

The World of Our Fathers

Revisiting the Lives and Times of Macdonald and McGee

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Books

Richard Gwyn, *John A. – The man who Made Us – The Life and Times of John A. Macdonald*. Toronto: Random House, 2007, 501 pages

David A. Wilson, *Thomas D'Arcy McGee, Volume 1 Passion, Reason, and Politics 1825–1857*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill–Queen's University Press, 2008, 448 pages

LIFE IN CANADA is full of comforting rhythms. Take Canada Day, for instance. A day of fireworks, picnics, concerts in the park and craning our necks to watch the Snowbirds somersaulting above us. But, of late, a discordant note has sounded every Canada Day. Satiated with hot dogs and Blue Rodeo, we seem to have little time for our history. The Dominion Institute, Canada's watch dog of historical consciousness, glumly reports on the eve of every Canada Day that Canadians, in the words of the Institute's co-founder Rudyard Griffiths, are in danger of becoming a "rootless nation of amnesiacs." The numbers are worrisome. In 1997, the Institute reported that only 54% of adult Canadians could name Sir John A. Macdonald as our first prime minister; only 36% could accurately tag the year of Confederation. Ten years later, despite "History Minutes" in the cinemas, people's history on the television and "greatest" Canadian contests on the television, the situation has deteriorated. A 2007 Ipsos-Reid/Dominion Institute poll found that now only 46% could identify Macdonald and a mere 26% could pinpoint Confederation.

Like part of a Greek chorus, national political columnist Jeffrey Simpson frequently joins the lament. "No history, please, we're Canadian," he wrote in *The Globe and Mail*. Only Pierre Berton, Simpson suggested, ever possessed the talent for arousing Canadians' interest in their own history by spinning tales of building national dreams, pushing the Americans back across the Niagara border, storming Vimy, and all that heroic action. But, Simpson lamented, "the pickings get mighty slim after his volumes." And, as historian Jack Granatstein splenetically argued in *Who Killed Canadian History?*, our professional historians have done little to rectify the situation, choosing instead to concentrate on reporting national wrongs rather than

providing an uplifting Whiggish narrative of national accomplishment. A feverish debate has raged of late over whether nations in this post-modern world really need a national narrative to bolster their sense of citizenship. Citizenship, some insist, should be rooted in more than a historical trivia contest, a contest reflecting the sensibilities of a hitherto largely male and Anglo-centric historical profession in Canada. Griffiths, Simpson and Granatstein retort that citizenship, and all the social cohesion that it supports, necessarily needs a peg-board of common national knowledge – a set of common denominator facts and values that permit mutual action.

We are not alone in this debate. On Australia Day 2006, then Australian prime minister John Howard berated the quality of history in Australian schools. Quoting the esteemed Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey, Howard bemoaned the fact that young Australians got little more than "black arm band" history, "a fragmented stew of themes and issues" that tended to emphasize what had gone wrong in Australia rather than what had made it a society that was now the object of hundreds of thousands of immigrants' ambition. Australia, Howard concluded, needed "a structured narrative" of its past which would ensure that all Australians imbibed a common historical heritage. Howard called the nation's historians to a History Summit, where he urged them to reform their ways. Howard's government consequently implemented a citizenship test for newcomers, one with a strong historical bent. Yet, as in Canada, many Australians questioned the validity of making history national dogma. Howard is now gone from the prime minister's office, but the debate continues down under.

Another post-colonial nation – the United States – exhibits, at least to commentators like Jeffrey Simpson, a healthier fascination with history. When called by the pollsters, a majority of Americans can identify their Washingtons, Lincolns, Bunker Hills and Gettysburgs. They celebrate their Presidents' Day, visit a galaxy of presidential libraries and don't stumble through the words of their national anthem at the ballpark. They know *when* and *where* the rockets glared red. And they read their history. "Could it be that a fundamental difference lies in Americans being fascinated by their history and therefore wanting it to be retold again and again," Simpson has speculated, "whereas Canadians don't know much about the

grand narratives of their history because they aren't taught much about it and therefore aren't interested in reading about it."

Take biography, for instance. Every American generation, it seems, slips a new filter onto the lens of its national consciousness and produces a new impression of the men and events that shaped their nation. Each iteration presents a new interpretation of this panoply of protagonists. In the introduction of his 1996 biography of Thomas Jefferson, *The American Sphinx*, historian Joseph Ellis noted the malleability of Jefferson in the American consciousness. To some, he is the mentor of American libertarianism; to others he is an anchor of conservatism. Since Gilbert Chinard and Max Beloff produced the first modern, scholarly biographies of Jefferson in the mid-twentieth century, other biographers have compulsively returned to Jefferson and rotated him in the American consciousness. Jefferson the legalist. Jefferson the farmer. Jefferson the statesman of science. The diplomat. The lover of music. The slave owner. (Indeed, Jefferson the owner and lover of Sally Hemmings.)

