

John A. Macdonald and Thomas D'Arcy McGee

Review Number:

1107

Publish date:

Wednesday, 1 June, 2011

Author:

Ged Martin

ISBN:

9780919770140

Date of Publication:

1970

Price:

£30.00

Pages:

214pp.

Publisher:

Kingston Historical Society

Place of Publication:

Kingston, Ontario

Reviewer:

Andrew Smith

Both of these books are about an important figure in 19th-century Canadian political history. Few books on purely Canadian topics are reviewed for this website. However, both of these men will be of interest to historians outside of Canada. They were born in the British Isles and had political careers that transcended the boundaries of the present-day Canadian nation-state. It is therefore appropriate that these works should feature here.

Ged Martin is well qualified to undertake a revisionist study of Sir John A. Macdonald, the first Prime Minister of the Canadian federation. Martin, who recently retired as director of the Centre for Canadian Studies at the University of Edinburgh, has had a long career publishing on imperial and Commonwealth history. Martin has written on Canadian Confederation, an event in which Macdonald was an important player, as well as on the histories of Australian, New Zealand, South Africa, and Ireland.

Ged Martin's study of John A. Macdonald follows his life from his birth in Scotland in 1815 to his emigration with his parents to Canada, his days as a rising lawyer, his political ambitions, and his role in the federation of the British North American colonies in the 1860s. The book goes on to discuss Macdonald's subsequent long career as the Prime Minister of the federation he had helped to create. As such, this book covers most of the same material as the existing biographies of Macdonald. Donald Creighton's two-volume life of Macdonald, which was published in the 1950s remains the standard reference work for Canadian historians of this period. Martin's new book will not change this, for although a few passages in it read much like a standard biography, it differs in that its focus is on Macdonald's relationship with one community, namely, Kingston, the small garrison town in Ontario that Macdonald represented in the Canadian parliament for many years.

In the 20th century, Macdonald became an important part of the social memory created by Kingston's thriving heritage industry. Today, residents of the city take tremendous pride in the fact that Canada's first Prime Minister was linked to their city. In addition to visiting Macdonald's restored home and his grave, tourists can take walking tours structured around Macdonald's life. Visitors to Kingston's other tourist attractions, such as Queen's University or the massive fortress built by the British in the 19th century, are also proudly informed of Macdonald's connections to these institutions, however tenuous they may be. Typically, the Macdonald walking tours end with a visit to a pub. It is common knowledge among Canadians that the country's first Prime Minister was a terrible drunk. It has been said that 'Canada, like many a child, was conceived under the influence of alcohol'. This statement normally elicits a laugh from Canadians because it alludes to Macdonald's drinking habit, which was very much in evidence at the conferences that drafted the Canadian constitution. Indeed, Macdonald many failings as a human being may be one of the reasons why Canadians do not venerate their 'Founding Fathers' in the same way that Americans do the creators of their national constitution. On the other hand, many Canadians take a sort of pride in Macdonald's legendary capacity to consume liquor, which is perhaps why more than one licensed establishment in Kingston claims to have been the favourite bar of Macdonald. In the 1990s, the author of the present review was told by a waitress at a quite modern-looking tapas bar in Kingston that it had been Macdonald's favourite haunt.

In short, Kingston's heritage industry trades on the belief that Macdonald's relationship with Kingston was extremely close. The prevailing view is that Macdonald was devoted to Kingston's interests and that Kingstonians loyally supported Macdonald during this lifetime. Martin's book dissects this folk memory by showing that Macdonald gradually lost interest in Kingston as his national and international importance grew. Moreover, his loss of interest was reciprocated by Kingstonians, who eventually elected someone else as their local MP: Macdonald's loss of his seat in Kingston forced him to stand in a safe Conservative seat in a distant part of the country. Prime Minister Macdonald did relatively little to arrest the relative economic decline of Kingston, which had begun in the 1840s.

