



John A. Macdonald and the Bottle

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Many Canadians recall John A. Macdonald as a politician with an alcohol problem. This view of a key architect of Confederation affects perceptions of national identity and inhibits biographical analysis. Macdonald had a serious but intermittent drink problem for 20 years from 1856. It is unhelpful to relate this to the medical concept of "alcoholism," although he was a recurrent binge drinker; however, he was not consistently drunk. Recognition of his problem underlines the ability that enabled him to survive politically. A secure marriage plus growing public disapproval of inebriation in the 1870s probably explain his changed behaviour.

Two incarnations of John A. Macdonald survive in Canadian popular memory: the creative statesman of Confederation, and the politician who could not handle his drink. Impressionistic evidence suggests that, as many Canadians become vague about their history and cynical towards their politics, his achievements are forgotten while his weakness is emphasized. Although a survey of 2001 found that barely half the adult population could name Canada's first prime minister, some of those who identified him highlighted his failings: "Sir John A. rarely thought of much beyond his next drink," one citizen remarked (*The Globe and Mail*, 11 February 2001). In popular history, the legend of an inebriated architect of Confederation has fed into the self-deprecating insecurity of national identity: "Canada, like many a child, was conceived under the influence of alcohol" (Ferguson 1999, 82). The problems of the Conservative party in recent decades have also been associated with this aspect of his character. The Tories ruled under a leader "preserved in giggle-juice," claimed one acerbic commentator, but they "have never got over the shock of Sir John A. Macdonald shucking his gin bottle for the last time" (Fotheringham 1984, 20). Thus, the investigation of Macdonald's relationship with alcohol represents something more than sensationalizing prurience, and contributes to a wider understanding of how Canadians have memorialized their history.

Macdonald's biographers throw little light on this central aspect of his life. Although E.B. Biggar openly referred to "Sir John's unfortunate habit of indulging in strong drink," Joseph Pope's allusion to "an occasional irregularity" was so oblique that Goldwin Smith missed it altogether (Biggar 1891, 192; Pope 1894, 2: 325; Pope 1960, 130; Martin 1999b, 300-19). In 1902, one intending biographer even consulted the governor general "as to the advisability of mentioning the intemperance question" (Stevens and Saywell 1983, 2: 115). Half a century later, in his first volume, Donald Creighton awkwardly described Macdonald's "irresponsibility" as both "comic and awful," while a discreet indexer buried pre-Confederation drinking bouts under entries such as "sickness." While Creighton was clear that Macdonald "was occasionally a hard drinker," the biography does not convey the full extent of his hero's difficulties (Creighton 1952, 217, 331-32, 519; Creighton 1955, 40-41, 67, 158-59, 175, 621).

By 1856 and at intervals for 20 years, Macdonald was a problem drinker, subject to intermittent binges that rendered him incapable of attending to his responsibilities. Some caveats are required to this general statement. The combination of public discretion and private gossip creates unusual problems in assessing evidence: some episodes were glossed over in the press, while others were perhaps magnified in the telling. One allegation, the *Toronto Globe's* 16 April charge that Macdonald "was drunk in the plain ordinary sense of that word" during an all-night session of Parliament in April 1878, was probably invented by opponents bidding for the temperance vote at the upcoming elections (Thomson 1960, 325; Waite 1972, 21-22)

Modern writers have applied the terms "alcoholism" and "chronic alcoholic" to Macdonald (B. Roberts 1975, 60; Travill 1981, 85). A historian lacking medical qualifications must tread carefully. While the "disease theory" of excess drinking was long discussed in the medical profession, the concept of "inebriety" only gained attention in Canada during the 1870s (Heron 2003, 9-10, 48, 141-43). The term "alcoholic" was coined in 1891, the year of Macdonald's death (*Compact Oxford English Dictionary* 1991, 34). In his lifetime, critics usually attributed Macdonald's drinking to moral weakness. The disease theory is also unhelpful in grouping different forms of behaviour under one label. Macdonald resembles one category, "bout drinkers," people who for long periods cope with alcohol in moderation, but who "suddenly start to drink excessively, for days on end ... neglecting all

their responsibilities," before equally abruptly stopping (Kessel and Walton 1969, 90-91). As Heron notes, however, alcoholism is no longer "a recognized disease in the medical community" although "it retains that status in popular consciousness" (Heron 2003, 10). Given the generalized popular use of the term, it would be unhelpful to label Macdonald as an alcoholic because his behaviour sometimes conformed to one manifestation of a contested concept. For instance, in the disease theory "chronic alcoholism" implied mental or physical damage (Kessel and Walton 1969, 71). This can hardly apply to someone who held the office of prime minister until he was 76. Macdonald was not consistently drunk throughout a period of 20 years. He succumbed occasionally, under various forms of pressure. Johnson and Waite challenge "the legend that Macdonald was a chronic drunkard," but concede that he was "a spasmodic one" (1990, 605).



Alcohol was not invariably disadvantageous to Macdonald. During his speech of 3 November 1873 on the Pacific Scandal, he persuaded Peter Mitchell to supply him with tumblers of gin. Mitchell was nonplussed to discover that the prime minister had two other suppliers, but ruefully noted that the "mental excitement" of the crisis "would naturally enable him to stand almost any amount of liquor" (Burt 1961, 216; Pope 1894, 2:193-94). Macdonald's peroration, after five hours on his feet, was a dignified appeal to his position in Canadian history. Indeed, "Sir John's very weakness was a secret of his popularity with a certain class of men," something that he exploited in his claim that "you would rather have John A. drunk than George Brown sober" (Biggar 1891, 194).

