

Sir John A. Macdonald, lawyer, businessman, first and third Prime Minister of Canada 1867-1873; 1878-1891, (1815-1891)



John A. Macdonald was born on either January 10th or 11th of 1815 in Glasgow, Scotland, and was brought by his parents Hugh Macdonald and Helen Shaw to Kingston, Upper Canada (now Ontario) in 1820 when he was five years old.

Macdonald spent his youth and school years in and around the Kingston area, where he took private school and enjoyed courses such as Latin, Greek, grammar, mathematics and geography. His father Hugh owned several businesses in the area, planting roots for the Macdonald family in Kingston in their new Canadian hometown. John A. Macdonald demonstrated an affinity for law in his early teenage years and began an articling apprenticeship at age 15 with one of Kingston's most prominent lawyers, and by 17, while still in school, he was managing a regional law office in nearby Napanee.

A gifted businessman in his own right, young John Macdonald opened his own law practice in Kingston at age 19—two years before even completing his education in law and being called to the Law Society of Upper Canada! In 1837, when Macdonald was 22, rebellions were taking place in both Upper and Lower Canada, with leaders such as William Lyon Mackenzie (Mackenzie King's grandfather) demanding a more democratic government for the British-North American colony. Mackenzie was a private in the militia and served in several raids, before gaining public notice in 1838 for defending in court some of the very rebel leaders he fought against.

Macdonald would continue to practice law his entire life, mainly in Kingston until 1874 and then in Toronto with a variety of partners. His firms specialized mainly in commercial and real estate law, where his most valued clients included wealthy businessmen and corporations representing a variety of interests. In this career he acquired significant wealth, numerous friends in high places, and valuable property in downtown Toronto and scattered throughout Ontario. It was in these dealings and networking that Macdonald began to gain an interest in politics.

In 1841 when Macdonald was 26, his father died, and grieving, he travelled to Britain in 1842 for a holiday. It was there that he met his cousin, Isabella Clark; she came to Kingston to visit him in 1842, and they were married a year later. Constantly ill and invalid her entire life, she died in 1857 after a mostly unhappy marriage with John Macdonald.

In 1843, the same year he married Isabella Clark, John A Macdonald ran for the position of Alderman (city councilor) in Kingston, winning the election, but suffering what he called his "first downfall" after his supporters accidentally dropped him onto the street after carrying him off in victory. A year later, local businessmen who supported Macdonald asked him to run as a Conservative candidate for the legislative assembly of the Dominion of Canada, which met in Montreal. He won the election by providing his supporting voters with large supplies of alcohol—a common practice at the time.

In 1847 year the Conservative government lost, and Macdonald remained in Opposition until 1854, at 39 years old, when he formed a cross-provincial political alliance known as the Liberal-Conservative Party to counter the more divisive visions for Canada that other parties promoted.

When this alliance overtook the previous government Macdonald took the prestigious post of Attorney General of Canada West (now Ontario). Two years later, at 41, Macdonald took over as co-premier of the Province of Canada (he was premier of Canada West). From 1854-1864 Macdonald's government faced increasing scrutiny over the perception that Canada East (Quebec) had too strong an influence on the Province of Canada's politics. George Brown of the Toronto Globe (now Globe and Mail) in particular pressured Macdonald for a new political coalition that would bring about constitutional change for the Canadian province, leading Macdonald to have the first serious discussions about Confederation.

Macdonald understood that a divided, federal-provincial style "federal" government was needed to accommodate the racial, religious, and linguistic differences that Canada faced, but he preferred to create a strong, unitary federal government in the proposed Canadian Confederation. In 1867 in Charlottetown with leaders from across the province, the Dominion of Canada was created on July 1st, 1867 with their signatures. On that same day, John A Macdonald was appointed Prime Minister of the Dominion of Canada by the new Governor General, and was knighted the same day.

Sir John A. Macdonald's first tenure as Prime Minister was from 1867-1873, and in this time he was an unquestionable "nation builder," negotiating for Manitoba, the North-West Territories (now Saskatchewan and Alberta) and Prince Edward Island to join into Confederation with Canadian Dominion. A transcolonial railway between Halifax and Quebec City was nearly completed, and Macdonald had plans for much more; a transcontinental railway that would connect the Canadian provinces to the Pacific coast, ensuring Canada could grow from Sea to Sea. The amount of public money he would need to command to build this dream were immense, and not without scandal.

In the lead up to the 1872 election Macdonald was in the thick of promoting his idea for a transcontinental railway, and was part of the negotiation for Canadian Pacific Railway to complete its construction. Sir Hugh Allen, who led CP Railway made massive donations to the campaigns of Macdonald and his colleagues, culminating in what was called the Pacific Scandal. In 1873 his government was forced to resign, and was defeated by Alexander Mackenzie's Liberal Party in the 1874 election.

Alexander Mackenzie's Liberals faced an economic downturn almost immediately after being elected, and their policies proved ineffective at improving things for Canadians. Macdonald remained Conservative opposition leader and after promising to promote a "Canada first" economic strategy, he was re-elected as Prime Minister in 1878, an office he would retain until his death.

Throughout his later years as Prime Minister Macdonald would implement a "National Policy" that protected Canadian manufacturing from being overtaken by the American industrial machine, and perhaps most importantly, he ensured the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885, at massive public cost and amid many scandals. That same year he ordered the execution of the Metis leader Louis Riel, an act that significantly damaged his reputation in Quebec.

Macdonald's legacy as a nation-builder is without doubt, his shrewdness as a politician is legendary. He was charming and personable, and wonderful company. Despite his heavy drinking — an inebriated Macdonald had to be carried from the House of Commons on more than one occasion — he was beloved by many. This included women, who appear to have found him extremely charming and would likely have appreciated his proposal that (unmarried) women be granted the vote.

Yet Macdonald was not without flaws. His political ruthlessness and his involvement in the Pacific Scandal and the execution of Louis Riel have long been debated. More recently, his Aboriginal policies such as residential schools and legislation concerning Chinese immigrants and their treatment in the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railroad have come under fire.