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

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."