

# The Commercial

WINNIPEG, JUNE 15, 1891.

## THE LATE SIR JOHN A. MACDONALD.

On the evening of Saturday, the sixth day of June, 1891, Sir John A. Macdonald, Premier of Canada, died at his residence in Ottawa, after a brief sickness, which from its first attack seemed, in defiance of medical skill, to indicate a fatal result.

Seldom in the history of any country has the death of one man been of such ominous import to the people thereof, as is the death of the right honorable gentleman to the people of Canada at the present time, for his loss brings with it doubt and uncertainty about the future of Canada as a nation.

The biography of Sir John Alexander Macdonald will ere long be a story of almost every Canadian fireside, but at present we are most interested in the points therein, connected with the political history of the Dominion.

Born in Glasgow, Scotland, on the 11th of January, 1815, John A. Macdonald came with his father's family to Canada in the summer of 1822, and located in Kingston. There he received his education and training in law, and at the age of 21 entered business life as a member of the bar. In 1844 he was elected Member of Parliament for Kingston, and in 1847 he accepted the portfolio of Receiver General in the Draper administration, but was soon afterwards sent with his colleagues into opposition, there to remain for a number of years. This was evidently the period during which his views of Canadian politics concentrated and crystallized and during the balance of his life we find him equally opposed to extreme Toryism and equal-averse to the views of radical reformers. It is just possible that even at that early time he entertained his first hopes of a great Canadian Confederation, such as he has lived to rule over almost as an autocrat, and at the same time by the voice of the people. His separation from Sir Allan Macnab and his *ultra* Tory following in 1856, and a decade later his union of forces with George Brown, out of which union was born confederation as it now exists, all go to show that the union of the colonies of North America in one vast Dominion was at first possibly only the dream, but ere long the great hope of the statesman who has just passed away from amongst us.

When in 1867 Confederation became a fact, the honor of forming the first ministry, and with it the honor of knighthood were bestowed upon Macdonald, and from its birth until the day of his death, with only five years of exception he has held the position of Dominion Premier. His career in public life from that date to his death is too well known to require a record in these columns at present.

It is only now at his death that the great mass of the people of Canada begin to realize the importance of his existence and rule to the Dominion. In his early political life he was the careful nurse of every hope of Canadian unity, and in later life he has been the equally

careful nurse of that accomplished unity. Many have questioned the policy, or it may be said the changes of policy, by which the work of nursing has been carried on, but few will question his object in view, and none can deny the tenacity with which he has held to it. Since confederation he has endeavored to nurse a Canadian national sentiment, and the work has not been an easy one, with a people so practical, and with so little space in their character for anything that can be considered pure sentiment. Surrounded with anomalies, and assaying to hold together with something like national ties a number of discordant elements, and a collection of provinces with interests differing greatly in most instances, and in some diametrically opposite. Race prejudice, religious rancour, and the more substantial differences of conflicting trade interest had all to be met and dealt with, and it was simply impossible that in dealing with such, strict justice could always be abided by, and yet to avoid the injustice done at times and preserve Confederation seemed almost impossible. As Premier of the Dominion, surrounded by a number of greedy provinces, jealous of each other beyond measure, he was in much the same position as the Siberian traveller of our boyhood story, throwing to the wolves to keep them at bay. Sometimes throwing worthless allurements, and at others rich prizes as the situation demanded; and it is only natural to infer, that too often the strongest and most audacious wolf fared best, while the weaker or more timid ones had to suffer undeservedly.

Sir John, as we familiarly called him evidently depended much upon the support of that class who looked forward to the building up of a great nation of the north, and that this class is not more numerous at the present time may be due largely to the fact that the attainment of greatness could only be held out as a distant hope. Alluring though it might be, it was still only a hope, and at the present time, with some five millions of population sprinkled over half a continent, the hope may be to many not only distant but hazy and indefinite. But to Canadian unity coupled with loyalty to Great Britain he stood unflinchingly, and through whatever tortuous course the details of his policy might drag him he never for a moment forsook these two principles.

Among the details of his policy most severely criticized by his opponents are his trade and his financial policies. That the former was only a temporary arrangement Sir John admitted often during life, and that it produced an artificial state of affairs is evident from the patching and tinkering it requires each session of Parliament. His financial policy it is too soon to criticize. That it is a policy of inflation, which may entail heavy burdens upon posterity is beyond doubt, but time will tell whether or not this inflation is justifiable.

That Sir John A. Macdonald met with so much success in political life in later years, may be due less to the wisdom or justice of his policy than to a personal magnetism which he possessed, as great evidently as that said to have been possessed by the first Napoleon. Affable and unassuming in private life; destitute of personal cupidity or selfishness, and gifted

with a power of reading human nature, such as few even great men have possessed, he was just the man to be accepted as a leader by that numerous class who follow a person in preference to a principle. It is thus that his personal power became so great, and that with the voice of the people, he was almost as much an autocrat in the last decade of his life as the Czar of Russia, and his fellow ministers were more like students around an old instructor, than colleagues with him in a cabinet. He had nursed confederation from its birth, and in the closing years of his life he stood like the flag staff of Canadian Unity, from whose halyards the flag of Confederation floated.

It is now that Sir John is dead, that the danger of his personal rule becomes plain. The Dominion furnishes at present no successor, who possesses the elements of power within himself, and we must leave personal rule, and pass under a more purely representative one, and while affairs are thus adjusting themselves to the new circumstances, many a startling change may take place, and amid the possible changes there will undoubtedly be circumstances which will test and try the stability of the institutions nursed into life by the greatest of Canadian statesmen, who has just passed away.

Future generations will know but little of Sir John A. Macdonald beyond his connection with the history of Canada, but there are thousands of the present generation in whose hearts and memories he will live and find love if not reverence on account of his social qualities. A Tory in politics, he was socially a Democrat among Democrats. He had no social failings which could be considered crimes or even great faults, the worst of them were but weaknesses, and of these he had just sufficient to endear him to all who met him socially; for the common herd of mankind sympathize with, and would hide the weaknesses of great men, looking upon them merely as proofs that greatness is not exempt from the defects of human nature. The austere demi-god may force admiration and respect from human kind, but he can never command their affection. The rising generation will hear many a quaint story of the great Premier, and perceive through those tales some of the keen wit embodied in the character of the man, for wit and humor of the keenest kind and quaintest description he possessed in a high degree; and those who were most intimately associated with him in his every day life say, that often when the affairs of state brought the most care, and wore the most serious aspect, calling very naturally for staid solemnity on the part of him who manipulated them, Sir John's sense of humor was keenest, and his jokes most ludicrous. Even in Parliamentary debate the chance of cracking a joke he seldom let slip, and his humor thus applied added in no small degree to his power as a debater. While thus never allowing the gravity of business to silence his humor, he was equally careful never to allow the exuberance of his humor to mar his business. Summing him up it may be concluded that socially he will always be most powerful in the hearts of those who were intimate with him personally, while to those of the future who will never meet him, he will stand out in bold relief as one of the most stalwart, if not the most stalwart figure in Canadian history of the present century.