

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

"Canadians today owe more than they know to Macdonald. May his memory and spirit never die...."

Part two follows of the article on Sir John A. Macdonald published in last week's issue, which is reprinted from *The Royal Bank Letter*, July/August 1983.

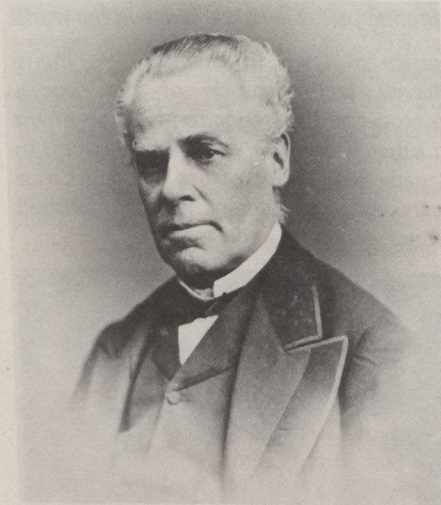
The administration in which Macdonald served was swept out of office in 1849. In the meantime his personal life had become a day-to-day tragedy. Struck down by an illness which has never been satisfactorily identified, his beloved Isabella was now a chronic invalid. She had given birth to a boy who, to his doting father's sorrow, died shortly after his first birthday. Isabella was usually bedridden, and was growing addicted to the opium she took to ease her constant pain. In his desolation, Macdonald's own addiction to alcohol grew worse.

The Conservative coalition to which he belonged was replaced by a group of Reformers who introduced legislation to compensate Lower Canadians for property losses sustained in the 1837-38 rebellion. This gave rise to virulent anti-French feelings, since it seemed to condone disloyalty to the Crown. When it was signed into law in April 1849, a furious band of Tory protesters rioted and burned down the Assembly buildings in Montreal.

The feeling of abandonment by the mother country resulting from the removal of colonial tariff advantages and the confirmation of the Rebellion Losses Act found its expression in a manifesto calling for Canada to join the United States. Macdonald reacted by throwing in his hand with the British American League. The league held a convention at

which it adopted a program of maintaining the British connection while levying tariffs to shelter the growth of domestic industries. These policies set the broad course which Macdonald was to follow later on.

Another proposal made at the league's convention seemed to him premature if not downright impractical. It called for a federal union of all the British North American colonies: the two Canadas, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, and Prince Edward Island. (The Hudson's Bay Company then governed

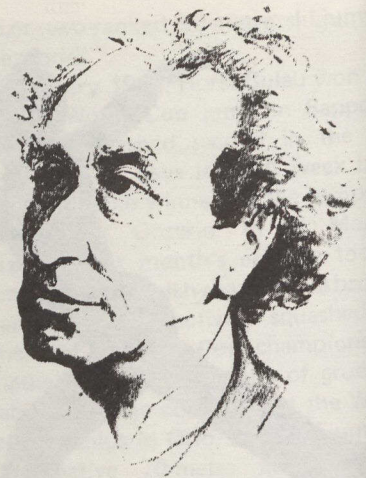


Georges Étienne Cartier

the North West and the future British Columbia on behalf on the Crown.)

In Macdonald's view there was more than enough to do to keep the Province of Canada from falling apart from its own internal tensions. While in opposition he led an informal campaign to find common ground among moderate English-Canadian Conservatives like himself and non-aligned moderate French-speaking members. This was in line with his belief that "no man in his senses can suppose that this country can for a century to come be governed by a totally unfrenchified government".

His image of Canada was the dead opposite of that of George Brown, his strongest adversary. Brown believed in British ascendancy over the "conquered" French. He advocated representation by population, which would have meant that the more numerous English would swamp



the French at the polls. To Macdonald, "rep. by pop." could only mean the bitter and perhaps violent break-up of the union.

Brown's anti-Catholic and anti-French policies formed the rallying-point for Macdonald's French-English alliance. He called his bicultural group the Liberal-Conservative Party, a seemingly ambiguous name which actually made sense because it was composed of moderates of both the left and right.

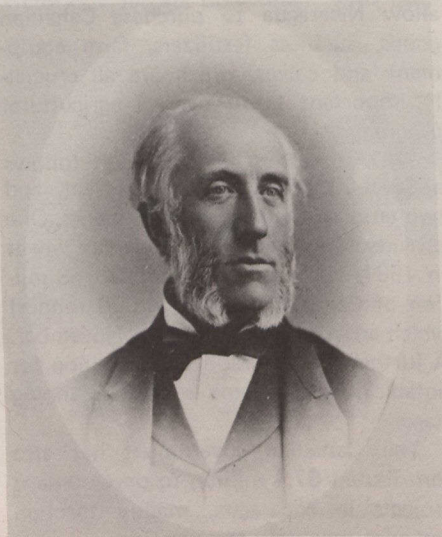
Cartier important ally

The most important ally he acquired in his genial and no doubt boozy canvassing of French-speaking support was a former Lower Canadian rebel named Georges Étienne Cartier. Macdonald and Cartier were to alternate as first minister and chief lieutenant over the next few years. The first Macdonald-Cartier administration was formed in 1857. Three months later the long agony of Isabella Macdonald ended, leaving her husband the widowed father of their second child.

Cartier was Macdonald's friend both politically and personally. "That such a friendship was possible," commented the historian W.L. Morton, "revealed how far Canada has travelled from the politics of ascendancy towards the concept of a dual culture in one political nationality."

The realization of this concept was partly made possible by the fact that the province had a parliamentary system. This perfectly suited Macdonald's genius for balancing off the interests of different political camps. He could, wrote Stephen Leacock, "control two factions at a time as easily as a circus rider goes round on two horses". According to Leacock, he did this "by having no principle — or rather being content with one — the allegiance of a contented people under the British Crown".

(To be continued)



George Brown, Macdonald's adversary.