

SIR JOHN A. MACDONALD

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IT is nearly half a century since the death of Sir John A. Macdonald, the first premier of the Dominion. In the thick of every controversy of his day, and a partizan of partizans, he was always a white angel to the Tories and a black angel to the Grits. To-day he has passed into history, and has become a figure around whom legends cluster. But now that the heat of those old struggles has cooled, it is possible to look at the man and his career with relative lack of bias, and to make some judgment on him and on his place in Canadian life.

Macdonald was that singular anomaly, a Scot and a Tory. His father, who appears to have been somewhat of an amiable failure, may have handed on to the son, along with an ardent Highland temperament (and other Highland tastes), a Highland delight in men, a Highland joy of battle and a certain casualness towards property;—a casualness at the opposite pole from the frugality usually associated with people of Scottish blood. He never acquired wealth himself, and with the property of the nation, as with his own, he was perhaps inclined to be a bit casual. He was not interested in property, save as a medium in managing men.

In the course of nearly fifty years of public life, Macdonald was intimately associated with virtually every major event in Canadian politics. It was his part in the formation of the Liberal-Conservative party in 1854 that first established him in the public mind. Until his death in 1891, this party of his was his particular concern. He identified it so closely with the state itself that it is sometimes difficult to discern whether he made any distinction between Conservatives and Canadians. In building the Dominion of Canada he built the Conservative party, and in building the Conservative party he built the Dominion of Canada. Which one of these accomplishments would he have considered the greater?

Macdonald is usually regarded as the chief architect of Confederation. As long as it was academic, he had shown little friendship for the idea; but when it became a matter of practical politics, no one knew better than he how to realize it. In many respects Confederation may be considered the touchstone of

his career. Did he merely see in it the possibility of an escape from the political deadlock of the time, or was he fired with some vision of a colonial nation? It is hard to believe that he was nothing but a mere opportunist, and that his Celtic imagination was not stirred by the vistas of creation and nationhood down which other men were then looking. On the contrary: no man rejoiced more than he did at the prospect ahead. "We are all mere petty provincial politicians at present", he told the Governor-General of the time; "perhaps by and by some of us will rise to the level of national statesmen." One cannot escape the conviction that Macdonald gave his all to making the Canadian nation, a conviction reinforced by many other incidents in his career:—his strenuous resistance to the surrender of Canadian interests in the Treaty of Washington of 1870, the skilful way in which he brought in not only the Hudson's Bay Territories and the North-West but also British Columbia, his refusal to allow Canada to be drawn into the vortex of Imperialism, and his continuous stubborn fight for a genuine nation as opposed to the Canadian League of Nations with which the narrow sectional interests of the provinces and lesser men such as Sir Oliver Mowatt have succeeded in endowing this present generation.

In the list of Macdonald's accomplishments, most people would agree that the Canadian Pacific Railway ranks next to Confederation itself. Had it not been for his pertinacity, the railroad might never have been built. Without a railroad, the Dominion in its present extent could not have been kept together. But as with so many others, this great achievement of Macdonald's was spotted with the man's weaknesses, and the initial attempt to get the railway built, involving the Pacific scandal, came near to ending his career altogether. He was saved only by the indomitable partyism of the day, the resilience of the leader himself, and the induration of the Canadian conscience, then as now lenient to the genial foible which prevents clear distinction between *mine* and *thine*.

To speak of the other matters with which he was concerned would be to narrate the history of Canada within the period of his life. He set the first government of the Dominion in motion, his policies shaped the lines which the cabinet and the senate have both since followed, he created the province of Manitoba, he forged the "National Policy". To his lot it fell to wage the first battles in the long controversy over provincial rights, to deal with rebellion in the West and to keep French

Catholics and Ontario Orangemen from flying at each other's throats. The Prime Ministership in those days of violent prejudice was no sinecure. The political atmosphere of the Dominion then was much closer to the primitive vulgarity of present-day political life in certain of the provinces than to the comparative urbanity of modern Ottawa. Macdonald was no shrinking violet, his fibre was tough, but eventually the task wore him out. He lived to fight and win the election of 1891 and then, like Wolfe on the Plains of Abraham, to gasp as he passed away "Thank God, I die happy". He had given his life for his party. Or for his country? Who can answer?

Most of the published correspondence of Macdonald shows him on the pedestal on to which most Canadian public men are sooner or later hoisted by their biographers. His day-to-day letters, as contained in the great collection in the Public Archives at Ottawa, more successfully reveal the man.

Macdonald is always credited with having exercised discretion in his appointments to the bench. How he looked on it, and how he could gently turn aside an unwelcome candidate comes out in the following:—

(1)

Ottawa, 26 Dec., 1882.

"My dear Landry

I have your letter on the subject of a vacancy on the bench of your province. . . . It certainly never occurred to me that you would be an aspirant for the position. You are so important to the administration and to the party that I have looked forward to your career being a political one. . . . I cannot help thinking that it would be a great mistake for a young man like you, in the full vigor of health. . . . to shelve yourself on the bench. . . . Ten years hence, after a successful political career, will be time to set yourself aside and make yourself in effect a legal monk. . . .

