

# Report of the Annual Meeting

## Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

### John A. Macdonald — His Biographies and Biographers

T. W. L. MacDermot

Volume 10, numéro 1, 1931

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300094ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/300094ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

#### Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

#### ISSN

0317-0594 (imprimé)

1712-9095 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

#### Citer cet article

MacDermot, T. W. L. (1931). John A. Macdonald — His Biographies and Biographers. *Report of the Annual Meeting / Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada*, 10(1), 77–84. <https://doi.org/10.7202/300094ar>

All rights reserved © The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada, 1931

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

**é**rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

## JOHN A MACDONALD—HIS BIOGRAPHIES AND BIOGRAPHERS

By T. W. L. MACDERMOT

All the general and obvious observations about Sir John A. Macdonald have been made and reiterated with great persistence since his death forty years ago next Saturday week June 6. He was an active force in Canadian politics for nearly 50 years; he was a head liner in all the political crises and storms on both sides of Confederation; his name and figure aged into a universal fame comparable only perhaps to that of Queen Victoria. Confederation, the Canadian Pacific Railway, the Liberal-Conservative party, the ever vigorous National Policy—all these massive branches of the Canadian tree, and many others, were conceived or nurtured in whole or in part by the obscurely born Glasgow-Kingstonian. The commonplace portmanteau phrase is that the story of John A. Macdonald is the story of Canada during the 19th century: and as phrases go, it seems adequate.

Appropriately enough, this giant figure has received more biographical attention than any other single 19th century Canadian, and it is the intention of this paper (1) to be short, but (2) to glance for a few minutes at that biographical material. It is perhaps a somewhat narrow basis on which to offer a paper before this association, and I have had many qualms since suggesting it. But the subject has one or two curious and interesting features, particularly if it has the good fortune to win the ordeal of a discussion afterwards.

The work to which I shall allude in the main are the following:—

Sir Joseph Pope's "Memoirs of Sir John Macdonald," published in 1894, in two volumes, and until a few months ago practically unobtainable and unobtainable outside libraries.

Pope's "Day of Sir John A. Macdonald" in the *Chronicles of Canada Series*. This has one or two small distinctive points, but was in reality a digest adapted to the *Series*. This too is generally only accessible in the set.

The one volume "Correspondence of Sir John Macdonald, 1840-1891," selected from some 50 or 60,000 letters, by Sir J. Pope. This is of course not a biography, but has its claims in this list, as from it we can get a single picture of a kind, and with distinct elements of reality about it.

Then there is J. P. Macpherson's "Sir John A. Macdonald, G.C.B.," usually in two volumes and strongly reminiscent of many of the lives of Queen Victoria. His object was chiefly "to clothe mine age in angel-like perfection." There are Sir Geo. Parkin's volume in *The Makers of Canada Series*, the twin productions of E. J. Collins, and Mercer Adam, the first of whom dedicated his book to Goldwin Smith, and the second of whom, Goldwin Smith's secretary, perhaps in a burst of gratitude, copied out Collins' pages, added a few chapters fore and aft, and republished it. And there is E. B. Biggar's *Anecdotal Life*—"now becoming scarce" as the book catalogues say. Seven years ago Mr. Stewart Wallace contributed a small, accurate, and readable summary of Macdonald's career to the *Canadian Statesmen series*.

In a slightly different category from these, but important as a reference life is the article in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Unlike

the synoptic Epitome of that work, this article gives Macdonald's birth-place correctly, but repeats the old legend of the brilliant inaugural defence of Schoultz by the young Kingston lawyer, and persists throughout in designating the two Canadas as "Toronto & Quebec." It also gives a tactful but apparently misleading colour to the visit of the Prince of Wales by saying that John A. Macdonald helped to entertain the Prince on his visit, when, as Pope tells us of course, Macdonald was much put out by the rigid scruples of the Duke of Newcastle on that occasion and refused during the tour to go to London or Toronto.

Macdonald's life-time was punctuated by numbers of biographical notices, like Fennings Taylor's sketch in "Portraits of British Americans," and Joseph Tassé's "Lord Beaconsfield et Sir John Macdonald. Un parallèle." But these are very slight, and exceedingly difficult to get.

The Macdonald of the biographies must be sought in the first half dozen books I mentioned. What do we find?

