

Sir John A. Master - Builder of Canada

**The dream of the Father of Confederation
was to shape one great and unified nation from
a handful of British colonies**

By Bruce Hutchison

John Alexander Macdonald, one of the most decisive figures in North American history, was a magnificent paradox. As widely known for his scandalous public conduct as for his political acumen, he emerges in history as the Canadian counterpart of his great contemporary, Abraham Lincoln. For it was Macdonald who welded Canada into a union.

Today, few of the problems of Canadian-U.S. relations are understandable without some knowledge of Macdonald's life and work. It was he who permanently bisected the continent and made a separate nation north of the United States. Yet it was, in a sense, the United States that made Macdonald. This roistering public actor and melancholy private person might never have achieved his dream of a Canadian nation but for the upheavals of the American Civil War. He might, in fact, never have become more than a small-town politician except for an incident of American intrusion at the very beginning of his career.

In 1838, Macdonald, then a gangling homely lawyer of 23 in Kingston, Ont., already addicted to liquor, undertook the defense of a small group of Americans who had crossed the St. Lawrence River and invaded Canada to rescue it, as they thought, from the tyranny of Queen Victoria. Though Macdonald's principal defendant was condemned to death, the young lawyer's courage in taking a case that could ruin his budding political career won him the admiration of Kingston's voters. Moreover, the abortive invasion brought him the sharp realization that Canada must be united to resist the pressures of her powerful neighbor.

The Canada of those days was a British colony that consisted of a few muddy towns along the St. Lawrence, some half-cleared farms and, beyond them, the wilderness. It embraced the modern provinces of Ontario and Quebec, united in 1841. On the Atlantic coast there were still the four separate colonies of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland, which quarreled among themselves and regarded Canada as a remote foreign country. And by 1844 the colonial legislature of Canada was already coming to a dangerous deadlock between British Protestants and French Catholics.

The apprentice Conservative politician whom Kingston sent to the legislature was born in Scotland in 1815. When he was five, his parents brought him to Canada; he spent only about five years in formal schools. His chief qualification for leadership was what he had learned about his fellowmen in books, in the Kingston courts, in too many barrooms. His gaudy clothes and genial raillery, his addiction to bawdy jokes, made him seem a buffoon. Many saw only the mane of black curls, the disarming grin, the jaunty figure announcing from the platform that Canada preferred Macdonald drunk to his chief enemy, George Brown, sober. But others saw in the stricken eyes and prematurely lined face the lonely husband who sat at night beside an invalid wife, the distraught father mourning his first son, dead from a fall at the age of 13 months.

Progress toward Macdonald's goal of a great and unified Canada was slow and tortuous. In middle age, he was still in the political opposi-