

The great John A. — a practical dreamer who built a nation

The July/August 1983 issue of *The Royal Bank Letter*, was devoted to an article on Canada's first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, who held office from 1867-1873 and from 1878-1891.

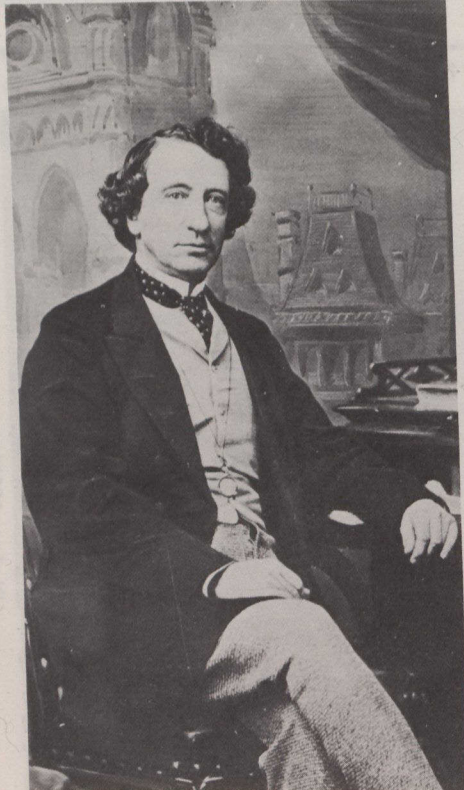
In public life for 42 years, he was, says the introduction, "a practical dreamer who battled the narrowness of his times to build a unique new nation. Then he held it together almost alone...."

Reprinted below is the first part of the article, to be followed in the next two issues by parts two and three.

A few years ago a government agency conducted a poll of primary school pupils to determine how much they knew about Canadian history. Asked who was Sir John A. Macdonald, 70 per cent replied that he was the man behind a well-known hamburger chain.

This response no doubt says much for the effectiveness of modern fast-food marketing. But it also shows how ill-informed Canadians are about their history, and how little recognition they give to the great figures of their past.

It is inconceivable that an equal proportion of American school children should think that Washington is merely the name of a city, or Lincoln a make of automobile. That is because their parents and teachers as a matter of



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course have equipped them with a reasonable knowledge of the historical figures who bore those names.

Nation-founder

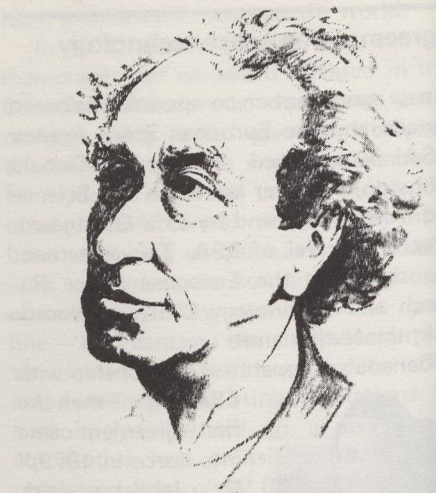
In Canadian terms, John Alexander Macdonald was George Washington and Abraham Lincoln rolled into one, and then some. Like the former, he was the principal founder of his nation; like the latter, he held the state together in times of stress and peril. He did more than either to build a nation from the rawest of materials. And yet the beneficiaries of his efforts today have only a cloudy notion of who he was and what he did.

At that, most of what we present-day Canadians know (or think we know) about Macdonald is apt to be misleading. He is remembered as an inveterate drunkard, a sly politician, a notorious procrastinator, and altogether a bit of a clown.

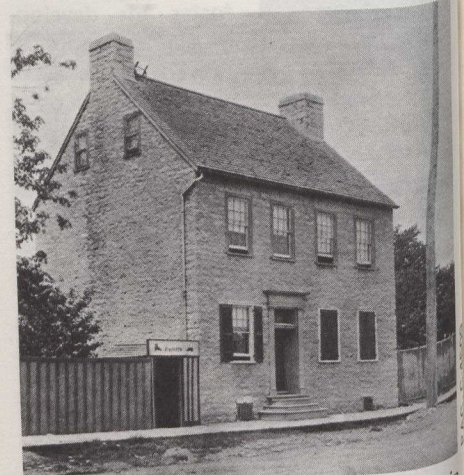
Yet here was a man who stood at the centre of Canadian affairs for 42 years, 29 of them as a head of government. He entered public life at a time when Canada was little more than a scattering of muddy towns and scrub farms with about one million residents. When his career ended on his deathbed, he headed a burgeoning industrial nation of five million occupying the second-largest land mass on earth.

His achievements as a nation-maker alone give ample cause to honour his name, but there is a further reason for Canadians to remember him with gratitude. For it was he, more than anyone else, who bequeathed us our political tradition of living with our differences and resolving the conflicts among us through peaceful conciliation and compromise.

His stature can only be measured by viewing it against the backdrop of his times. Born of Presbyterian parents in Scotland in 1815, he came to Upper Canada at the age of five. There were two separate Canadian colonies then, the



lower one predominantly French-speaking and Roman Catholic, the upper mainly populated by Protestant settlers who were viscerally anti-French and anti-



Sir John's home on Rideau Street in Kingston, Ontario where he lived during the 1837 rebellion.

Catholic. To accomplish all he did, he had to rise above the parochialism and prejudice of his group.

"Ugly John"

A business failure had driven Macdonald's father across the Atlantic to join his wife's kinfolk in Kingston. A lazy man with a weakness for drink, the elder Macdonald proceeded to fail in business twice more. Young "Ugly John", so called for his extraordinary nose, attended school as such for only five years, then became articled to a lawyer. Such was his legal ability that he had already formed his own practice when he was called to the bar in 1836.

By that time political unrest was reaching a boiling-point in both the Canadas as the relatively powerless elected representatives struggled against the pseudo-aristocratic ruling cliques that