In the first place, with the exception of Sir Geo. Parkin's book, they are all very 19th century—1880: 1891: 1894. These are the dates. To a certain extent therefore they may be taken as primary sources. For they preserve as old handkerchiefs and fans sometimes do, the peculiar fragrance, or mustiness, of the days to which they belong. It is illuminating for example to read that in the 40's, the salad days of Macdonald, the drinking of whisky was not looked upon as a violation of the code of morality. Whereas as E. B. Biggar says, "it is happily now (1891) regarded in a different light."

This flavour of 19th century antiquity therefore, still hangs about them.

Then in a more commonplace way these volumes have served a purpose. They contain a good deal of the framework of the history of the time; and here and there, particularly in Pope of course, there are scraps of personal observation that could not be found otherwise. But when these apparently superfluous admissions have been made, I think one must go on to say that both students and ordinary readers of Canadian history are pretty poorly served in the matter of one of the most remarkable men this country has ever imported.

Technicalities and convention have combined to bring this about. His correspondence has not been opened to the public student, and feelings of respect, affection, reticence have probably often stood in the way of any amplification of the Collins-Adam-Pope generation of biographers. These writers have been careful as they say not "to hurt any feelings:" they write as nephews, friends, admirers, and political supporters. Also of course, they write very close up to their subject. They generally prefer burying him in obscurity to putting him in the shade.

But whatever the reason, Macdonald has been left in the lurch for 40 years, and I think to the great detriment of our historical study of the 19th century. We have had to depend on these biographies which are extremely hard to obtain, and are stylistically out of date. Further than this, however, the historical deficiencies and defects in these biographies are manifold and manifest—manifold as I shall hope to show in part, manifest in the very fact that they are forty and more years old.

In that time not only has a quantity of material been brought to light and compiled, but our historical perceptions have been immeasurably sharpened. Take for example, our economic consciousness. It is instinctive, now, to seek at once for the economic roots, often the origins, of revolutions, reforms, parties, even literatures and art. In the long public life

of John A. Macdonald he was now supported by, now opposed by group after group of commercial interests in whose hands lay at least some of the important strings that worked politics. In 1857, April 22, the *Globe* wrote, "The G.T.R. governs Canada at the present moment;" twenty-five years later, October 19, 1881, John A. Macdonald was writing in urgent terms to George Stephen about the danger that lay ahead over another railway. Yet only once (in 1873) is this skeleton in the cupboard of our biographers ever allowed to inflict its grisly person on the readers—and then only because it took Sir John away with it.

Take too the long struggle between George Brown and Macdonald. A fascinating psychological study in itself, we might have forgiven writers who were neither psychologists nor dramatists for overlooking it; but it also saw the initiation of the Press into Canadian politics, and in the outpourings of the *Globe* editorials—as Professor Underhill made clear to this Association some four years ago—we find the real issues flung into the arena of political debate. East and west: Orangemen and papist: bigotry and tolerance: English political corruption: republicanism and flunkeydom, as Goldwin Smith called it: patient, calculating far-sighted equanimity opposed to burning covenanting zeal and a quick sense of moral turpitude—these were some of the waters that divided Brown and Macdonald, Ontario and Quebec, Reformer-Grit and Conservative-Tory.

Yet scarcely a breath of this creeps into the life of Macdonald. There we move in a discreetly political world. Once or twice even Macdonald was stung into un-Macdonald-like fervour and pithiness: the precipitate Col. Rankin, and W. H. Blake nearly meet the Attorney-General West in duels. But these appear to be merely personal lapses. And the reality of those early days of Canadian politics remains shut away from us.

The same inadequacy marks the story of Macdonald as a Parliamentarian. It is evident that his influence on the practice and procedure of the Assembly and the House of Commons was constant and deep. And we are told that in the early days, just after he was first elected he wisely spent his time reading and studying voluminous works on political constitutional history and theory. But the books he read, the real course of his training, any analysis of his tenacious attachment to Parliamentary institutions—these are left for us to imagine for ourselves.

These and other lacunae in Macdonald's political development are peculiarly exasperating in the accounts of the years 1854-64, and 1873-78. The first period is quite vital in the political life of Macdonald. Never again it has been said, did he rule Canada as fully as he did then. "I question if he were ever . . . the whole government to such a degree as during the years 1858-62." (Pope.) Not only that, but it was in that decade or thereabouts that he laid the party foundations of the manoeuvres that led to Confederation, and later the National Policy, and it was in this fateful decade too that Macdonald was finally drawn down to the prevailing level of Canadian party politics. The exigencies of unrestricted competition in the day to day bid for power, the amorphous condition of parties, the dazzling uncertainties of leadership, created an atmosphere which permanently affected Canadian politics, and one in which John A. Macdonald flourished. It is plain that the study of such a period might be fruitful soil for partisan writing. But apart from the fact that mere partisan writing could not do Macdonald any essential harm, nothing could do more to clarify the perplexing ebb or flow of political alliance and intrigue at that time than focussing it round one of its central figures.

