
CHAPTER XXVI

SIR JOHN ALEXANDER MACDONALD

*Out-worn without assoil,
From a great life's lengthened toil,
Laurelled with half a century's fame;—
From the care and adulation
To the heart-throb of the nation
He hath passed to be a memory and a name.*

*Him of the wider vision,
Who had one hope, Elysian,
To mould a mighty Empire toward the West;
Who through the hostile years,
'Mid the wrangling words, like spears,
Still bore this Titan vision in his breast.*

“The Dead Leader.”

IN treating of Canadian political life of the period before and during the quarter-century following Confederation, one figure stands out pre-eminently as the dominating personality—namely, that of the great Scottish-born statesman, the Right Hon. Sir John Alexander Macdonald. Though many distinguished and remarkable leaders throng the period, among them all with common consent, irrespective of party or other

considerations, he stands out and makes the time particularly his own. So much is this so, that, as in the case of Lincoln, the great American, the history of the forty or fifty years of Canadian struggle and development of the last half of the nineteenth century might reasonably be called "The History of Sir John A. Macdonald and his Times." Few men in the annals of the Empire have so dominated a whole period, and made it so much their own, as is represented in the career of this remarkable man.

The only other parallel cases are those of Disraeli and Gladstone in Britain. But even in those cases each had a rival in the other, whereas Macdonald had none to challenge his long political sway over the hearts, minds, and imaginations of a whole people. It is not denied that he had many contemporaries, such as Howe, Mackenzie, Brown, Blake, and Tupper, who might have challenged his supremacy in some respects, and others who were his superiors as orators, jurists, and scholars; but in some subtle way, by the very genius of an innate personality, he stood out and was acknowledged as the great political leader, who was so strong in the people's hearts and so held their imaginations that they allowed him to accomplish much, and forgave him more than they have ever any other public man before or since. It would be absurd to say that Macdonald had no faults. Indeed, he was a man, like Burns, all compounded of faults. But, as in Burns's case, they were the large, human faults of genius. So

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that even in his weaknesses he was brought nearer to the sympathy of his fellow-men. But this was not all. Men of the highest ideals and the straightest, narrowest life respected and honoured John Alexander Macdonald, because they felt that at core he was a man with the instincts of a true man and a gentleman, who respected and realised the best ideals of the British heredity and the British community. They felt that he was, in spite of all, a true British statesman and a loyal servant of the Crown and the Empire. Then, he had in himself by birth and environment, and he appreciated it in others, that innate refinement and love of culture which dominated his life and helped him in influencing the community of his day.

He never claimed the power of an orator with the wizard locks and the flashing eye, who welded Jove's lightnings into his words. On the other hand, he generally spoke quietly and simply what he had to say. But when he had need to say anything important, there was a strange power of persuasion in his words and personality that carried weight where often his more rhetorical lieutenants and opponents failed. It was said of him that he picked other men's brains. This in a sense might be true. There is no doubt he knew how to gather about him able followers, and that he organised and developed their gifts for the common good. But this is a sign of the highest genius in a leader or ruler ; and few men had this gift more finely developed than Macdonald. To write at length of him is a work of supereroga-

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tion ; his whole distinguished career is so well known. But, in short, he was the greatest political leader that Canada has ever known, and one of the few great political personalities in the history of the Empire. He will live for ever in Canadian history as the supreme father of Confederation. Without being a student in any particular line of thought, he was a man of general reading and culture, and never appeared at a loss for a word or a phrase. He had a wide fund of anecdotes, and possessed the remarkable power of keeping silent until the moment for necessary speech arose. He was greatly admired in Britain, where he was considered to resemble Lord Beaconsfield. The real lasting greatness of Sir John A. Macdonald will be found to have its base in the fact that he was a great Imperialist and Empire-builder. In all of his work he never seemed to lose sight of this idea. His was a commanding, complete, and well-balanced greatness, which combined many subtly blended gifts of insight, resource, and tact with a commensurate knowledge of character. But two even greater qualities made the man what he was. These were a supreme intellectuality which, without intruding itself, permeated and controlled his life ; and the other was a great human sympathy which only one other Canadian, Joseph Howe, possessed in so great a degree.

Macdonald's Scottish origin is significant. Like many another noted Canadian, he hailed from the far north Highlands. His early friend, Oliver Mowat, came of Caithness stock. Macdonald's

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immediate ancestors came from Sutherlandshire. To my mind, there is no more beautiful part of the world than this historical old Scottish shire, which stretches across Scotland in the far north, from Assint to the Dornoch Firth.

In the east of this shire lies the quaint old town or Royal Burgh of Dornoch, with its ruined Bishop's Palace and ancient cathedral. Near here lies Skibo Castle, another ancient place, now the old-world home of that famous Scotsman, Andrew Carnegie. North of Dornoch is Dunrobin Castle, the chief seat in the north of the Duke of Sutherland; and south of Golspie, the station at Dunrobin, is a grim old glen or valley stretching down the hills to the sea called Rogart. Here, in the old days of the eighteenth century, was the first home in the north of this particular family of Macdonalds, who had moved north from Western Ross and the Isles, the great home of the Macdonald clan. Sir John had his book-plate in all his books, with the Macdonald arms and crest, the cross crosslet, and the galley, and the famous motto, "Per mare per terras." But it is not known from what special branch of the clan his people descended. Sutherland, with Strathnaver, was the great country of the Mackays, who were, with the Sutherlands, the Macleods of Assint on the west and the Sinclairs on the north-east, the prevailing people. But into this great region of the clans of the cat and the muzzled bears several septs of western clans and southern families intruded. During the Breadalbane in-

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vasion of Caithness came some Campbells and Macdonalds. There was in this Reay country during the eighteenth century a famous Presbyterian divine, the Rev. Murdoch Macdonald, called the Apostle of the North, from whom some Macdonalds of Pictou, Nova Scotia, are descended.

It must have been of this stock that Sir John's forbears in the Mackay and Sutherland county came or to which it had affiliation. In the thirty-sixth year of the eighteenth century John Macdonald, grandfather of the great Canadian Premier, was born. He was reared at Rogart, and early in his youth he was put to a business in the neighbouring town of Dornoch. He rose by prudence and patience to a high place in the town, ultimately becoming its Provost. He was married in 1778 to Miss Jean Macdonald, of Rogart, who was, no doubt, his own cousin. He had a large family, and died in 1822. His second son, Hugh Macdonald, was born in Rogart in 1782. He removed to Glasgow, and acquired a more extensive business. He married Helen Shaw, daughter of James Shaw and his wife, Margaret Grant.

They had five children, three sons and two daughters, all born in Glasgow; and one of them was the future Canadian Prime Minister. In 1820 Mr. Hugh Macdonald, finding his business affairs unsatisfactory, emigrated to Canada and settled in Kingston. John Alexander, the second son, was born on January 11, 1815, and was five years old when he arrived in Canada. Though his father was in a material sense a failure, the son was

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early equipped for his future life. Hugh Macdonald tried several places of residence, living for some years on the shores of the picturesque Bay of Quinte, in the county of Prince Edward, near Belleville. The biography of his distinguished son is well known to all; his life as a student at Kingston, his legal studies, local practice, and subsequent political career are all recorded.

This short account of his connection with the north of Scotland is all that is necessary for the purpose of this volume. Sir John Alexander Macdonald, like his great kinsman Sir William Alexander, was one of the few most remarkable and outstanding personalities of a breed of men unusually great in the history of Scotland and the world. In his passing we know that—

A mighty heart is still,
And a great unconquered will
Has passed to meet the Conqueror all must meet.