

## *John A. Macdonald: Canada's First Prime Minister* by Ged Martin

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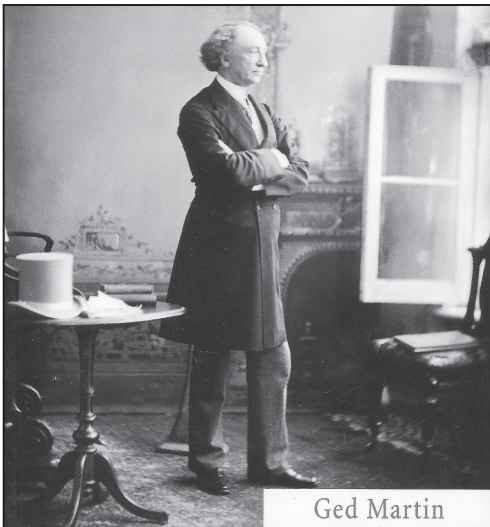
linguistic data, wampum belts, and names for the Petun. Of the five, appendix C, on linguistic data, should have been incorporated into Chapter 3 on Petun origins.

The overall organization of the book works well. Editors Jean-Luc Pilon and William Fox, and Rudy Fecteau (who provided crystal-clear artifact photographs) and Andrew Stewart (who drafted the excellent maps), in close collaboration with the author, created a readable book out of a huge body of historical and archaeological data. It is rare to see the results of fifty years of research being distilled into one volume.

In summary, Charles Garrad's *Petun to Wyandot* is a wonderful example of integrating historical and archaeological data to produce a work of Aboriginal history. In

fact, the Ontario Archaeological Society has recognized this book by awarding it the 2014 Award for Excellence in Publishing. It deserves to be read as part of a trilogy, which includes Kathryn Labelle's *Dispersed but Not Destroyed* and John Steckley's *The Eighteenth-Century Wyandot*. This book will occupy a prominent place on the bookshelf of any serious scholar of Aboriginal history and have an appeal for the general reader as well. Charles Garrad should be applauded for writing the definitive history of the seventeenth-century Petun. I am certain that the Petun-Wyandot ancestors and living descendants are pleased.

Gary Warrick,  
Wilfrid Laurier University



Ged Martin

JOHN A.  
MACDONALD  
CANADA'S FIRST PRIME MINISTER  
A QUEST BIOGRAPHY

## ***John A. Macdonald: Canada's First Prime Minister***

by Ged Martin

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2013. 215 pp., index. \$19.95 paperback. ISBN: 978-1-45970-651-4. \$9.99 e-book. ISBN: 978-145970-653-8 ([www.dundurn.com](http://www.dundurn.com))

**G**ed Martin has long been a reliable and insightful guide to John A. Macdonald, offering over the years original essays on confederation debates, Macdonald and alcoholism, Macdonald's accent, Macdonald and his Kingston, and the limits of archival research in understanding Canada's first prime minister. With this short book conceived for the "Quest Biography" series that already includes forty portraits of people as varied as Tecumseh and Jacques Plante, Martin's mandate is to initiate the curious more than to impress the learned. Freed of foot-

notes, he goes to it with a full pallet of colours and succeeds in both tasks.

There are no driving questions that lead Martin to his “Macdonald.” The first chapter sketches the broad outlines of the almost fifty-year political career of Canada’s first prime minister, focusing in turn on each of the grand issues of the day with which he had to contend. There is no broad thesis; Macdonald was projected to the front of Canadian politics because he was a “talented lawyer, an effective administrator and prominent figure in Upper Canadian politics.” (9)

Each of the eight succeeding chapters examines Macdonald in an unsurprising chronology. Chapter 1 sketches the youth and first steps into adulthood, focusing on family, relations and his apprenticeship as a lawyer. The chapter culminates in 1839, a turning point in Canadian affairs but also when Macdonald was named a director of the Commercial Bank. Martin brings to his portrait his rare ability to note the quirks of the nineteenth century and seems to have noted every minute detail of Macdonald’s life, from broken arms to broken hearts. He can also be a cold-eyed realist, as in observing Macdonald lamenting that he was earning his own living by the time he was fifteen. Martin notes wryly that most teenagers in the period did the same (23).