Incidentally nothing could do more to make interesting what is otherwise a waste of futile village pump politics.

Macdonald of course was a master plotter. Wm. Boulton's chief fault, he complained at this time, was impatience: "he destroyed one or two marvellously good plots of ours by premature disclosure:" while John Ross writing to Macdonald later says, "The contact with His Excellency (Sir E. Head) will do you good, as you have a great game to play before long." And these were pre-eminently the days of the plotter.

These were the years too of the superseding of Sir Allan McNab; of the Macdonald-Brown quarrel in the House; of the short administration of Brown; of the Double Shuffle; and of the Militia Bill of 1862: and yet Pope's correspondence shows exactly five letters on the period, none of them in the slightest degree illustrative of Macdonald or of his political activities.

The conspiracy of silence is even closer over the years in the tomb—1873-8. This we can understand in part. But Macdonald's political resilience did not take long to assert itself, and one would expect to see in a biography how he brought his reviving powers to bear on the political field, as he prepared for his last long tenure of power. But here as elsewhere the Victorians are affected by a modesty which is now hard to appreciate. Perhaps we have a less sensitive moral sense, but I think we have gained by developing a better historical sense.

Such are one or two of the most glaring gaps in the political side of Macdonald's lives. There are many others. There is the well known omission from Pope's *Memoirs* of any reference whatever to the dismissal of Letellier St. Just: there is the Farrer incident in 1890-1: the scandal of the C.P.R. is done much more faithfully than the building of that railway: there is Macdonald's threatened resignation over Galt's advance of £100,000 to the Commercial Bank: and there is the whole story of the political association of Brown and Macdonald. The list of individual cases could be lengthened, but the conclusion would be the same.

No biography of Macdonald has yet treated Macdonald the politician and statesman by the evolutionary method. We have to make what we can of a row of impressions and pictures, unevenly spaced, but they are never connected, and between the first and the last there is only the continuity supplied by Macdonald himself. The whole often reads like a sort of censored film.

This discrepancy might not be so marked if the biographers were conspicuously successful in their study of the intellectual processes and development of Macdonald. But here too they are tantalizingly incomplete. We are told, for example, that John A. read omnivorously. This may mean anything or nothing, and so far as these books go it more nearly means nothing than anything. If his reading was even moderately catholic, Macdonald must have come across at least the fringe of radical or progressive thinking that was then broadening out in England. We should suppose that echoes of rationalism: feminism: social reform: socialism: J. S. Mill, Herbert Spencer, Ruskin, Karl Marx; even the Fabians might have touched him. But "John A." is not reported to have dwelt for one moment in any reflective way on them or their parallels in Canada. It may be that he did not: the effect of reading on a mind politically proof against theoretical bombardment can be easily exaggerated. On the other hand it may be the sins of the biographers that have been visited upon us.

In speeches to "the people" he frequently touched, of necessity, on their affairs: he looked forward to the day when capitalists would be linked together in associations, and workingmen bound together in trades unions, and they would fight the battle together. But we are no more aware of the existence or importance of economic and social considerations in the mind of John A. than we are in his politics. There appears to be a complete separation either in the minds of biographers or of Macdonald between politics and political society: politics was a game having an indefinite number of players, who were unequal in status, in no way subordinate to one another, and freely associated as long as they promised to be of use one to another. But that it was a socio-economic-activity, more complex than any other because the meeting place of them all, does not appear.

We are equally in the dark about the development of Macdonald's constitutional history—though it is only here that he ventures at all into what might be called philosophical generalization. Such obiter dicta as, "Parliament is a grand inquest with the right to inquire into anything and everything"; and "we should concentrate the power in the Federal Government," suggest not only conviction but conviction based on experience, and full of purpose. So too is such a statement as "The contrary is democratic doctrine and must be repudiated by all Conservatives."

