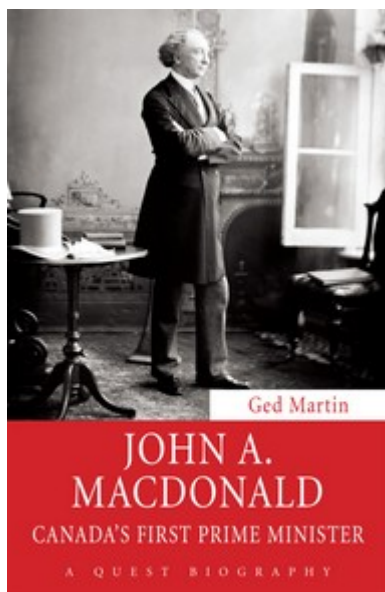


NEW BIOGRAPHY OF SIR JOHN A MACDONALD

BRITISH PROF TAKES COOL LOOK AT CANADA'S FIRST PRIME MINISTER



John A. Macdonald: Canada's First Prime Minister by Ged Martin, former Professor of Canadian Studies at Edinburgh University who now lives in Ireland

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What's new about this biography of Sir John A. Macdonald?

Two things -- it's a short book and it's the first biography of Sir John A. Macdonald written by somebody who's not a Canadian.

What's the advantage of a short biography?

All the great biographies of Sir John A. have run to two volumes.

As he was born in 1815 and died in 1891, they break his career into two sections at 1867, the year of Confederation when Macdonald became first prime minister of the new Dominion of Canada.

It's like Act 1 and Act 2 of a play.

A short, single-volume study stresses the continuity of themes in Macdonald's life.

1867 was a mighty turning point for Canada, but for Macdonald, politics ran on for some years in the same old deal-making, faction-squaring manner.

If anything, his personal turning point came early in 1864, when the dire state of his finances almost forced him to drop out of politics altogether.

Luckily, he stayed around and the Confederation issue came along.

One episode fundamentally affected the way John A. Macdonald looked at Canada and "did" politics.

That episode was the 1837 rebellions. It's hard to document, because Macdonald himself rarely mentioned his involvement -- and I find his silence revealing in itself.

He marched with the government militia force up Toronto's Yonge Street in December 1837 and took part in the brief battle against William Lyon Mackenzie's rebels.

Historians portray the whole business as a joke, but it must have been frightening at the time.

The young Macdonald seems to have been critical of his own political allies, the extreme Tories, for provoking the uprising.

We think of him an amoral wheeler-dealer politician who bought people off with shady deals.

And so he was.

But that was because he was a politician who knew that Canada was a complex and fragile society which could easily fall apart.

How has not being a Canadian affected the way your book looks at Sir John A. Macdonald?

Well, I certainly don't mean that I'm smarter or wiser than anybody else who's written about Sir John A!

I'm an Englishman, a graduate of Cambridge. I taught at a university in Scotland and I now live in Ireland -- so that adds up to a pretty broad outsider perspective.

Canadians generally approach Sir John A. as a great national hero.

Some even claim, "No Macdonald, no Canada."

My approach is more detached.

For instance, he came to Canada in 1820, when he was five years of age, because his father's business had failed in Glasgow, Scotland.

In the onward-and-upward approach to the Macdonald story, that seems the crucial first step towards becoming the leader and founder of a great Canadian nation.

But I prefer to stress the humiliation felt by his parents at being forced to leave their native land, almost like refugees.

What did this mean for John A? His father, Hugh, didn't do very well in Canada either -- he probably had a drink problem.

As the only surviving son, young John came under massive pressure to rescue the family honour and succeed in the new country.

From the age of 10, when his parents were living 40 kms from Kingston, he was sent to board in the town so he could attend an elite school.

"I had no boyhood", he said in later life.

There are some clues which suggest that his parents intended to send him back to Scotland to attend university -- but the money just wasn't there.