The second chapter takes the reader past Macdonald’s entry into government in 1846, but records in passing Macdonald’s delightful trip to London in 1842 and the circumstances of his courtship of his cousin Isabella that year. He equally paints a quick summary of provincial and international events as well as the troubled health of Macdonald’s home life, noting how his career was shaped by events of this period.

In a swift 25-page third chapter, Martin signals the malaise of the Canadian Union and Macdonald’s final resolve to break it

in order to save it. Macdonald entered the MacNab government in 1854 and ends the chapter as he is summoned by allies to take the lead in helping Canada find a way out of its “dreary waste of colonial politics.”

The fourth chapter examines the confederation debate and depicts Macdonald in action as he cajoles, convinces and converts various politicians to the idea that only by joining a larger whole can the Canadian project be salvaged. Martin is agile again in depicting the circumstances that brought about the Charlottetown conference and the arrangements made at Quebec the following year, as well as Macdonald’s sense of renewal, both politically and personally. He married again in the winter of 1867, and could be allowed, at age 52, a measure of optimism in looking forward.

The fifth chapter finally examines the subject of the book—Canada’s first Prime Minister—focusing on the first administration from 1867 to 1872. The key events are surveyed, from Nova Scotia’s threat of secession to Louis Riel’s first insurgency to the Washington Treaty of 1872. Chapter 6—perhaps the most original—is devoted to Macdonald in opposition as he comes to grips with political failure, personal and family crises (attempting to beat the bottle, trying to reconcile with his son Hugh John, moving to Toronto), and musters the courage to begin a plot to return to office.

The last two chapters focus on Macdonald’s years in government from 1878 to his death in office in 1891. Again, the key events are adroitly described as Macdonald’s personal growth is hinted at. Martin notes in a photo caption that Macdonald liked to “disguise his age by wearing light-coloured suits,” but brings attention to the reality that Macdonald was mindful of his advanced years and hopeful that a successor could be found. Perhaps here Martin is

less than satisfying. Macdonald evidently feigned an interest in retiring to all who could bear him do it, but in reality showed very little confidence that anyone could serve the party or the government as well as he could. He died in office only weeks after defending his government in a general election, leaving a party confused and aimless, bedeviled by untimely illnesses, deaths, and incompetence.

A useful chronology completes the picture, and Canada's most influential and complex nineteenth-century figure is fully presented in less than 200 pages, but the book remains oddly unfinished. Martin's haste out the door leaves the reader wishing for a meatier interpretation of Macdonald's

significance, of what made him so special. Martin the biographer prefers to point out particular personal traits, such as Macdonald's sense of humour, his humaneness, his ability to read his interlocutors. One would have hoped to read more about Macdonald's political abilities and his evolving philosophy of power and government.

Ged Martin reveals himself in this short biography as Macdonald's most subtle interpreter, and as a critical, yet fully sympathetic biographer. His study commends itself both to the learned and the merely curious.

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## *Negotiating a River: Canada, the US, and the Creation of the St. Lawrence Seaway*

by Daniel Macfarlane

Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2014. \$95.00 hardcover. ISBN 978-0-77482-643-3.  
\$34.95 paperback. ISBN 978-0-77482-644-0 ([www.ubcpress.ca](http://www.ubcpress.ca))

The fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 2009 resulted in a spate of books on the subject. *Negotiating a River* is the most recent. Each of the works on the Seaway has emphasized different aspects of the building of the massive creation. Clare Puccia Parham, for instance, concentrated on the experiences of those who worked on the project in her *The St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project: An Oral History of the Greatest Construction Show on Earth*. Jeff Alexander, on the other hand, looked at environmental damage associated with the Seaway in his *Pandora's Locks: The Opening of the Great Lakes—St. Lawrence Seaway*. Daniel Macfarlane has chosen to highlight the final negotiations between Canada and the United States, following the Second

World War, and ecological and social issues associated with the building of the seaway, and to put the whole project in a theoretical framework. This is not to say that the author confines himself to these topics, far from it, but he does stress that these topics are crucial to understanding the creation of the seaway.

In fact, his first chapter deals with the thirty years of negotiations and offers between the two countries that preceded the final push to close a deal. These negotiations were extremely complex, involving not only the two national governments, but also provincial and state governments and numerous lobby groups. Macfarlane has done an excellent job of providing an overview, without getting into the smaller details. Of course, in covering so much