Paradoxically, to recognize the severity of Macdonald's drink problem is to underline his ascendancy in Canadian politics. Even during phases of heavy drinking, as in 1864-67, his political achievement was still remarkable. Confederation is not discredited by Macdonald's occasional inebriation: rather, his impairment underlines the political ability that contributed so extensively to a wholly new constitution. In an apocryphal parallel story, President Lincoln responded to warnings about the insobriety of Ulysses S. Grant by offering to send a barrel of Grant's favourite whisky to every Northern general (Oates 1977, 354). Nevertheless, contemporaries who drank heavily, such as Nicholas Flood Davin, Michael Foley, and Robert Baldwin Sullivan, damaged their political careers: only D'Arcy McGee provides a partial exception. Yet the acerbic governor of New Brunswick, Arthur Gordon, conceded in 1865 that "Macdonald (when not drunk) is a really powerful man" (Gordon 1865, 63-66). Twenty years later, a senior British politician called him "a singular instance of a successful man of great ability and industry who is subject to fits of drunkenness [sic]" (Hawkins and Powell 1997, 349-50).

"Booze" and tavern culture pervaded mid-nineteenth-century Canada (Heron 2003; J. Roberts 2001, 95). Consumption statistics are unreliable (Noel 1995, 4-5), but impressionistic evidence suggests that alcohol flowed freely, and that immigrants were especially vulnerable to the temptation of cheap drink. An English visitor in 1840 reported that "the people of Upper Canada were much less temperate than the people of the United States" (Noel 1995, 125). Robert Lamond, an emigrant, warned his fellow Scots in 1821: "The immoderate use of spirits, is one of the greatest curses in this country." Finding rum cheap, he wrote, newcomers "often indulge in it to the utmost extent of their voracious appetite" (Lamond 1821, 94). Susanna Moodie lamented that "the very low price of whisky places the temptation constantly in every one's reach" (Moodie 1959, 48). Macdonald's own father seems to have succumbed (Biggar 1891, 80; Pope 1894, 1:6). Kingston, his adopted town, was the bacchanalian capital of Canada. In 1842, it contained 136 licensed premises: Montreal, with over four times the population, managed with 220 (Spurr 1976, 107; J. Roberts 2001, 93-107). Although taverns often broke down barriers of class, race and, even gender, some Kingston establishments catered specifically for professional men (J. Roberts 2001, 2002, 2003).

Reports of Macdonald's heavy drinking begin, however, in the mid-1850s, when he was usually absent from Kingston. Even the censorious *Globe* rarely associated him with barrooms (*Globe* 4 August 1849; 30 April 1870); but as a lawyer and politician, Macdonald belonged to two professions noted for alcohol consumption. In Cornwall in 1855, it was common to see barristers "stretched out upon the street in a helpless state of intoxication" (Hodgins 1971, 33). Elections were notorious for conviviality. "Whiskey in large quantities must be wholesome," David Macpherson remarked after his first campaign, "or I would have given a job to a coroner before now" (Campbell and Bennett 1990, 684).

Each of these elements—culture, migration, parental example, Kingston, the law and politics—increased the potential risk facing Macdonald, but none of them forced him to drink. Indeed, his associate Alexander Campbell, the son of a Scottish migrant, also a Kingston lawyer-politician, was a severe critic. Compassion will note the deaths of Macdonald's son in 1848 and of his

bedridden wife Isabella in 1857, but Canada's second prime minister, the lifelong teetotaler Alexander Mackenzie, had buried his wife and two children before the age of 29 (Thomson 1960, 22-23). The comparison warns against simplistic guesses at causation. Creighton has been criticized for failing to interrogate his gender perspective, which subtly blamed Macdonald's two spouses for the drinking problem, implying that Isabella Clark failed as a homemaker, while Agnes Bernard was too strong-minded for wifely submission (B. Roberts 1975). In writing about alcohol, historians must remember that "so many of the words we use have moral overtones, suggesting at least approval or disapproval" (McCullagh 1984, 225).

During his first decade in politics, Macdonald became known as a convivial backstage operator rather than a parliamentary orator. As the *Globe* remarked on 4 August 1849, "he never says much anywhere except in bar rooms." In office six years later, his role as a political manager was roguishly defined by Campbell to include "drinking the refractory members," plying backbenchers with champagne and stories "of doubtful moral tendency" (Campbell 1855; Creighton 1952, 217). Campbell would hardly have joked about the matter had Macdonald's behaviour aroused unease. Indeed, in 1854, as attorney general, Macdonald dismissed a thief's appeal against a short prison sentence on the grounds that "he was intoxicated," arguing that "seven months enforced exclusion from the opportunity of indulging in his besetting vice may have an effect in weaning him from it" (Johnson 1968, 210).

In January 1856, Isabella Macdonald fell dangerously ill. Macdonald's first documented alcoholic excesses occur soon after. On 8 March, his secretary, Robert Harrison, recorded that his employer was "on the 'spree'-unwell." Two weeks later, Harrison's diary baldly noted another "spree" (Johnson 1969, 75; Oliver 2003, 126-27). Drink probably contributed to Macdonald's angry denunciation of George Brown on 26 February 1856, which marked a permanent breach between them. Although a partisan source, the *Globe's* description of Macdonald speaking "in a state of wild excitement" was probably a coded reference (27 February 1856; Creighton 1952, 228-29).

The death of Isabella is conventionally assumed to have driven Macdonald to drowning his sorrows: both Richard Cartwright and Pope identified the decade before Confederation as the peak period of his problem (Creighton 1952, 260-61; Cartwright 1912, 10; Pope 1920, 166). He was under great pressure during his brief term as premier in 1857-58. Isabella's death occurred during an election campaign in which his government lost ground, placing him on the defensive in parliament. The *Globe* implied inebriation when it criticized his "post-prandial proceedings" one May evening. Soon after, the Reformer and temperance campaigner Malcolm Cameron announced that the premier had taken the pledge and that "for as long as he was in public life, he was determined to be a tee-totaller," adding that Macdonald "admitted that he had not been altogether free from blame in the course he pursued." The *Globe* called the story "the funniest thing which has occurred for some time" (26 May 1858; 16-17 June 1858). Perhaps Macdonald did try to reform. In February 1861, he was angry with Cartier for getting drunk (a charge his French-Canadian ally denied). Since he begged a fellow minister, Sidney Smith, to deliver a rebuke, however, he evidently felt his own censure lacked credibility (Johnson and Stelmack 1969, 303).

