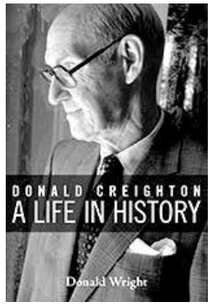
A BIOGRAPHER'S FLAWED PORTRAIT REVEALS HARD TRUTHS ABOUT HISTORY



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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.

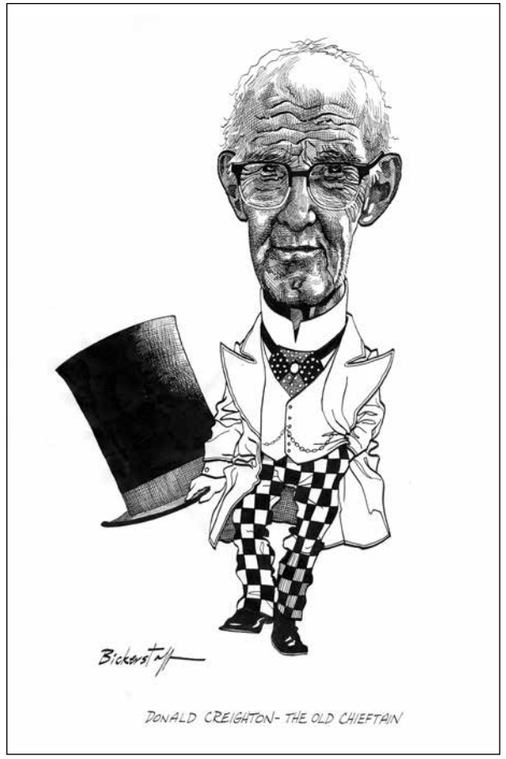
Its publication in 1952 and 1955 confirmed Creighton's reputation as a brilliant writer. Oxford fellow Max Beloff described him as "one of the half-dozen best historians now writing anywhere in the English-speaking world," while even his harshest critic, historian Frank Underhill, conceded that *Macdonald* 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