



The bottle and the damage done

From murder to lost weekends: John A. Macdonald's tragic life

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On a spring night in 1822, John A. Macdonald, only seven years old, watched as a drunken caregiver beat his four-year-old brother James to death. The caregiver, a man named Kennedy, was a friend and employee of the boys' father, Hugh. Kennedy had brought John and James to a tavern in Kingston, Ont., home to the Macdonald family since they left Glasgow two years before. As John A. recalled that evening decades later to his private secretary Joseph Pope, Kennedy forced gin on the boys. "Not liking the taste" -- at least not at that point in his life -- John took James's hand and made a run for home. But the younger brother tripped and fell, and when Kennedy caught up with them, he struck James with his cane so viciously that the boy went into convulsions. He died a few hours later.

No police investigation or charge followed; James didn't rate a headstone in the family plot or even a record of his death in the family book Hugh used to note the exact birth times of his children. Years later, however, another hand -- John A.'s -- entered a final notation in that book: "James died on Monday, 22 April at 20 minutes 6 o'clock p.m." Patricia Phenix's judgment in her compelling book about Macdonald's personal life, *Private Demons* (McClelland & Stewart) seems apt: the father chose not to remember, but the brother couldn't forget. "I never had a childhood," an elderly, melancholy Macdonald told Pope. And, as Phenix shows, adulthood had more than its share of sorrow too.

The public highs and lows of Canada's first prime minister, the indispensable man at the founding of this improbable nation, have been fodder for historians for over a century. Far more than his virtues, Macdonald's character flaws -- if that's not too mild a word for them -- are the very stuff of mythology in Canada, making him a kind of anti-George Washington. Even by the standards of the alcoholic 19th century, Macdonald was a notorious binge drinker, a man who would take himself to bed for days, downing bottle after bottle of port. (The sister-in-law of governor general Francis Monck -- Queen Victoria's representatives all soon learned they had to keep close tabs on Her Majesty's first minister -- once reported to Monck that Macdonald had been found in his nightshirt, drunkenly reciting Hamlet before his bedroom mirror.)

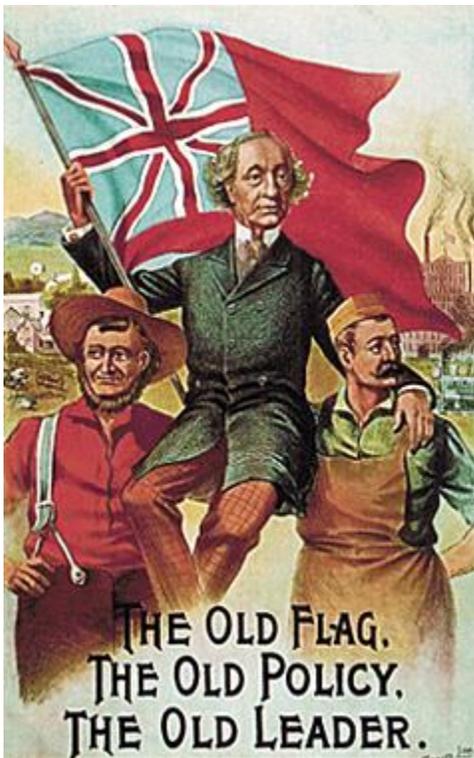
Macdonald's tolerance for political corruption -- the buying and selling of votes -- was high, although political office never enriched him personally. (In September 1867, the prime minister of the newly minted Dominion of Canada was threatened with arrest by his own civil servants if he didn't pay his tax arrears.) His cynicism was boundless. In one close election campaign, Macdonald actually took the temperance pledge in public; he then went home and raised a toast to celebrate his guile. Even his charm seemed somehow sinister: an acquaintance once came upon the Tory Macdonald and a Liberal member in an alcove of the legislative assembly. Macdonald had his head on the other man's shoulder, while the Grit was saying, "Ah, John A., how I love you; how I wish I could trust you."

