

# Sir John A. Macdonald

## Canada's First prime minister

### Quick Facts

#### *Term(s) of Office:*

- July 1, 1867–November 5, 1873
- October 17, 1878–June 6, 1891

#### *Born*

- January 11, 1815, Glasgow, Scotland
- Immigrated to Kingston, Upper Canada (Ontario) in 1820

#### *Died*

- June 6, 1891, Ottawa, Ontario, while still in office
- **Grave site:** Cataraqui Cemetery, near Kingston, Ontario

#### *Education*

- Midland District Grammar School and John Cruickshank School, Kingston, Ontario

#### *Personal Life*

- Married 1843, Isabella Clark (1811–1856)
- Two sons (one died in infancy)
- Re-married 1867, Susan Agnes Bernard (1836–1920)
- One daughter

#### *Occupations*

- Lawyer (called to the bar of Upper Canada in 1836)
- 1837 Private, the Commercial Bank Guard
- 1843–1846 Alderman for Kingston, Ontario

#### *Political Party*

- Liberal-Conservative (forerunner of Conservative party)
- 1867–1891 Party Leader

#### *Constituencies*

- 1867–1878, 1887–1891 Kingston, Ontario
- 1878–1882 Victoria, British Columbia
- 1882–1887 Carleton, Ontario

#### *Other Ministries*

- 1847–1848 Receiver General (Province of Canada)
- 1854–1858, 1858–1862, 1864–1867 Attorney General (Canada West)
- 1861–1862, 1865–1867 Militia Affairs
- 1867–1873 Justice and Attorney General
- 1878–1883 Interior
- 1878–1887 Superintendent General of Indian Affairs
- 1889–1891 Railways and Canals

### *Political Record*

- Joint Premier, Province of Canada, with Étienne-Paschal Taché 1856–1857, and with George-Étienne Cartier 1857–1858, 1858–1862
- Co-leader, Great Coalition, with George-Étienne Cartier and George Brown 1864–1865 and with George-Étienne Cartier 1865–1867
- Father of Confederation 1867
- Creation of provinces of Manitoba 1870, British Columbia 1871, and Prince Edward Island 1873
- Red River Rebellion 1870
- Building of Canadian Pacific Railway 1871–1885
- North West Mounted Police 1873
- Pacific Scandal 1873
- Leader of the Opposition 1873–1878
- National Policy 1879
- Northwest Rebellion 1885
- Creation of the first national park at Banff, Alberta 1885

## Biography

*When fortune empties her chamber pot on your head, smile —and say “we are going to have a summer shower.”*—Sir John A. Macdonald, ca. 1875

Fortune emptied her chamber pot on Sir John A. Macdonald's head more than once, and his comment is indicative of the humour with which he met life's set-backs. Canada's first prime minister probably had more obstacles to encounter than any other.

Born in Glasgow, Scotland, John A. Macdonald immigrated to Upper Canada with his parents when he was five years old. He articulated with a Kingston lawyer at the age of 15; by 19, Macdonald had his own legal practice. His introduction to politics came in 1843 when he served as a city alderman. The following year, he was elected Conservative representative for Kingston in the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada, which consisted of the present-day Ontario and Quebec. From 1856–1862, he served as joint Premier of the Province of Canada, first with Étienne-Paschal Taché and then with George-Étienne Cartier.

Throughout the 1860s, Macdonald worked in support of the Confederation movement. There had been for several years a movement to unite the Maritime provinces. When the Province of Canada showed interest in Confederation, a conference was held in Charlottetown, September 1, 1864. Each province was contending with its own "anti-Confederation" forces, and Newfoundland would reject union outright. The more prosperous Maritime provinces felt Confederation would weaken their autonomy. In Canada East (Quebec), there were fears that Confederation would dilute French-Canadian interests.

Finally, external events hastened the acceptance of Confederation. The American Civil War, the Fenian Raids of 1866 and a generally aggressive American foreign policy caused concern about the defence of the British North American colonies.

Macdonald played a leading role in promoting Confederation, to the point of making an alliance with his staunch political rival and Opposition leader, George Brown. With his wide-ranging personal vision and constitutional expertise, Macdonald drafted the *British North America Act*, which defined the federal system by which the provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and the Province of Canada (now Quebec and Ontario) were united on July 1, 1867, into the Dominion of Canada.