Macdonald's restraint probably lapsed in April 1861 when he clashed with Oliver Mowat in the Assembly and threatened to slap his face (Creighton 1952, 310). Six months later, a visiting Englishwoman described a dinner given by the governor general, Sir Edmund Head. Macdonald, "the cleverest man of the lot, distinguished himself by getting completely drunk." In contemporary slang, he was "decidedly screwed" on arrival and "the first glass of wine finished him off." Embarrassingly, he attempted an after-dinner speech but "was at last obliged to retire," only to return "in such a maudlin state that we didn't know what he would do next!" (Wilson 1993, 200).

In May 1862, Macdonald's behaviour had political repercussions. The ministry introduced a Militia Bill, an expensive overhaul of Canada's defences. The government was already under pressure, but Macdonald's incapacity during the crucial debates hastened its collapse. The *Globe* reported that he was suffering "one of his old attacks," adding that "Mr. Macdonald's 'illnesses' occur at very inconvenient times" (*Globe*, 14, 19 May 1862; Creighton 1952, 327-33). The governor general, "deeply mortified," reported to London that Macdonald's absence from Parliament as the Bill foundered was caused "nominally by illness, but really, as every one knows, by drunkenness" (Monck 1862). For the next dozen years, Macdonald's intermittent binges constituted a widely known element in contemporary politics: "[H]e frequently gave way to drink, sometimes absenting himself from work for days at a time, and paying little heed to the quality of the liquor he drank, or the standing of the place at which he got it." As a Toronto cleric bluntly commented in a commemorative sermon in 1891, "No one familiar with Sir John thirty years ago would have thought that he would have lived so long" (Biggar 1891, 192-93, 326).

Again, Macdonald promised to reform. In July 1862, "fully convinced of the evils of the drinking customs of society," he was reported "to renounce them on his own part." Rather than join the Sons of Temperance at Quebec, the seat of government, however, he preferred "to associate with his own townsmen" in Kingston. A dispute with the local Orangemen over the cancelled visit of the Prince of Wales to the town in 1860 had outraged many Kingston Protestants. Joining a Kingston temperance group combined the maximum of political advantage with the minimum of inconvenient supervision: unusually, there was an Orange temperance lodge in the city. A report in November 1862 asserted that "since Mr. Macdonald took the total abstinence pledge, he has kept it inviolate, and is determined to continue to do so." In March 1863, the Methodist leader, Egerton Ryerson, reported that "John A. is conducting himself with great propriety" (Sissons 1947, 2: 480-81; Livermore 1976, 245-60; Lockwood 1993, 68). The temperance movement has been portrayed as a reaction against both Protestant and Catholic Irish. Either way, it was primarily associated with Macdonald's Reform opponents (Lockwood 1993; Clemens 1972). His decision twice to join them points to the extent of his problem.

It did not last. After the 1863 election, Richard Cartwright encountered "a rather remarkable tableau" in an alcove outside the parliamentary dining room. Macdonald was resting his head "on the shoulder of a certain stalwart Grit member," who remarked, "Ah, John A., John A., how I love you! How I wish I could trust you!" (Cartwright 1912, 47). That was a case of failed political seduction, but alcohol probably lubricated Macdonald's new alliance with former foe D'Arcy McGee. The January 1864 South Leeds by-election, in which they campaigned jointly, may be the source of a celebrated "John A. drunk" story, in which Macdonald shocked an audience by vomiting on the platform but then won them over by claiming that his opponent's policies had turned his stomach (Biggar 1891, 193; Slattery 1968, 205-207; Creighton 1952, 345-46).

From March 1864, Macdonald was again coping with the demands of office. In addition, his business affairs were thrown into disarray by unexpected death of his law partner. Kingston's Commercial Bank was also in difficulties and less likely to provide favourable treatment for his own debts-and in 1867 the bank collapsed altogether (Montreal Gazette, 30 March 1864; Magill 1976, 169-81). The combination of pressures probably drove him back to the bottle, even though relatively few descriptions survive from the hectic days of 1864-65 of Macdonald the worse for liquor. Some of the evidence comes from George Brown's correspondence; in his private letters to his wife, Brown had little reason for invention and, as a member of the Great Coalition, he was a close observer. Macdonald fell seriously ill in November 1864: "I was very near going off the books," he wrote. Since he collapsed at a banquet, contemporaries apparently suspected that his illness was alcohol-related. When Ryerson noted that Macdonald was sick again in March 1865, he quickly added that the illness was "not in consequence of any indulgence" (Sissons 1947, 2: 3).

The Executive Council met over lunch on 28 August 1864 to review the proposals they were to take to Charlottetown the following day. Macdonald arrived three hours late "bearing symptoms of having been on a spree." He grabbed some food and was soon "quite drunk with potatoes of ale." After a long discussion of Confederation, Macdonald suddenly tried to bounce his colleagues into paying disputed contractor's bills for the new Ottawa Parliament. He clashed with Brown, a critic of the project, and both men threatened to resign. Brown's account is censorious but credible. Evidently Macdonald's alcohol intake had made him combative, but he was capable of discussing political strategy, constitutional change, and public finance. Brown assumed the row would be forgotten "when John A. gets sober" (Careless 1963, 151-52). Presumably Macdonald survived the famously ferocious social whirl that accompanied the process of nation-building at Charlottetown. During a champagne lunch aboard the Canadian government steamer, delegates jocularly pledged themselves in political matrimony, and nobody hinted that the leading member of the Canadian bridal party was incapacitated: the puritanical Brown even praised the quality of the champagne. Alcohol provided the celebratory context for the decision to launch British North American union, not the intoxicating cause (Creighton 1964, 115-16; Careless 1963, 228).