Jefferson's great colleague and rival Alexander Hamilton has similarly been repeatedly reinvented to serve the changing sensibilities of the great republic. Contrary to Jefferson's libertarianism, Hamilton has been held up as an exemplar of centralized power, a dynamic executive branch and the importance of trade as an engine of national growth. This latter theme dominated Ron Chernow's engrossing 2004 biography of Hamilton, who, for Chernow, one of America's most prolific biographers, was "the prophet of the capitalist revolution in America." There is ample evidence of America's biographical carousel in any bookstore. Big, costly biographies that addict readers to their subject and engage their sense of national purpose dominate the history shelves. At first glance, who, for instance, would ever be tempted to tackle Robert Caro's mammoth, three volume biography of Lyndon Johnson? Yet, out of Caro's engrossing telling of Johnson's life one concludes that a man with the most venal of personalities can lead a nation to "new frontiers" of social reform and civil rights. In America, as in England, biography has installed itself as a prism of the national psyche. Americans seem to know their Washington not just because he adorns their dollar bill, but because they have encountered his life in book form.

Which brings us to Canada and the biographers of our founding fathers. Think, in particular, of the lives of Sir John A. Macdonald and Thomas D'Arcy McGee, two men intimately tied to Canada's creation in the mid-nineteenth century. Surely, here is grist for the biographer's mill. Perhaps yes, but also

sometimes no. Macdonald certainly floats lightly on the surface of our national consciousness. Airports and highways enshrine his name and he enjoys an anecdotal notoriety, principally fuelled by the folksy notion that our first prime minister was a "drunk." But, as the Dominion Institute reminds us, that is about it. Macdonald the master builder of federalism, Macdonald the economic architect of the nation, and Macdonald the master of bicultural politics barely register in the national consciousness.

Thomas D'Arcy McGee fares even worse. Drink and assassination have, however, held McGee back from historical oblivion. McGee has been carried along by his association with the mythic Irish passion for boozy merriment and nationalist posturing. And the sad fact of McGee's violent end at the hand of a shadowy assassin in 1868 has given countless high school and university lecturers a dramatic reprieve from the otherwise dreary details of Confederation. This coincidence of drink and death is testified to in Ottawa by the popularity of D'Arcy McGee's Pub on Sparks Street, located just metres from the scene of his bloody demise. But McGee the poet, the Irish nationalist or the theorist of cultural union has never installed itself in the national imagination.

Macdonald and McGee have, of course, had their biographers. But not many. In 1948, Donald Creighton, a historian at the University of Toronto who had made his reputation chronicling the power of the commercial empire of the St. Lawrence River in shaping Canada, complained that interest in Macdonald the man had "been secondary, not primary, and sometimes even accidental" to the writing of Canadian history. It was "curious," he wrote, that "Macdonald himself, has never been made the main theme of an extended study." Historical biography in Canada had instead, Creighton argued, focused on *papier mâché*? protagonists who were deployed to exemplify impersonal themes of national development – the achievement of responsible government, for instance – rather than to probe the intricacies of personality. Creighton set out to give Macdonald an identity of his own and in 1952 published the first installment of his two-volume biography of our first prime minister, *The Young Politician*. In 1955, a concluding volume, *The Old Chieftain*, rounded out the set and, according to the historian of the Canadian publishing industry Roy MacSkimming, outsold best selling U.S. authors like John Steinbeck in Canada. Creighton had proved that Canadians did indeed have an appetite for "character and circumstance" when it came to their politicians.

McGee, too, has had his biographers. Isabel Skelton's 1925 biography set the passionate Irishman in a romantic frame – a fiery Celtic nationalist is converted into the wordsmith of Confederation

nationalism. Others have delved into McGee's life; Robin Burns' unpublished 1976 doctoral thesis added new dimensions to our understanding of McGee the practical politician. McGee, for instance, presaged the Canadian welfare state. But generally McGee has been trapped in his iconic role of romantic nationalist, a species in perpetual short supply in this country. Hence, McGee has always proved enticing rhetorical material for political speechwriters. Take, for instance, Mackenzie King's syrupy rendering of McGee and national unity in his 1928 *The Message of the Carillon*. Unlike Macdonald, McGee has largely remained type cast in a *papier mâché*? role, better suited to conspiracy theory and pub culture than historical understanding.