Macdonald was appointed Prime Minister of Canada and won the federal election the following month. In his first administration, his primary purpose was to build a nation. Communications between the provinces were essential and to this end, Macdonald began the transcontinental railway. It would run from Halifax to the Pacific coast and include Canada's two new provinces of Manitoba and British Columbia, and the Northwest Territories. Under Macdonald's leadership, Canada gradually achieved a certain degree of autonomy from Britain in foreign affairs. He also brought in a system of tariffs to protect Canadian products from foreign imports, especially those from the United States, in order to boost economic growth.

While Macdonald's administration accomplished great things, it was also fraught with difficulties. Revelations of the shady dealings between the Conservatives and the railway syndicate led to the Pacific Scandal in 1873. Macdonald's government was forced to resign and lost the election in 1874. He regained power in 1878, but political troubles continued. Macdonald's handling of the Northwest Rebellion in 1885 and execution of Louis Riel outraged French Canadians, sparking an antagonism between them and English Canadians that would continue for years. The federal powers envisioned by Macdonald were weakened by legal challenges launched by the provinces.

In his personal life, Macdonald had his fair share of troubles. At stressful times, he frequently drank to excess. His first wife, Isabella, was an invalid and died in 1856. Of the two boys born to her, only one survived to adulthood. Macdonald married a second time, to Susan Agnes Bernard in 1867. Their joy over a birth of a daughter in 1869 was mitigated by the fact that she suffered from hydrocephaly, which caused both mental and physical handicaps.

In March 1891, Macdonald won a fourth consecutive electoral victory. He died three months later while still prime minister, having forged a nation of sprawling geographic size, two European colonial origins and a multiplicity of cultural backgrounds and political views. Grieving Canadians turned out in the thousands to pay their respects while he lay in state in Parliament and they lined the tracks to watch the train that returned his body to Kingston.

## International Relations

After Confederation, Great Britain still handled Canada's international relations, although Canada was autonomous in domestic affairs. Canada's right and ability to act independently at the international level evolved slowly.

In 1871, Macdonald took part in the Washington Conference, during which several issues between the United States and Great Britain were discussed. A number of these issues involved Canada, including fisheries, the Fenian raids, and claims relating to the American civil war.

In 1880, Macdonald's government created the position of Canadian High Commissioner to Great Britain and in 1882 a Commissioner General represented Canada in France.

From 1880 to 1885, the Canadian Pacific Railway needed cheap labour to work on building the railway, so Chinese labourers were brought into the country. Once the railway was completed, the federal government introduced the Chinese Immigration Act, to deter the families of these labourers from entering Canada by forcing them to pay a \$50 head tax.

During the election campaign of March 1891, the Liberals wanted a commercial union with the United States in the form of another Reciprocity Treaty. Macdonald opposed this, believing that reciprocity would be a step towards annexation, famously declaring that he was born a British subject and hoped to die as one. The Conservatives won the election.

## Anecdote

### Rebels with a cause: Future prime minister helps save the day

Montgomery's Tavern, Yonge Street, Toronto, December 7, 1837. Some 400 rebels have gathered to protest the domination of the colonial government by a privileged few. Grievances over patronage have compounded with crop failures and economic decline. In desperation against an unresponsive government, men have taken up arms. Leading the rebels is William Lyon Mackenzie, the future grandfather of William Lyon Mackenzie King, Canada's longest-serving prime minister. Bearing rifles, pitchforks and staves, they face a larger and better-armed force of militia. Among the troops is the future Father of Confederation and prime minister-to-be John A. Macdonald. The destiny of Canada hangs in the outcome of this confrontation!

Fortunately for Canadian history, both Macdonald and Mackenzie survive this fateful encounter! The revolt is repressed; 53 rebels are tried the following year and two are hanged. After his militia duties, the young lawyer John A. Macdonald defends one of the rebels at his trial. The leader of the revolt, William Lyon Mackenzie, is exiled from Canada for ten years, during which time his daughter is born, the mother of our future prime minister, Mackenzie King.

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