Martin's book is local history at its finest. On one level, it unfair to call this study 'local history' since that term sometimes evokes images of antiquarians arguing about insignificant details. Martin's book is essentially the study of the relationship between Macdonald, the creation of the Canadian nation state, and a particular locality. Martin's book should interest historians seeking to place Canada within the North Atlantic world. The reader learns something here about Canada's relationships with the United States, Britain, Ireland, and even the Vatican here. For instance, Martin tells us how Macdonald used his contacts in Britain to prevent the promotion of a hostile cleric within the local Catholic hierarchy. In this case, the Duke of Norfolk, a leading English Catholic, relayed a message to Rome stating that another cleric would be a more suitable man for the job. (p. 123). Martin also presents us with new information about the role of the Orange Order in 19th-century Canadian politics. Historians have long known that the Order, which was strongly committed to the monarchy and 'No Popery', was a major force in Canadian life, but Martin's case study of Kingston has helped to deepen our understanding of how it influenced politics and the constituency level. A Canadian author might well have ignored or minimized these international connections, but Martin has an outsider's perspective on Macdonald. Martin recognises that Macdonald played a moderately important role in the evolution of the British Empire in the 19th century, particularly in the years surrounding the British

decision to demilitarise the Canadian frontier. Martin neither exaggerates nor minimises the man's importance in the imperial history.

The sections of the book devoted to Macdonald's career as a businessman are particularly important. Martin's research on Macdonald's involvement in the Kingston-based Commercial Bank and the Trust and Loan Company of Upper Canada will interest many economic and business historians. The Commercial Bank failed in October 1867, just a few months after Macdonald's appointment as the Prime Minister of the infant Canadian federation. This bank failed, in part, because Macdonald's government had refused to provide it with the financial lifeline it needed to deal with a liquidity crisis to which he had contributed. Macdonald, who was a notorious spendthrift, had been unable to repay the loans the bank had earlier issued to him. Macdonald probably would have favoured government aid, but the members of his Cabinet who hailed from the financial centres of Toronto and Montreal were powerful enough to thwart this idea and Kingston's sole independent financial institution was allowed to fail.

The case of the Commercial Bank raises the interesting question of what Kingston got from being represented in parliament for so many years by the Prime Minister. It would seem that the city derived very few actual benefits. Kingston, which had once been the largest city in Upper Canada/Ontario experienced a prolonged period of relative economic decline that coincided pretty much with Macdonald's political career. By the early 20th century, Kingston had become an economic afterthought halfway between the great economic centres of Toronto and Montreal. Today, Kingston is dependent on public-sector spending and tourism. Given the geography of its hinterland, Kingston probably would have experienced relative economic decline regardless of who was the Prime Minister. What is striking, however, is that Macdonald did so little to try to help the city's economy aside from a few high visibility projects, such as the controversial dry dock built at the end of his career.

Martin argues that Macdonald's death in 1891 was hastened by stress caused by the knowledge that a corruption scandal was about to become public. The scandal centred on 'Andrew C. Bancroft', a non-existent person who had been awarded a contract to build a dry dock in Kingston by the federal government's Department of Public Works, which was then headed by the notoriously corrupt Hector-Louis Langevin.

This reviewer discovered a small problem with this book. Martin does not really explore how Macdonald's connection with Kingston was influenced by the environmental history of the surrounding region. Environmental history is probably the fastest growing sub-discipline in Canadian history departments and Canadian environmental historians have produced many studies focused on the environmental histories of particular localities.⁽¹⁾ It is perhaps unfortunate that Martin did not apply some of the conceptual tools developed by the environmental historians to his study of Macdonald.