It was otherwise at the Quebec Conference in October 1864. Frances Monck, the governor general's niece, recorded that Macdonald "is always drunk now, I am sorry to say." He had been found in his hotel room, with a rug thrown over his nightshirt, "practising Hamlet in a looking glass." The Monck clan regretted Macdonald's behaviour, since "they wanted all Canadians to appear their best before the delegates." Arthur Gordon also alluded to Macdonald's weakness at this time, and there is a tradition-perhaps apocryphal-that he vomited in Lady Monck's drawing room (Morton 1970, 158-59; Batt 1976, 34).

Brown is the source for another episode from this period, commenting one Monday morning in March 1865 that "John A. has been tipsy since Friday." Macdonald was perhaps unwinding at the end of a demanding parliamentary session-and "tipsy" was hardly as condemnatory as "drunk" (Careless 1963, 190). His behaviour had wider ramifications, however, as ministers discussed the selection of a delegation to negotiate with the imperial government in London. Macdonald was an obvious choice, but "the chance of his breaking out there is not to be forgotten" (Best 1969, 1: 347). In the event, a broad-based delegation made sense on general grounds, and three colleagues accompanied Macdonald.

In December 1865, Brown resigned from the ministry and resumed partisan hostilities. That winter, the Canadian government moved to its new headquarters in Ottawa. Ominously, the city lacked both piped water and social amenities (Gwyn 1989, 45). Macdonald helped found the Rideau Club, which, in those early days, was perhaps less decorous than it subsequently became. In the 1866 parliamentary session, ministers aimed to avoid controversy in Canadian politics and thus encourage the acquiescence of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick in the Confederation project. Westminster legislation would then be sought before the imperial parliament rose in August. The timetable was already tight when, in June 1866, the Fenian invasion added to the workload of the minister of Militia, John A. Macdonald (Creighton 1964, 377-405). It seems that the pressures proved too great.

On 21 June 1866, Lord Monck issued an unprecedented threat to resign if his ministers did not move faster. Although Macdonald read him a dignified lesson in constitutional practice, Monck was probably delivering a coded warning (Pope 1894, 2:299-304). Privately, he expressed concern that "the fact of seat of government being in such an isolated place will have a damaging effect on public men" (Gwyn 1989, 39). On 26 June, Brown noted that Macdonald had been "as usual out of order" in the Assembly for some days past (Careless 1963, 228). A "disgraceful" two-day binge early in August kept him away from the House altogether.

In mid-August 1866, the *Globe* launched a public attack. Joseph Pope called it "more than usually vile," and even Alexander Mackenzie, George Brown's faithful echo, was reportedly shocked (Pope 1894, 1: 325-26). While the *Globe's* assault was an unprecedented violation of decorum, it was undoubtedly effective. For "three days in succession," Macdonald was alleged to have appeared in the House "so utterly gone at mid-day as to be unconscious of what he was doing." Macdonald and a cabinet colleague were seen "rolling helpless on the Ministerial benches." (The other inebriate was probably D'Arcy McGee: presumably the tale of Macdonald telling his colleague that the ministry could not carry two drunks, and that McGee must give it up, dates from this time.) Macdonald's speech was "wild and incoherent ... so thick as to be almost incomprehensible." Worse still, he had been drunk during the Fenian raid. (In 1870, the *Globe* alleged that "telegram after telegram was left unanswered, because he was in such a state of intoxication that he could not comprehend them.") Echoing Lord Monck's concerns, the *Globe* charged that Macdonald's incapacity was responsible for postponing Confederation into 1867. Widening the indictment, the *Globe* blamed his cabinet colleagues for failing to intervene, since they had "long known the road Mr. Macdonald was travelling" (*Globe*, 20, 24 August 1866; 5 September 1866; 30 April 1870; Biggar 1891, 193; Slattery 1968, 343, 418).

As a countermeasure, Macdonald's Kingston supporters organized a banquet in his honour-a high-risk strategy. Conspicuously sober, the guest of honour deplored the *Globe's* "wanton and unprovoked attack"; Cartier and McGee lauded his role in Confederation (*Montreal Gazette*, 7 September 1866; *Canadian News* 13 September 1866, 169; 20 September 1866, 184-85; 27 September 1866, 197-98; Creighton 1964, 402). As the *Globe* pointed out, however, nobody denied the allegations. Government newspapers merely pleaded that the problem was "not confined to one side of the House" (*Globe*, 5 September 1866).

At the Kingston banquet, McGee described Macdonald as the author of 50 of the 72 Quebec Resolutions, the Confederation blueprint. Leading a Nova Scotian campaign in London to block the scheme, Joseph Howe decided that "the matter might be improved" (Burpee 1917, 435). On 3 October, he wrote to the colonial secretary, Lord Carnarvon, "charitably attributing to the

inveterate habits referred to the incoherent and defective character of the whole scheme," and objecting to placing the Maritime provinces under Canadian politicians who "cannot govern themselves."

Colonial Office staff were alarmed by Howe's attempt "to assail Confederation through the Canadian ministers." The foreign secretary, Lord Stanley, felt that under responsible government, Macdonald's inebriation was Canada's problem, but Carnarvon, later nicknamed "Titters" by his own party leader, argued that "Parliament would hardly absolve us" if British soldiers were killed because of paralysis of command in the Canadian militia. Monck privately confirmed that the minister of Militia was occasionally so drunk "as to be incapable of all official business for days on end"; but, as one official noted, Canada was "jealous of interference" and nothing could be done from London. Carnarvon had to recognize that that Macdonald, "in spite of his notorious vice," was "the ablest politician in Upper Canada," and to lose him "would absolutely destroy Confederation" and pave the way for annexation. One civil servant hoped that the Canadians "would now have the good sense to keep Mr John A Macdonald on the other side of the Atlantic," but Carnarvon decided that it would relieve "grave anxiety" if there was an ocean between Macdonald and the Canadian militia (Howe and Annand 1866; Blake 1969, 668; Carnarvon 1866a).¹ Macdonald's weakness for alcohol had become a problem at the heart of the Empire; yet within a year, he would be a Knight Commander of the Bath and prime minister of the Dominion.