Yet Macdonald's political and other intelligence seem clearly to have been of a very high order. It impressed even Disraeli. We are therefore left with an important historical question unanswered. Was Canadian politics a stage, and were the Prime Minister, Cabinet and Members merely players? Did the real forces, forces which have written their testimony all over our commercial and industrial life so indelibly—did they proceed cynically oblivious to the votes of Parliament, and happily receptive of its grants in aid. If so we shall have to readjust every general picture of Macdonald yet made: and if so, too, we shall have to offer a different view of Canadian history to those we teach.

The present singular divorce between politics and economic reality is an excellent parallel to the same divorce in the life written of Macdonald. Is it false to suggest that the biographer has in this case caught the unpalatable truth? These questions could easily lead us very far afield. But they do arise, for they all hinge directly on the portraiture of Macdonald. If he was a real power in the Dominion, his reading, thinking, intellectual quality and equipment generally, are of first rate importance in any properly so called life of the man.

The portrait *intime* of "John A." the beloved, "the Old Man," "Old Tomorrow," "the sprightly, incomparable Mac" could we say? as might be expected is the most solid achievement of these volumes. But even so it is a composite picture rather than a single exposure in any one work.

Readers of the stars, Pope tells us, will be interested to know that Sir John was born at 4.15—*a.m.* or *p.m.* does not appear. As a boy he seems to have fought a great deal, had a somewhat pathetic time of it ("I had no boyhood" he said himself), and learned his lessons as only a self-making boy can do. There is never any doubt about Macdonald being what is called a human person. He gambled, or could do so with great success, winning \$2,000 at one session of loo—after which he gave up playing for money—and 20 guineas (from Galt) on Gladiateur the Derby winner in 1865. His face was "forcible, yet changeful." As he

grew up in politics he came to exercise a magnetism that astounded those who remembered him. Joseph Howe spoke of the fear that the Maritimes had of him—where he was regarded as a kind of "wizard." He was able to discuss the classics with Disraeli, though Dizzy is said to have had only a Shakespearian acquaintance with the classics; he could use the deaf and dumb language—as also could his second wife: in England in December he had the sense to wear a thick flannel shirt under his night shirt, and at the age of 75 he was 5ft. 11ins. high and weighed 180 pounds.

But we have no substantial study of the more emotional and sentimental side to Macdonald. His attachment to the British Empire and its institutions are well known and as conspicuous in his life and speeches as is the absence of any attempt to define exactly what he meant by them. It is interesting in this connection to remember that he once passed a minute of Council "directing that in all official publications the English practice [in spelling] should be uniformly followed."

Pope, like Biggar, speaks of his belief in the truths of Christianity, though it does not need as proof the further remark that whenever Macdonald spoke of his plans for the future in his letters, he invariably qualified his statement by the letters "D.V."

It is difficult to be sure about Macdonald's financial circumstances. Biggar speaks of his making money and investing shrewdly in land in the early days—which, incidentally, may have given point to his desire to have Kingston made the capital, and in 1866 he was reputed in one biographical notice to be very well off. Pope tells us of his penniless condition in 1869 and the purse got for him in the 70's—\$67,500—and Macdonald in office in 1883 speaks of getting £12,000 a year salary. But here again any inquisitiveness we may suffer from, cannot be allayed from reading these books.

Next to his love of power nothing is more commonly remembered about Macdonald than his weakness at various times for drink. On the other hand, much more remarkable than this ordinary failing was his power of resistance against it and in these books we are relieved and warmed by the generally tolerant allusions to this side of John Macdonald's character. But here again a more modern and less mock-modest handling of the subject, with a rational account of his fight for sobriety, the stipulations laid down by his second wife, and his characteristic and humorous depreciation of the fault in himself, would be interesting. It would not detract in the least from the greatness of the man concerned.

But the most interesting aspect of John Macdonald's personal make-up that comes out of these books is its apparent freedom from what nowadays are called complexes. He thought, felt, and lived simply, and if this impression of simplicity is correct, it goes far towards elucidating the quality of Macdonald as a man of politics and affairs of state. It explains for example the absence of intellectual speculation, philosophical and otherwise, and would give a natural appearance to the astonishing capacity he had for letting his opinion crystallize almost literally through the passage of time alone. Efforts have been made both by his biographers and others to grapple with the nice problem of when and how Macdonald reached the profound conclusions underlying the National Policy. I cannot feel they have been convincing: but it would be easier for me to believe that he never considered it as a theoretical policy at all. It rolled

up on the political horizon, and when it grew black and portentous enough John A. adapted himself to it—and did it with his customary success. The same thing seems to apply to his unsophisticated change from supporting an elected legislative council to a nominative one, and other political developments of the same sort.