Helen Macdonald was a large and cheerful woman -- I'm sure she was a great mother.

But she drove her son, for instance enthusiastically backing his political career in days when women took a back seat in public life.

Helen died in 1862. But, almost 30 years later, Sir John A. Macdonald left instructions that he was to be buried in Kingston's Cataraqui Cemetery -- because she had made him promise to be laid to rest beside her.

So being an outsider means you can do a hatchet job on a great Canadian national hero?

Far from it

The more detached my approach to John A. Macdonald, the more remarkable his achievements appear.

Some Canadians will say: "why do we need a book about John A. Macdonald? He was just a drunk who ran the country in an alcoholic haze"

Macdonald certainly had a problem with alcohol, for a 20 year period, roughly from 1856 to 1876.

I wanted to find out more about an issue that many Canadians find either an embarrassment or a joke.

First, it's nonsense to portray him as permanently intoxicated.

John A. Macdonald was a binge drinker. Maybe 2 or 3 times a year he took refuge from the pressures upon him by going off on a bender.

The problem started to become acute around 1856. His first wife, Isabella, suffered from a mystery illness. His finances were in a mess. He was a key minister in the government of the province of Canada (Ontario + Quebec) in a time when there were hardly any civil servants, no computers or typewriters and so all business was transacted longhand, often by Macdonald himself. He was working too hard.

Occasionally, his binges came at dangerous moments. He was seriously drunk when the Fenians attacked Canada in 1866. They were Irish paramilitaries who thought they could somehow free Ireland by killing Canadian volunteers on the Niagara peninsula.

Macdonald was Minister in charge of the Militia -- in effect, Canada's defence chief. He was lucky to survive the scandal.

And let's give him the credit for beating the bottle.

Around 1876, after many embarrassing episodes, he finally got on top of his problem -- and could even drink a few glasses of wine at dinner parties without becoming blotto.

Your own health has given you some insight into Sir John A. Macdonald?

It sure has.

After several years of intermittent illness, I was diagnosed in 2010 with gallstones, and by that time I needed major surgery.

When I reviewed John A. Macdonald's health record, I realised the importance of a serious illness in 1870, which nearly killed him.

Newspapers even had his obituary set up in type with black borders ready to rush out the news of his death.

The crisis was either a kidney stone or (more likely) gallstones.

Newspapers often reported John A. Macdonald's "illnesses" with ironic inverted commas, but I believe the gallstones problem had hit him before.

He was seriously ill twice in 1864, during the vital negotiations at the start of the Confederation movement.

Yes, he was drinking heavily -- but the nation-building conferences at Charlottetown and Quebec included a lot of banquets, and I suspect it was rich food rather than strong drink that wrecked his health.

So -- some biographers look into their own souls to understand their subjects.

I got valuable clues from my gallbladder.

Sir John A. Macdonald holds the record for being Canada's oldest prime minister -- he died in office at the age of 76. That's quite an achievement?

For Sir John A. himself, yes.

But his triumphal grip on power was also a failure -- a systemic failure in Canada's politics, if not of the man himself.

He surely ought to have retired in 1886, when the completion of the transcontinental railway crowned his life's work.

He thought about getting out -- but there was no obvious successor to take the reins.

Sir John A. Macdonald had become so dominant that it was impossible to think of anybody else taking his place.

Hence the cry, "You" never die, John A!" It was touchingly loyal but politically naive.

Maybe because I'm retired myself, I see achieving retirement as a major career goal!

But there's still something very moving in the story of Sir John A. fighting for his life against a series of strokes in May and June of 1891?

Yes, indeed.

Canada held its breath as the Old Man slipped into a coma on his deathbed, and even his critics shared in the grief that Saturday night when the church bells tolled the news of his death across the Dominion that he had done so much to create.

But there's another, long-buried, side to the story of his last illness.

To shore up support in his own riding of Kingston, Macdonald had gifted the city a big public works project to dig out a new dry dock. (It's still there!)