Although he discreetly avoided naming Macdonald, Carnarvon impressed upon Monck that "undoubted ability" was no excuse for drunkenness (Carnarvon 1866b); however, censorious officials in London were soon "very greatly struck by [Macdonald's] power of management and adroitness" (Marindin 1896, 301). He also married again. The privacy of the decision must be respected, but his sudden wooing was probably related to the furore over his habits. Agnes Bernard had left Canada the previous year to live in England, which seems to rule out any previous engagement. Their decision to marry was probably taken around Christmas 1866, when Macdonald was deeply absorbed in the drafting of the new constitution (Martin 1999a, 10-12). He had also suffered extensive burns after setting fire to his hotel bed, an episode that he was anxious should not be reported (Pope 1894, 1: 316-17).

At the age of 30, Agnes was free to make up her own mind, but Macdonald sought the approval of the bride's brother, civil servant Hewitt Bernard, formerly his private secretary and now in London serving the Canadian delegation. Bernard assured the incredulous journalist T.C. Patteson that Macdonald had acknowledged that his drink problem represented an objection but "he had promised reformation in that respect." Bernard later claimed "he did everything he could to dissuade his sister from the marriage" (Patteson c1905; Gwyn 1989, 198).

Was he abandoning alcohol to get married, or taking a wife to break his habit? Either way, change did not come at once. Macdonald returned from England to a triumphant cabinet meeting on 5 May 1867. Civil servant Edmund Meredith recorded in his diary on 8 May that Macdonald was "carried out of the lunch room of the Executive Council office hopelessly drunk." The challenge of forming the first Dominion cabinet next took its toll: "Macdonald has been in a constant state of partial intoxication," Alexander Gait wrote to his wife as 1 July 1867 approached. A rival if eccentric candidate alleged that Macdonald was drinking during an election debate in Kingston in September (Coyle 1968, 54).

Official Ottawa looked to his young bride to curb Macdonald's weakness: "What a prospect Mrs John A[.] has before her!" Meredith exclaimed in his diary on 8 May. When Robert Harrison, now an MP, spotted "Sir John drinking" in December, he promptly collected Agnes by cab and escorted her to the rescue: afterwards, this proud, spiky woman thanked him (Oliver 2003, 319-20). In mid-January 1868, her diary noted "a rather trying week": the Commercial Bank had been swallowed by a Montreal rival, and Macdonald had now lost all control over his debts. Agnes gave up wine "for example's sake," and throughout 1868 she seemed to be winning the uphill battle: even her diary's references to her husband's headaches on 11 and 19 January may refer only to overwork (see also Reynolds 1990, 53-54). Macdonald came through the shock of the murder of McGee in April, his face "white with fatigue, sleeplessness & regret," as Agnes noted in her diary on the 13th: "Yet he never gave in, or complained, or was other than cheerful, to me, & kind" (see also Reynolds 1990, 55). More important still, he remained sober during the negotiations that summer to placate the Nova Scotian separatists. Agnes's pregnancy, confirmed at the end of August, was probably a further steady factor. In February 1869, she gave birth to a daughter.

The idyll was soon destroyed. It appeared that their child was physically handicapped and could never live a normal life. The blow coincided with a demand for the settlement of Macdonald's debts: he owed almost \$80,000, about ten times his annual ministerial salary. At the age of 54, and with a second family to support, Macdonald was forced to surrender his assets

(Reynolds 1990, 60-61; Creighton 1955, 42). This personal disaster destroyed his self-control. When apologists later claimed that the Red River crisis had wrecked his health, the *Globe* retorted that Macdonald had started to drink in the summer of 1869 when there were "no unusual pressures upon Ministers" (5 May 1870). By September, rumours were rife in Ottawa. In October, Macdonald attended an official luncheon in Toronto to greet Queen Victoria's son, Prince Arthur. Hewitt Bernard, who accompanied him, "was kept in a state of miserable anxiety about Sir John who committed himself disgracefully at the Dejeuner at Toronto," as Edmund Meredith related in his account of the visit in his diary (7 and 13 September, 8 October 1868). Macdonald had to be steered out of the dining room by T.C. Patteson (Oliver 2003, 364). Weeks later, Agnes Macdonald finally admitted in her long-neglected diary that she had "suffered keenly in mind since I last wrote here.... I was over confident, vain and presumptuous in my sense of power. I fancied I could do too much and I failed signally" (Creighton 1955, 42).

Macdonald, however, was neither permanently inebriated, nor incapable of doing his job, as was shown by his shrewd management of the Red River crisis through the winter of 1869-70. It was not until late April that he cracked. An incidental embarrassment about this binge was the presence in Ottawa of a front-rank British politician, Sir Stafford Northcote: the *Globe* feared "the account he will have to give in England of the rulers of the New Dominion" (27 April 1870). Indeed, Northcote reported home that consternation followed the report that "Sir John A. has broken out again." Macdonald's usual pattern was to go to bed and drink bottles of port: "All the papers are sent to him, and he reads them, but he is conscious of his inability to do any important business and he does none" (Creighton 1955, 67). Lord Stanley was amused by Northcote's letter. "It seems he breaks out in this fashion once or twice in the year," Stanley noted, adding that "the habit is so well understood that no especial notice is taken of it." Indeed, on this occasion the complaint was "not that the minister should be drunk for a week together, but that he should not have waited till the urgent business on hand was disposed of" (Vincent 1994, 58-59).

he "urgent business" was the creation of the province of Manitoba. Macdonald's attendance in Parliament was "very irregular" for several days, and there was "much comment and speculation." Some said he was drafting the Manitoba legislation, others admitted he was "indisposed." On 30 April, in a powerful editorial headed "A Foul Disgrace," the *Globe* charged that "the Prime Minister has again yielded to the temptation of drink" and was "incapable of attending to his duties" at a critical moment in the long campaign to absorb the Northwest. It was almost as if Macdonald chose "those seasons when his vice is calculated to bring the greatest disgrace upon himself and upon the country." The spectacle of its leader "babbling in maudlin intoxication in a hotel bar-room, is a thing to which no other country would submit for an hour." The *Globe* recalled "his pitiable condition" during the Fenian raid and revealed "his disgraceful condition" during Prince Arthur's visit. As in 1866, the attack was widened to Macdonald's colleagues for serving under "a confirmed drunkard." Macdonald did return to work, but the excuse offered by apologists, that he had been "suffering from over-exertion," only provoked a further *Globe* thunderbolt on 5 May.² Reading the *Globe's* denunciation over a century later, it is hard to see how any politician could survive.