Let us turn to the second volume to be reviewed in this piece. From 1863 to 1867, Thomas D'Arcy McGee served alongside John A. Macdonald in the Canadian cabinet. McGee's assassination in 1868 is well-known to Canadians because it was one of the few political murders in the country's history. The execution of McGee's assassin, Patrick J. Whelan, which was one of the last public hangings in Canada, attracted a vast crowd of spectators. The memory of the assassination has lived on in Canada's folk memory and even today, there are non-academics who passionately contend that Whelan was innocent and was convicted solely because of his association with Irish Republicanism. The Fenian brotherhood in the 1860s hated McGee for some of the same reasons he is popular with Canadians: a republican revolutionary in his native Ireland in the 1840s, McGee became a monarchist and an exponent of peaceful and gradual change after his relocation to Canada. McGee therefore fits one of the master narratives of Canadian history, namely, that Canada is a peaceful and evolutionary society rather than a violent and revolutionary one. McGee also repeatedly declared that minorities, including Roman Catholics, were better treated in Canada than in the United States, statements which anticipated the ideology of official multiculturalism that Canada developed in the last third of the 20th century. One scholar has even claimed that McGee was an early prophet of the Canadian welfare-state.⁽²⁾ Generally speaking, Canadians have seen McGee as a man who was ahead of his time. It is an indicator of McGee's continuing relevance to Canadians that when a former Canadian Prime Minister, Brian

Mulroney, gave the eulogy at Ronald Reagan's funeral in 2004, he compared the deceased American President to 'Thomas D'Arcy McGee' and read some of McGee's poetry. Mulroney's attempt to honour Reagan in this way doubtless briefly mystified his American audience, who would not have understood the reference, but it also illustrates that the memory of McGee has endured in the Canadian consciousness.⁽³⁾

Wilson's book is the first instalment of a two-volume biography of Thomas D'Arcy McGee. The second volume, which is expected soon, will likely sell well in Canada as the first volume has done. Wilson teaches at the University of Toronto and is an accomplished historian of modern Ireland and the Irish diaspora. He has devoted much of his academic career to demolishing historical myths. As such, Wilson is ideally suited to writing a biography of a figure whose importance in Canadian history has grown to mythical proportions. McGee is today remembered as one of the Fathers of Confederation. Wilson's book reminds us that McGee was once an Irish revolutionary republican.

Wilson's discussion of his subject's formative years in Ireland includes extensive information about McGee's family background. Wilson then discusses McGee's emigration to the United States in 1842, at the age of 17, and his journalistic career in Boston. By the time he returned to Ireland in 1845, McGee was an important figure in the Irish-American community. Wilson then discusses McGee's role in the Young Ireland movement, his response to the Potato Famine, and the events that led up to the failed rebellion against British rule in 1848. Following the rebellion, McGee escaped to the United States, where he edited Irish Catholic newspapers in New York, Boston, and Buffalo. Wilson ends this volume in 1857, when McGee relocated to Montreal. The next volume will explore McGee's role in the politics of Confederation, his opposition to Fenianism, and his assassination in 1868.

The earliest biographies of McGee emphasized that his Canadian career and contribution to Confederation. The hagiographic works by Isabel Skelton (1925) and Josephine Phelan (1951) glossed over McGee's personal failings, most notably his alcoholism. More importantly, the earliest biographers de-emphasized McGee's life before Canada and glossed over the fact that McGee had once been a revolutionary Irish nationalist. As memories of McGee's tragic death faded, McGee's biographers adopted a less hagiographic approach. In 1972, Timothy Slattery, a Montreal lawyer, published an entertaining biography that presented a wealth of anecdotes about McGee, many of them connected to the man's drinking. Slattery displayed tremendous ability as a storyteller but this biography was not an academic work. Robin Burns's 1976 biography of McGee, which took the form of an unpublished PhD thesis, went to the other extreme in that it was a very solid work of scholarship with a readership confined to scholars with the patience to read a thesis on microfilm. By synthesizing a vast body of primary and secondary literature into an accessible biography, Wilson has performed an important service. Wilson's book demonstrates that McGee was a restless man whose ideas were constantly in flux. In the 1840s, McGee espoused a non-sectarian Irish nationalism that sought to unite the island's Catholics and Protestants against Britain. In the late 1840s, McGee supported the efforts of Italian nationalists to liberate Rome from papal rule, a stance condemned by Catholic clergy in New York. In the 1850s, McGee embraced ultramontanist, a highly conservative interpretation of Catholicism, and began to equate Irishness with Catholicism. McGee's attitude to the United States also shifted. In the 1840s, he admired the republican institutions of the United States and associated the American Revolution with the Irish struggle against British rule. The rise of anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiment in the United States in the 1850s forced McGee to re-evaluate the Great Republic. By 1857, he had concluded that the prospects for Irish Catholics were better in British North America than in the United States. Wilson shows that McGee's thoughts on the great question of Black slavery were inconsistent, as were his attitudes toward Jews.