Pope and others speak repeatedly of Macdonald's reluctance to revive the past. He never showed much enthusiasm for the Letellier St. Just matter, and referred to it very rarely. After his resignation following the C.P.R. scandal—probably the most agonizing period in his career—his biographer tells us he dismissed the whole painful matter with "Well that's got along with," and shed it with the changing of his coat preparatory to a quiet evening at home. And though Pope says no one will ever know what John A. suffered at the hands of George Brown, the relations of the two men as recorded show that it was Macdonald who stood the strain of the association and the complete severance that followed with the greater equanimity.

Closely allied with this proclivity for living strictly in the present is one other characteristic that is brought out by these biographies to some extent, and by his letters even more. This was Macdonald's positive genius for thinking and acting in terms of the concrete individual. When a practical problem was under consideration, he at once reduced it to its personal terms: the Governors-General was to him not a type but the man then in office, Monck, or Head or Lisgar or Dufferin. Members of Parliament became not merely Conservative supporters, but "poor old Howe who has been making a fool of himself;" "Mackenzie who was very angry at himself for his simplicity in allowing himself to get caught": "Master Wilkins whom it will do no harm to play like a trout." His snap judgments were notoriously reliable, and he had as uncanny a knack of spotting the essentials in a man, as he had of stripping an argument to its primitive outlines. It is a very engaging power: it is particularly useful to a reader of history for it shoots continuous darts of light over the political scene, framing and characterizing unforgettably the faces it falls upon. It is also a tremendous key to the man John A. Macdonald: it helps to explain what the books do not—how he could have trod the stage here so long, and left so little of thought or language that is truly memorable.

Thus with regard to the heart and "pulse of the machine," our biographers seem to have given us something tangible and in its way complete. I am inclined to believe that is so. But the position is as unsatisfactory here as in other respects. The root limitation to all these books is that we simply have not enough authentic data to go on, on which to build our own interpretation of John Macdonald. We have not even enough data to be sure that what we have is dependable or useful.

John A. Macdonald was a Scot, and a dark haired Highlander at that: and many will remember Sir Walter Scott's apocalyptic description of the psychology of his countrymen: you pass with comparative ease the outworks, the inner works, and even the drawbridge of their personal life. But at the very centre defying all mankind—as he thinks—is the heart and soul of the Scot, which he gives or opens to no man.

Well, there is a way of scaling that citadel which even the Scotman cannot deprive us of: but it is by information, and in the case of Sir John Macdonald we have not got it; until we have we cannot be sure of anything.



But this paper has already stretched your ears upon the rack of verbosity long enough, so it will conclude with celerity.

To put the matter in a nutshell. We have in John A. Macdonald a figure, great perhaps, interesting and important certainly. His work which grew ever more and more extensive, sprang directly out of a growing Canada and touched it at every point; in industry, railway building, banking: in electoral machinery: in diplomacy, and international negotiation: in even subtler strata of national growth—the delicate ground of racial and religious tolerance, the reality and loftiness of an industrious affection for the soil and people of this country. In short in every way in which a man who loves the company of his fellow beings, who rules many and is ruled by some, John A. Macdonald impinges on the history of Canada.

We have in the biographies of this man with deadly uniformity a plain political statement precluded by genealogical plunges into Scotland, and concluded with panegyrics, funeral obsequies, and discreet touches of personal reminiscence.

In modern terms we have no real biography of Macdonald, no Beveridge or Woodward, no Monypenny and Buckle, no Lytton Strachey. All we have are a few examples of arid Victorianism, at their best sincere and earnest, but even so pompous and unintelligent, quite devoid of the historical reality and thoroughness that we demand to-day. It is such tedious wastes as these that hamper the teaching and reading of Canadian history in any but an antiquarian sense. It is not hard to engage the attention of the gullible student: he is pathetically ready to find wheat in any pile of chaff. But the ordinary reader is repelled by the boredom of this 19th century biography, and consequently is still unconscious of what a profoundly stimulating study he has in the Scotch Canadian John A. Macdonald.

It is fashionable nowadays to quote Russia, one way or another, and so I quote this lame translation from a Russian poet, in summary:

We have been fed up with heavenly candies,

Give us plain black bread to live on.

We have been fed up with cardboard passions,

Give us a live wife to live with.