The following afternoon, Macdonald collapsed suffering from a kidney stone. The attack almost killed him, but it probably saved his career. Alcohol was not totally banished from the sickroom: on one occasion Agnes "took a flask of whisky and rubbed some of it over his face and chest," which Macdonald found soothing. His diet, however, was controlled by his doctors. Meanwhile, well-wishers subscribed to mitigate his financial worries, and on 4 November 1870, the *Montreal Gazette* magisterially rebuked the *Globe* for its vendetta (Pope 1894, 2:76-7; Creighton 1955, 70-71; Biggar 1891, 106).

In 1871, Macdonald played a superb hand for Canada during the tense negotiations for the Treaty of Washington, which pitted him not simply against the voracious Americans but also the arrogant British (Creighton 1955, 75-129); but the unpopular treaty and the loss of the Ontario provincial government to the opposition weakened him as he headed into the second Dominion election in 1872. Desperate for campaign funding and forced to act as his own bagman, he appeared to place himself under obligation to the entrepreneur Hugh Allan in his notorious telegram begging for one more \$10,000 donation. He had no idea what promises Cartier had made to Allan to secure similar support (Creighton 1955, 103-79). Worse still, drinking heavily, he probably could not recall his own commitments. In Kingston, the *Daily British Whig* reported on 25 July that he was "much excited" and slapped his opponent's face at the Kingston hustings in July 1872: the colonial secretary, Lord Kimberley, thought the episode "delicious" and tried to imagine Britain's sanctimonious prime minister Gladstone slugging an opponent (Kimberley 1872). Unamused, Macdonald's campaign manager, Alexander Campbell, claimed that throughout the election, Macdonald "kept himself more or less under the influence of wine" and hence had "no clear recollection of what he did on many occasions" (Swainson 1969, 91). Another lieutenant, Charles Tupper, also attributed Macdonald's notorious telegram to Allan to his "being 'upon the drink'" (Dufferin 1873c).

Throughout the six-month public humiliation of the Pacific Scandal of 1873, Macdonald returned to the bottle. Late in May, the governor general, Lord Dufferin, confidentially warned Lord Kimberley that Macdonald had "broken through his usual abstemious habits" and was resorting "to more stimulants than suit his peculiar temperament." Dufferin thought it tragic "to see so superior a man subject to such a purely physical infirmity, against which he struggles with desperate courage." Kimberley regarded this rare hint of the disease theory as an amusing euphemism, but he agreed that "we should excuse and cover his failings," adding "I am very sorry to hear he has had a relapse into his old habits" (Dufferin 1873a; Kimberley 1873; Creighton 1955, 158-59).

That summer, the governor general shocked Alexander Mackenzie by inviting the "drunken debauchee" to become godfather to the Dufferins' latest child. Macdonald arrived at the christening from Cartier's funeral in Montreal, "in a very bad way, -not at all himself" after drowning his sorrows. Somehow, "he contrived to pull himself together ... in a most marvellous manner." Even the blasé Dufferin was uneasy when they had to confirm a death sentence—probably that on Elizabeth Workman of Sarnia who was sent to the gallows for the murder of her husband, a heavy drinker with a record of physical abuse. Macdonald had already opposed a reprieve, but it seems that her hanging was finally confirmed during his hangover (Thomson 1960, 156; Dufferin 1873b; Creighton 1955, 159; Swainger 2000, 70-71). Throughout August, Dufferin was reporting to the colonial secretary "that Sir John has been constantly drinking during the last month" and "in a terrible state for some time past." Months later, he admitted that his prime minister had in fact disappeared: "No-one—not even his wife—knew where he was." Macdonald turned up at Rivière-du-Loup, where enemies alleged that he had attempted suicide by jumping off a wharf. Macdonald later laughed at the story, but alcohol abuse is associated with self-harm: perhaps it was founded upon some real incident (Dufferin 1873d, 1873e, 1873f; Creighton 1955, 164; Kessel and Walton 1999, 164-66).

Parliament reassembled in late October to confront the Pacific Scandal. Macdonald began the session well, "but after two or three days the strain became too much for him, and he was compelled to resort to stimulants, which produced the usual effect." During the debate, he delayed speaking for fear that the opposition might then reveal yet more damning evidence; but the Liberal orator, Edward Blake, refused to speak before Macdonald, "calculating on the effect of his physical infirmities breaking his adversary down." By the time Macdonald finally rose on 3 November, his majority had virtually evaporated. Although "quite tipsy" earlier in the day, as already noted he continued to drink gin throughout his "tremendous oration" (Creighton 1955, 174-77; Dufferin 1873f). The next day, Macdonald's cabinet colleague, Peter Mitchell, found Macdonald "lying on a sofa in a state of intoxication" and persuaded him to meet with a key waverer, Donald Smith. Macdonald reluctantly agreed, asking for time to sober up. Smith angrily stalked out after 20 minutes, complaining that Macdonald had "done nothing but curse and swear at me since I went into the room." That evening Smith administered the government's coup-de-grace (Burt 1961, 217). As Campbell cleared his ministerial desk, he grumbled "that had Sir John A[.] kept straight during the last fortnight the Ministry would not have been defeated." Throughout the session, Campbell wrote, "we never had the full advantage either of his abilities and judgment or of his nerve and courage." Worse still, unlike Churchill, Macdonald suffered from hangovers: "A night of excess always leaves a morning of nervous incapacity and we were subjected to this pain amongst others" (Meredith 1873; Swainson 1969, 91-92; Charmley 1993, 549).

