizzically and mischievously.