The job went to a totally unknown contractor called Andrew C. Bancroft, who'd put in a suspiciously low tender.

Bancroft promptly went into partnership with a couple of shady developers who bankrolled Tory party funds.

The price of the dry dock steadily climbed, and the government nodded through the increases.

Then Opposition MPs got wind of a scandal. Bancroft didn't exist, he'd been invented to slip the contract to Macdonald supporters under the political radar.

The strokes that killed John A. Macdonald can be dated to probing questions and knowing remarks by Liberal MPs. He knew there was a scandal brewing, and that it would destroy him.

Remarkably, the Victorians buried the scandal with Macdonald -- they did not believe in speaking ill of the dead. I'm afraid I've dug it up again.

In your book, you make clear that Macdonald was primarily an Ontario politician, and that he hardly ever travelled or campaigned outside his home province. So why should anybody outside the Toronto-Ottawa-Kingston axis be interested in him?

Wherever he came from, and wherever you live, he was one of the key creators of modern Canada and he deserves to be remembered.

True, as late as 1878, he confessed he'd never set foot in New Brunswick, but he did travel the country.

Prince Edward Island, then an out-of-the-way place, played an important part in his life. It was at the Charlottetown conference in 1864 where he helped create the blueprint for Confederation.

He returned to the island in 1870 to convalesce after his illness.

On his last visit, in 1890, he jovially signed the visitors' book at the Province House describing himself as a "cabinet-maker".

15 year old Maud Montgomery, creator of Anne of Green Gables, met him then and thought him "not handsome but pleasant faced."

It's not widely known that Macdonald visited Calgary on his journey out west in 1886, predicting that it would become a great city. He promised to make a longer stop on his return journey, but there was a row about who should pay for the band that had serenaded him, and so he passed straight through without stopping.

When he left Vancouver Island on the evening ferry from Nanaimo in August 1886, there is a wonderful description of the official party watching the light reflected on Mount Baker after sunset.

It's a glimpse of BC that many of us have enjoyed -- and Canada's first prime minister shared it too.

He couldn't visit Vancouver in 1886. The city had only been founded a few months earlier, and most of it had just been burned down.

But did Macdonald's Canada include Quebec?

He was one of the first English-speaking politicians to insist that Quebeckers must be full and equal partners in the making of Canada.

True, he didn't much understand the faction fighting that went on inside the province -- very few outsiders did!

And, although he probably understood more French than he let on, he rarely if ever attempted to speak the language.

In fact, he spoke French only once in the House of Commons.

Shortly after his victory in the 1891 general election, he taunted Opposition leader Wilfrid Laurier: "J'y suis, j'y reste" -- here I am, here I stay.

6 weeks later, he was dead.

What was Sir John A. Macdonald like?

We have some great photos of him.

In an age where you had to sit and stare at the camera for a long exposure, most people look stern and pop-eyed.

But Macdonald had an actor's ability to hold a genial pose.

He was tall, around 180 cms (5 feet, 11 inches). Most people in those days were shorter than now.

But he used his height in an inclusive way, with a trick of bending forward in a gesture of welcome.

He was famed for his huge nose and wild black hair. His own sister called him "the ugliest man in Canada". A cheering supporter who had never set eyes on him before commented in 1886 that he was a "seedy looking old beggar".

He had a great memory for names and faces, and people who had only met him briefly years before felt hugely flattered when he remembered them.

And he had a Canadian accent. Docu-dramas often cast him speaking in a Scots accent but -- in Canada since the age of five -- he even ended his sentences like a Canadian.

Truly he was Sir John "Eh?" Macdonald.

Is it time to forget Canada's first prime minister?

Not at all.

From 2014 to 2017 Canadians will be marking the 150th anniversary of the movement for Confederation, his greatest achievement.

And in January 2015, it will be 200 years since his birth.

Now -- more than ever -- Canadians need to re-evaluate this complex and ruthless and fascinating man who did so much to create their country.