Macdonald continued to drink for a time after his downfall, although he seems to have overcome his problem by 1877. On one occasion, on a visit to T.C. Patteson's country property, Patteson reported that "Sir John got very drunk at dinner" and insulted another guest, Tupper. Agnes Macdonald was obviously upset and walked out. "Once he was to speak at a town on Lake Huron," Willison recalled of another binge, probably from this period, "but he was so long in sleeping off the consequences that the vessel on which he was a passenger dare not put into harbour." Sometimes, well-wishers discreetly veiled embarrassing lapses, and some episodes probably left no trace in the record. Interrogated by a group of MPs, his loyal Ottawa cabman Patrick Buckley diplomatically replied that Macdonald was never in better health (Willison 1919, 179; Biggar 1891, 243). The parliamentary correspondent of the *Toronto Mail* applied tactful self-censorship in reporting an occasion in 1875 when Macdonald appeared in the House slightly drunk ("though not very bad, his condition was well known"), to the disgust of his supporters. The incident was probably Macdonald's comments on the outlawry of Louis Riel, delivered "after the [dinner] recess" on 24 February, when he was condemned by Prime Minister Mackenzie for his "vehement language." In March 1875, Macdonald delivered one of his most celebrated statements, proclaiming even if Canada's link with Britain was "a golden chain ... he, for one, was glad to wear the fetters." Mackenzie responded that his adversary "appeared to be speaking under some unusual excitement" (Belford 1875; *Debates* 1875, 1: 318, 915; Creighton 1955, 196). There is a vivid though not explicit glimpse in one journalist's description of Macdonald leaving parliament one winter night in 1875, "tottering down the hill ... alone, others passing him with a wide sweep" (Maclean 1894, 257).

In May 1877, however, Dufferin noted that Macdonald could "drink wine at dinner without being tempted to excess, which hitherto he has never been able to do, and during the present Session he has never given way as in former times." Pope, his private secretary from 1883, insisted that the problem had been solved "long before I knew him." Macdonald shucked the bottle over a decade before he farewelled the Conservative party (de Kiewiet and Underhill 1955, 351; Pope 1894, 1: 325; Fotheringham 1984, 20).

There remain just two alleged lapses. One, already noted, was the *Globe's* 14 April 1878 charge that he was drunk during an all-night filibuster. The report, supplied by Alexander Mackenzie himself, was probably politically motivated. Raising the allegation as an issue of parliamentary privilege, Macdonald's supporters testified to his sobriety, a risky strategy if untrue. Macdonald himself even engaged in an uncharacteristic threat of an action for defamation, although he directed his feint at a minor newspaper in Guelph rather than confront the mighty *Globe* (Thomson 1960, 325; Waite 1972, 21-22). Creighton relates a colourful tale of one final binge in November 1878. Macdonald, who had travelled to Halifax to welcome the new governor general, Lord Lome, was said to have retreated to bed with a pile of official reports, looking "more dead than alive." A private secretary who daringly invaded the room to warn that the viceregal party was about to disembark was dismissed with the words "Vamoose from this ranch!" Unusually, Creighton gave no source for his story. It can be found in Patteson's reminiscences, recorded nearly 30 years later-and, when Creighton wrote, still officially closed to researchers (Creighton 1955, 248-49). The truth may be more prosaic. Having only just returned to office, Macdonald faced a heavy workload. He was suffering from corns and probably preferred to get off his feet. He had been in Halifax for just three days, hardly long enough for a prolonged disappearance, and he welcomed the Lomes on the dockside wearing court dress, formal attire which requires some preparation (Johnson 1969, 130; *Globe*, 22 and 26 November 1878). True or false, it seems to be the last story of John A. drunk.

"I believe he has been more sober lately," Lord Kimberley noted in 1884 (Hawkins and Powell 1997, 350). J.W. Bengough still occasionally caricatured Macdonald with bottle in hand, but the prime minister no longer drank to excess (Bengough 1974, 243; Cumming 1997, 43). Indeed, some preferred to remember that he had "completely triumphed" over his weakness, proving his "strength of character" (Stevens and Saywell 1983, 2: 115; Wallace 1924, 123). How did he overcome his problem? The major study of Macdonald's relations with his doctors concentrates on practitioners from Kingston, a city he left by the 1870s (Travill 1981; Creighton 1955, 111). Hence it is impossible to know whether he received medical treatment. Dufferin's report that he could handle wine might suggest that Macdonald had belatedly decided not to mix his drinks. According to Pope, during his last decade, Macdonald confined himself to a glass of claret at dinner, drinking spirits only occasionally and "in great moderation." Macdonald himself implied that his metabolism rebelled and imposed a form of aversion therapy, telling Dufferin in 1877 that "his constitution has quite changed of late." By 1881, his digestive system was seriously disordered. Macdonald's sister plausibly blamed his liver, but an Ottawa physician suspected stomach cancer. A specialist in London diagnosed "catarrh" (possibly gastritis) and placed him on "a very rigid diet." Henceforth, his favourite tipple seems to have been milk (de Kiewiet and Underhill 1955, 351; Pope 1920, 166; Johnson 1969, 144; Saunders 1916, 2:303; Macdonald 1881).