But for all the attention focused on the public and mythic Macdonald, little has been paid to his private life, says Phenix in an interview. "I wanted to look at him as son, husband and father." In *Private Demons*, she examines his two unhappy wives -- Isabella, a classic Victorian invalid who spent much of her married life in an opium-induced haze, and Agnes, much more John A.'s intellectual match, but equally unhappy because of the way he shut her out of aspects of his life. And then there were the formidable Macdonald women, sisters Louisa and Margaret -- who ran his many households, raised his children, and coped with his disgruntled wives -- and his mother, Helen. "I think they all spoiled him," says Phenix, "especially his mother," who instilled in him a belief in his destiny.

In that regard, as in so many others, Macdonald set the Canadian political template. From him through Mackenzie King to Pierre Trudeau, the importance of the mother-son bond can scarcely be exaggerated. Adoring maternal support, however, is not the only link between Macdonald and Trudeau. There was also the urge to flout convention: after a private audience with Queen Victoria in London, Macdonald visited Epsom Downs racetrack, where he and his friends amused themselves by firing spitballs at the crowd. "When I learned that," Phenix says, "all I could think of was Trudeau and that pirouette behind Queen Elizabeth."

Phenix keeps circling back, however, to that tragic moment in Macdonald's childhood. "I think it was then, when James was killed, that he began to run and kept running, pursuing his ambitions no matter what it cost others around him, because -- in Satchel Paige terms -- he was always aware something might catch him." Certainly, she argues, the memory of James must have flooded his mind 51 years later as he sat in the April slush of an Ottawa doorstep cradling the shattered head of Thomas D'Arcy McGee, a boon drinking pal, dead from an assassin's bullet. He came home blood-splattered and white-faced with shock, according to Agnes's diary: "McGee is murdered, it's true," he told her.

Although Phenix keeps the armchair psychology to a minimum, her depiction of the dual crises of domestic and public life that squeezed Macdonald in an ever-tighter grip after McGee's death makes *Private Demons* a real contribution to Canadian history. In February 1869, Agnes delivered a baby daughter, Mary, who soon proved to be severely disabled with hydrocephalus, her head unnaturally large, and her legs, writes Phenix, "like shrivelled pipe cleaners." John A. doted on her, but Mary's care was expensive, and arose just as he learned he was responsible for the immense debt of \$79,000 incurred in a failed investment. His health began to deteriorate; in 1870 he was bedridden for a week by gallstones. (His son arrived home to find his stepmother massaging his father's face with whisky, and John A. rousing himself long enough to murmur, "Oh, do that again.") Worst of all, Macdonald was caught redhanded soliciting bribes from the CPR.



There was neither solace at home from political pressure, nor relief in work from domestic sorrow. Something had to give. On Aug. 3, 1873, Macdonald actually disappeared from sight on a two-day bender somewhere in Quebec. The next day, the *Montreal Witness* reported that Macdonald had tried to commit suicide by leaping into the St. Lawrence. In his classic 1955 biography, historian Donald Creighton accepts the lost weekend story as true: as Lord Dufferin, the aghast governor general, later informed the Colonial Office, his first minister had indeed been missing in action, laid up "perdue with a friend in the neighbourhood of Quebec." But the eminent historian dismissed the suicide story as rumour spread by opponents.

Phenix isn't so sure, given what she calls Macdonald's "all-or-nothing" personality and the sheer amount of stress he was under from all sides. Whatever the truth, the episode marked the nadir of his life, both public and private. If his drinking never quite disappeared afterwards, neither did he. And although he had to resign himself to a five-year stint in opposition, Macdonald returned triumphantly to office in 1878, and remained prime minister until his death at 76 in 1891. During his last election campaign in 1890, admirers took to greeting him with cries of "You'll never die, John A.!" It's hard to blame them.

Question: What do we do with a character like John A. Macdonald, our first Prime Minister? Should his personal demons be swept under the carpet, or exposed to the world for all eyes to see? What are the benefits/detractors for an article like this one?