Wilson provides little information about McGee's personal life, probably because so few of McGee's papers have survived. This book is largely based on newspapers and the correspondence of McGee's political associates, documents that naturally say little about the man's marriage and children. The main flaw with this book is that Wilson assumes a great deal of prior knowledge on the part of the reader. Terms such as Young Ireland and Repeal are introduced without adequate explanation. This is a major problem, since most of the book's readers will be Canadians unfamiliar with the political history of Ireland. Wilson could have done a better job in situating McGee in his various North American contexts. For instance, the discussion of

McGee's move to Buffalo probably should have included a brief description of that city's then-booming economy. The city of Buffalo has a fascinating history that should have been connected to McGee's activities there. Wilson inserts portraits and short biographies of some of the individuals with whom McGee interacted (such as John Timon, Bishop of Buffalo). Many readers will probably think that a more substantial discussion of the social and economic histories of the communities in which McGee lived would have been better use of this page space. The reader is also left wondering how McGee supported himself and his family while he was writing poetry and giving political speeches. One of the strengths of Martin's study of Macdonald is that he explains how the man's political career and personal finances were related. There is little in Wilson's book about his subject's personal finances. This lacuna in Wilson's work may, in part, be a function of a dearth of the necessary archival materials, but perhaps the author could have used other sources, such as the credit reports prepared by the Mercantile Agency, to reconstruct McGee's finances. The papers of McGee's creditors and political supporters might also have provided some clues as to his finances. Despite these failings, this is an important work that will be read by many specialists in the history of this period.

The publication of these two books is a sign of a possible revival in 19th-century Canadian political history. Canada has a large and well-funded historical profession and there are many scholars who work on the Canadian past, particularly periods after 1914 and, especially, 1945. The gender, aboriginal, military, and environmental histories of 20th-century Canada are the subject of intensive research. Very few historians of Canada, however, now work on 19th-century topics or in political history. There are approximately ten specialists in 19th-century Canadian history and only one or two of them can really be described as political historians. Even allowing for Canada's smallish population, which is now half that of the United Kingdom and a tenth that of the United States, the volume of current research on 19th-century Canada is shockingly low. There are many scholars who study the political, social, and economic history of Victorian Britain. A fair number of these scholars work at Canadian universities: Queen's University in Kingston is the home of the Disraeli Project. In the last five years, now fewer than six books about Gladstone have been published in English. There are so many historians of the 19th-century United States that they have had to organise themselves into sub-fields with their own journals (e.g., the *Journal of the Early Republic* or the *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*). Political historians of the United States continue to gravitate towards the Civil War era, which is widely regarded as having had a transformative impact on the American federation. In contrast, very little has been published in the last two generations on the creation of the Canadian nation state in 1867 or other topics in 19th-century Canadian political history. These two books may help to inspire other historians to explore this critical period of the Canadian past.

Notes

1. For example see, Christopher Armstrong, *The River Returns: an Environmental History of the Bow* (Montreal, 2009); William J. Turkel, *The Archive of Place: Unearthing the Pasts of the Chilcotin Plateau* (Vancouver, 2008); Ken Cruikshank, 'Blighted areas and obnoxious industries: constructing environmental inequality on an industrial waterfront, Hamilton, Ontario, 1890–1960', *Environmental History*, 9, 3 (2004), 464–96. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Bill Kirwin, *Thomas D'Arcy McGee: Visionary of the Welfare State in Canada* (Calgary, 1981). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. 'Text of Former Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney Eulogy of Former President Reagan', *Washington Post*, 11 June 2004 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A34365-2004Jun11.html> [2]> [accessed 15 June 2011]. [Back to \(3\)](#)

Links

[1] <http://history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7746>

[2] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A34365-2004Jun11.html>