There were also political reasons for Macdonald to confront his behaviour in the mid-1870s. Excessive drinking was becoming politicized as a problem requiring state intervention. Ontario in 1873 and Nova Scotia in 1875 legislated for the confinement of inebriates. The Dominion Alliance was formed in 1875-76 to demand prohibition (Heron 2003, 142, 144-45; Sturgis 1984). The attack on alcohol, associated with the incumbent Liberal government, also presented political opportunities, as shown by the working-class backlash when the 1864 Dunkin Act was used to force local option vote aimed at closing the bars in Toronto in September 1877 (Heron 2003, 160-61). Dominion temperance legislation, the 1878 Scott Act, helped brand the Liberals as "cold-blooded, cold-water and cold-hearted" meddlers (Thomson 1960, 327). Conservative chances of exploiting the backlash against interventionist legislation would be damaged, however, if their leader was himself visibly impaired by alcohol-hence the attempt to brand him as drunk in Parliament in 1878. Macdonald's reformation was timely. In May 1877, Canada experienced a new style of platform campaigning, featuring moral exhortation from a reformed drunkard (Birrell 1977). With the climate of opinion towards public inebriation changing, Macdonald found politics more addictive than alcohol. He remained capable of using alcohol in support of networking, however. "Well, boys, don't you think we have had enough of disallowance?" he remarked as he steered two supporters towards the parliamentary restaurant after a debate on Manitoba railway charters. "Let's go down and take our allowance" (Ham 1921, 236-37).

Victorian convention credited Macdonald's recovery to "the care, solicitude and good counsel" of his second wife, Agnes (Biggar 1891, 192). Perhaps Agnes succeeded not by filling the gap left by the death of Macdonald's first wife, Isabella-indeed, her efforts as a bride failed-but by occupying a deeper void left by the passing of his mother, Helen Macdonald, who died in 1862. Like Mackenzie King and Pierre Trudeau, Macdonald was greatly influenced by his mother, and his descent into occasional despair after 1856 paralleled her decline through a series of strokes (Martin 1999b, 305-306). Amateur psychology might suggest that Agnes, strong willed and heavy featured, gradually acquired a maternal ascendancy. The teenage Lucy Maud Montgomery, who met her in 1890, described her as "quite stately and imposing, with very beautiful silver hair, but not at all good looking and dressed, as I thought, very dowdily" (1985, 25-26). If so, Agnes would be neither the first nor the last wife to discover that her husband needed a substitute mother. In addition, until her sudden death in 1875, Macdonald's mother-in-law formed part of their Ottawa household. Immediately after Theodora Bernard's death, Macdonald joined the Church of England, his wife's communion, so breaking with his Presbyterian heritage. (Reynolds 1990, 80-81). This probably represented a resolve to make a fresh start in his own life, although Anglicans were not prominent in denouncing alcohol (Heron 2003, 54, 58, 155-56).

Beyond that, historians must conclude that Macdonald's decision to stop abusing alcohol remains almost as difficult to explain as the causes that drove him to the bottle in the first place. Since his drinking bouts do not neatly slot into the years between his two marriages, they were probably traceable to deeper causes. "I had no boyhood," he once remarked. The family left Scotland because his father failed in business. At the age of seven, he witnessed a violent attack that had killed his younger brother-ironically, by a drunken childminder who had tried to force the boys to drink gin (Pope 1894, 1: 5-6). As the sole surviving son, he became the vehicle of his ambitious mother's disappointed hopes. At nine, he was sent to school in Kingston where he lived in dismal lodgings, remote from his family on the Bay of Quinte. Although a star pupil in a competitive environment, he none the less sometimes found the demands too great, and once ran away from school rather than face its annual public examinations (Biggar 1891, 29-30). In later life, taking to the bottle was perhaps a surrogate form of escape. The fact that his father had a drink problem is probably suggestive, and the problem surfaced in the third generation, affecting Macdonald's son Hugh John as well (Reynolds 1990, 156; Kessel and Walton 1969, 71). Sometimes, as in 1862 and 1873, Macdonald drank because of political pressures, while at others, as in 1866 and 1869, family and financial worries predominated. The pattern was cyclical: the inebriate of the Militia Bill crisis, the Fenian raid, the Manitoba Act, and the Pacific Scandal in 1862, 1866, 1870, and 1873 was also the controlled negotiator who maximized unpromising political assets in Nova Scotia in 1868 and Washington in 1871. Paradoxically, his personal weakness highlights his political strength, as the only front-rank figure in Canadian political history to have triumphed despite his weakness for the bottle. Even when he was challenged for the party leadership after the debacle of 1862, his caucus preferred John A. Macdonald occasionally drunk to John Hillyard Cameron unimaginatively sober (Montreal Gazette, 30 May 1862).

"His drinking was exaggerated," Willison recalled, "... by sleepless and insensate opponents" (1919, 179). Perhaps this was true in the private world of political gossip, but, in the public sphere, the picture is reversed: "In the lifetime of his wife and children it would be difficult for me to be more outspoken," Pope explained in 1900 (1960, 130). Macdonald's binges were treated with remarkable forbearance, and the Globe's attempts to unmask them probably offended Victorian propriety. Popular awareness of Macdonald's "weakness at various times for drink" probably explains the relative sparseness of major biographical studies (MacDermott 1931). Both Pope and Creighton were reticent in confronting the extent of his problem, dividing their studies at 1867, the midpoint of Macdonald's drinking years. Hence even where his excesses had to be acknowledged, they were portrayed as minor lapses in a career of achievement. In reality, between 1856 and 1877, the entire central phase of his life, Macdonald's weakness for alcohol was recurrent and sometimes disastrous, constituting a cumulative problem that has not been fully appreciated. To focus on the frequency of Macdonald's dependence upon the bottle has a paradoxical outcome, however, since ultimately it forces us to rise above condemnation to recognition of his outstanding ability: "Being Prime Minister of Canada is not a picnic, even in the best of times," Brian Mulroney remarked on the centenary of Macdonald's death. "Some days, I think I know in some small way what Sir John A. felt" (Mulroney 1992, 12). Canadians had good reason to prefer John A. drunk to anybody else sober. Paradoxically, it is only by appreciating that, for two decades in the central phase of his career, John A. was sometimes very drunk indeed, that we can begin to appreciate the remarkable extent of his achievement.