

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

The following is the conclusion of the article on Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first prime minister, which was published in the past two issues and reprinted from the July/August issue of *The Royal Bank Letter*.

One oft-cited instance of Macdonald's lack of principle was his tricky manoeuvre to overthrow George Brown in 1858 in what was known as the "double shuffle". But it must be said that if Macdonald had been more rigid in his principles, the continental nation of Canada might not now exist. It called for a great deal of political flexibility and adroitness to hold the union together. Macdonald was a man for his times.

But it was the dogmatic Brown who finally bent when the sectional and factional stresses became insupportable. He agreed to join Macdonald and Cartier in a coalition to seek a federation of the British North American colonies as the only alternative to the dissolution of the partnership between the present Ontario and Quebec. If this was a generous gesture on Brown's part, so too was it on Macdonald's. Brown was probably the only man he really hated, and the feeling was certainly mutual. Brown's Toronto newspaper, *The Globe*, never missed a chance to blacken Macdonald's character, running a "sick notice" every time he went on one of his notorious benders. Macdonald riposted that he knew the voters preferred him drunk to George Brown sober.

Drafted most of BNA Act

It is a fair assumption that Confederation

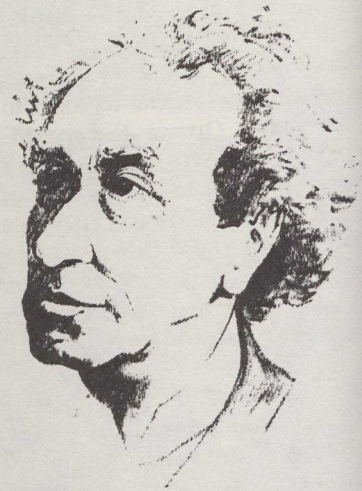
could never have come about without Macdonald's free-and-easy personality and his peculiar mixture of talents. Glass in hand, he charmed the Maritime leaders into feeling that they were joining in an association of good fellows. With his keen grasp of constitutional law, he personally drafted 50 of the 72 resolutions which were to form the backbone of the British North America Act.

Few Canadians today realize how close we came to never having a nation. Nova Scotia and New Brunswick bridled and hesitated throughout the negotiations, while Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland turned their backs entirely on the scheme. The ink was hardly dry on the BNA Act before Nova Scotia wanted to revert to its former status as a self-governing colony. Canada's security was placed in jeopardy by the bullying stance of the United States and the invasions by the Irish-American Fenian movement. When the Dominion took over the vast North West from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1870, it faced a ready-made insurrection led by Louis Riel.

As Canada's first prime minister, Macdonald grimly and almost single-handedly held the nation together. But he refused to go on the defensive; everything in his experience told him that it would be folly to stand still. Instead his government took the bold step of



The Fathers of Confederation meet in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island in 1864. As a result of these discussions, the four provinces of Upper and Lower Canada, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia became a nation in 1867 with Macdonald as first prime minister.



promising to build a railway to British Columbia as a condition of that colony's joining Confederation.

Thrown out of office

It was also very nearly Macdonald's undoing. He was caught red-handed appealing for campaign funds in the 1872 election from the man who stood to gain most from the railway franchise. For that he was thrown out of office, but his bitterest enemy could not dispute what he said in his own defence against charges of corruption: "...There does not exist in Canada a man who has given more of his heart, more of his wealth, more of his intellect and power, such as they may be, for the good of this Dominion of Canada."

It was true. His absences on political duty had precipitated the bankruptcy of his law firm, leaving him with enormous debts. He had tried to resign from office several times, only to be talked into staying on for the good of the country. He had continued to serve despite the trials and sorrows of his home life; the only child of his second marriage, Mary, suffered from a congenital defect and was permanently confined to a wheelchair.

Railway brings him back

He might have faded from the scene then if the new government had not challenged his vision of nationhood. It clearly had no intention of completing the railway on schedule, and British Columbia was threatening to secede. Aroused, the old warrior drew on his deep reserves of will to — as he saw it — save Confederation. He took his message directly to the people in town meetings and picnics. Within five years he was back in office; determined that, against all obstacles, an all-Canadian railway would be built to the West Coast.

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