# JOHN A. MACDONALD: A FOUNDER AND BUILDER

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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

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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