Why, therefore, have we seemingly failed to exploit the opportunity set before us by Donald Creighton in the 1950s? Why have we failed to take up biography as a means of constantly regrooming our national consciousness?

The most prevalent attitude in the writing of Canadian political biography is that *once* is enough. Why retread the familiar? Yes, we have had coffee table treatments of Macdonald. And he has been given centre stage in film treatment of pivotal events such as the building of the Pacific railway, our "national dream." But no one has undertaken to reclothe him in a new, full biographical suit. Conforming to the Creightonian mould, our historians have filled out the biographical panoply of our prime ministers. Even here, we continue to live with gaps – Depression prime minister R.B. Bennett has yet to receive incisive biographical treatment. Only Laurier has enjoyed multiple rendition. But even here, in the hands of historians such as Joseph Schull and Laurier LaPierre, the theme has shifted little from a fixation on Laurier's "sunny way."

One also could argue that the biographical trajectory set by Creighton in the 1950s was warped in the 1970s by Canadian history's embrace of the "new history" and the subsequent questioning of political history as the sole font of national understanding. Hence the opening up of a creative spectrum of new histories – labour, gender, business, local histories – tended to shunt the "great men" to the sidelines of our historical consciousness. Yes, Macdonald et al were still there, but usually cast in the role of "givens" – the dead, white males who more elucidated the *problems* of Canadian existence than its solutions. In the dying decades of the twentieth century, it was, for instance, a brave graduate student who floated the idea of political biography with a supervisor. That challenge, most academics sniffed, was best left to Pierre Berton and his ilk.

So the years have passed. But, as the new century began to unfold, there were signs that political biography in Canada was revivifying itself. In 2006, for instance, historian John English and retired Quebec academics Max and Monique Nemni each produced books on the young Pierre Trudeau. Their interpretations differed: for English, young Trudeau was a "citizen of the world" in the making and for the Nemnis he was more an *enfant terrible* who dabbled in some of the unsavory political ideas of the 1930s. For once, Canadians were offered some biographical gristle to chew.

And then, in the fall of 2007 and the spring of 2008, two new biographies of Macdonald and McGee appeared: Richard Gwyn's *John A. – The Man Who Made Us – The Life and Times of John A. Macdonald* and David A. Wilson's *Thomas D'Arcy McGee: Passion, Reason, and Politics, 1825–1857*. Our political biographers, it seemed, had returned to the world of our fathers, our fathers of Confederation. Two things immediately stood out about the books. First, they represented a major commitment on behalf of two mainstream publishers. Like English's Trudeau, each represented the first installment of a two-volume endeavour. Two-volume biographies are regarded as risky ventures by publishers, hanging for their success on the sustained loyalty of readers through two purchases. Could the Canadian book market sustain nearly a thousand pages each for Macdonald and McGee? Random House and McGill-Queen's University Press believed that John A. and Thomas D'Arcy respectively warranted such ambition.

Equally interesting about these new biographies was the fact that their authors were accomplished storytellers, authors who had the Creightonian touch for character and circumstance. Gwyn is a seasoned journalist, long a political columnist with the *Toronto Star* and author of well-received popular biographies of Pierre Trudeau and Newfoundland father of Confederation Joey Smallwood. A frequent television commentator on national affairs, Gwyn understands the idiom and nuances of Canadian life. David Wilson wears the cloak of an academic historian of Celtic studies, with books on Irish nationalism and immigration and the transatlantic spread of ideology. But Wilson shares Gwyn's talent for a lively tale; his best-selling *Ireland, a Bicycle, and a Tin Whistle* purveyed a charming, if somewhat Guinness-soaked, chronicle of a wander through the Irish countryside on a bicycle.

So what do we get from these talented writers? Do we get a "new" Macdonald or McGee from their pens? And what do their interpretations tell us about the birth of the Canadian nation?

In the end, Gwyn's Macdonald is largely a familiar figure. Like Creighton, Gwyn presents Macdonald as "the man who made us" – the wily, Scottish pragmatist who devised a deft political style ideally suited to the fragile sensitivities of an infant, post-colonial society. Young Canada was a "crazy quilt" (to quote Goldwin Smith) of regional, ethnic and economic interests, always in danger of being overwhelmed by the prejudices of inured localism. In this milieu, Macdonald mastered the "primordial political tasks" of building consensus and interracial trust. Instinctively, Macdonald understood that he must be "a doer, not a thinker," light on ideology – beyond such broad rubrics as "loyalty" – and heavy on practicality. He was the small town lawyer who knew how to work with people of strikingly different backgrounds. As such, Gwyn argues, Macdonald was "the country's first truly *Canadian* prime minister." He fashioned "the mould into which almost all successful Canadian political leaders have fitted themselves and their parties." Gwyn, in short, reintroduces us to the seminal genius of Macdonald, but he does not reinvent him. He does not topple him from his Creightonian pedestal.