When it was necessary he could be candid enough, even though he did not lay aside his suavity. He writes to a party leader in British Columbia—

(2)

"I do not quite understand from your letter whether you want the judgeship or not. I am from many reasons desirous of meeting your wishes, and if, like Sir John Falstaff, you would forswear sack and live cleanly, you would make a first rate judge. I believe that, like myself, your marriage has improved you and that your appointment would be acceptable. . . ."

He kept a constant close oversight on the doings of provincial governments, and never hesitated to give provincial

premiers tactful direction. Here is a letter containing a delightful ironical thrust, addressed to a former premier of what was then a pioneer province:—

(3)

Oct. 22, 1881.

“My dear Norquay:—

I was rather astonished on being informed that your legislature had ostracised my professional brethren from the other provinces, and that they must undergo an examination *de novo* in Manitoba.

I suppose this must be in consequence of the higher standards of education with you than in Toronto or Quebec. At all events it has excited the indignation of the profession and will continue to do so, and I fear that some hostile legislation. . . will be pressed upon the consideration of. . . Parliament. . . such for instance as a provision that no superior or county judges will be appointed from the bar of Manitoba. . . I am sure that your attorney-general will not sanction such illiberal legislation and will see to its repeal at an early day. . . .”

Sir John must have written hundreds of such letters. He kept copies of comparatively few, and yet those few fill various stout volumes. Many others, scattered over the Dominion, are probably still in existence in the possession of the descendants of his correspondents.

Not all were on public affairs; in fact the vast bulk of them seem to have been concerned with minor political matters, the appointment of some trifling official, a lesser repair in some political fence. Nothing of this sort apparently was too small for his attention. It is regrettable that a man whose business was to govern Canada should have found it necessary to waste so much of his time in the small change of politics. That may be a reflection on democracy, or it may be a reflection on Macdonald; it is hard to tell which.

He seems always to have found time for his purely personal letters. Here is a pleasant note to a friend in London:—

(4)

“I was delighted to receive your letter. . . and to know that you are now in a fair way to become all that I used to see you for so many years, strong and healthy. . . I never expected to see my old friend again. What an uncertain science, if it be a science, medicine is. Only think of two such men as Andrew Clark and Dr. Kidd being wrong about your case. As you have profitted about Sir William Jenner’s advice, I would by all means recommend you before returning to Canada to see him again, give him a full description of our climate, and get him to formulate a system of diet and treatment for you.

Don't come out before June, and bring with you a good supply of Burgundy and Claret... Bring some for me at cost price... (*There spoke the canny Scot*). I am greatly distressed with your second letter about the position of Lady Cartier and the two girls... It was our intention to erect a monument to Cartier (*Sir George Cartier*)... Your letter has changed my mind. I think the best monument we can erect to his memory is to see that his widow and children do not suffer from want...

"We have had the most factious opposition from Blake and his party, but we have routed them, horse, foot and artillery, and I hope that under your recent treatment you and I will, ten years hence, take a run across the continent *via* the Canadian Pacific to Vancouver."

He made that run in five years, not ten.

Those were rough and tumble days in politics. One of his henchmen writes frantically from the Eastern Townships of Quebec (1890):

(5)

"My dear Sir John:

Mercier is going to sweep the province. We have not one damm cent to run our organization upon... Without I learn something from somebody, I shall take out our men in the townships, except those few who can stand alone..."

(6)

Dec. 31, 1883.

"...As to your seat in Parliament, don't let that distress you in the least. The people when they elected you ran the risk of your health or business calling you away from your parliamentary duties... A man's duty when he accepts a seat in parliament is not to his constituents as a whole, but to the party that elected him... Unless they ask him to retire, he should remain. In the present uncertain state of politics in Quebec, the loss of your seat would be the greatest injury you could inflict on the party—and I think on the country..."

He was naively confident in himself; acknowledging private congratulations on his victory in 1878, he said that:—

(7)

"The Dominion has lost five years during the reign of Mr. Mackenzie, and it will take us hard work to recover the lost time..."

The National Policy and the C.P.R. were his methods of recovering it.

He never ceased to think in terms of the strengthening and enlargement of the political structure he had been so instrumental in erecting.....

(8)

“The Dominion cannot be considered complete without Newfoundland. It has the key of our front door,—and it may cause trade complications by pursuing a different policy on fisheries and such questions from Canada...”

That letter was written towards the close of his career. His successors had a chance to bring in Newfoundland, and failed.

But, about 1890, everywhere power was falling from the failing hands of old men. A generation of Bismarcks, Gladstones and Macdonalds was succeeded by a generation which began to descend the primrose path that we are still treading. Four years after his death French and English, so long kept in equipoise by Macdonald, were once more locked in bitter struggle. With all his failings, he had served his country well, and the English-speaking race in Canada has yet to produce a statesman who can measure up to his stature.