But Gwyn surpasses Creighton in crucial respects. He is a truly masterful storyteller. While Creighton was renowned for his Baroque imagery and theatricality, there was always a contrived sense about his narrative. Gwyn, on the other hand, has a magisterial knack for context and colour. The reader senses, for instance, that he is walking down Kingston's Princess Street in the 1840s, looking over the shoulder of Macdonald the young alderman as he pressed the flesh and contemplated the urge to nip into one of the city's 136 taverns to renew his strength. Similarly, Gwyn is brilliant in bringing out the human frailty of Macdonald. We acquire a deep empathy for Macdonald's troubled personal life – a roguish father, a chronically ill wife, the demands of building a legal practice in a colonial town, the death of a child all press on his psyche. No wonder the young Macdonald was "an on-again, off-again politician." No wonder the bottle at times offered escape. No wonder Macdonald early arrived at the realization that man was not a perfectible animal; he would instead deal with people as he found them. Thus, Gwyn draws an immense humanity out of Macdonald, a humanity that Creighton, eager to make Macdonald a nation-builder, often sidestepped.

Gwyn is also to be praised for thoroughly renovating the house that Creighton built. He stretches our appreciation of Macdonald's statecraft by drawing freely on the ample scholarship on Confederation era politics that has appeared in the half century since Creighton put down his pen. So, for instance, Gwyn usefully draws on the work of

political scientist S.J.R. Noel on "clientelism," the deferential and reciprocal bonding of leader and led in an era when votes were cast more out of an expectation of reward for loyalty than ideological purity. Similarly, he sets Macdonald's addictive use of patronage in the context of Gordon Stewart's persuasive argument that patronage provided the "glue" with the fragile young nation was held together. Historian Keith Johnson's investigation of Macdonald's business and investment activities is used to reveal the entrepreneurial side of our first prime minister. Medical experts are deployed to explain the lingering maladies of Macdonald's wife Isabella. In all this, Gwyn gives credit where it is due.

Gwyn's Macdonald is therefore more full-blooded and credible than Creighton's. He does not reinvent Macdonald in the way American biographers have made over their Jeffersons and Hamiltons. But he does infuse Macdonald and his times with a vivacity that escaped Creighton. Gwyn will pick up the story – and indeed he is telling a story in the best historical tradition – in his second volume which will carry Macdonald from the dawn of Confederation to his grave.

As an exercise in biographical repositioning, David Wilson's *McGee* covers significantly more territory. Wilson reminds us that McGee has long been trapped in diametrically-opposed mythic roles: as the wordsmith of young Canada's new nationalism, on the one hand, and as a traitor to his Irish roots, on the other. Wilson's achievement is to build a bridge between the starting point of McGee's "Young Ireland" nationalism in his homeland and his 1860s embrace of a pluralistic vision tolerant of minority identities in his new Canadian home. In the end, Wilson constructs a new synthesis of McGee that rises well above the pat stereotypes – a synthesis that blends strains of Burkean conservatism, Celticism and Catholicism into a nationalism well suited to the ideological needs of a fractious British North America on the eve of Confederation. In short, Wilson makes McGee into a real father of Confederation, not just a colourful Irishman who wandered across this colonial stage en route to his sad end. Although this volume leaves McGee in 1857, the trajectory of McGee's journey to a pluralistic nationalism is abundantly evident by the time he put down permanent roots in Canada in the 1850s. A final volume will carry McGee through Confederation to the fateful bullet on that cold April morning in 1868.

McGee was a prolific writer. A fast-paced journalist, McGee was also the author of history, novellas, poetry and literary essays. Wilson has meticulously read his way through this library of material. McGee is not easy to pin down. He frequently contradicted himself, abruptly abandoned

ideas, tactics, and friends and often misread the situation around him. But, Wilson argues, out of experience in Ireland, America and Upper Canada, McGee assembled a coherent worldview that by the late 1850s allowed him to reject revolutionary Irish nationalism while at the same time carrying across the Atlantic a love of his Celtic heritage and his ultramontane Catholicism. Appalled by the Know-Nothing anti-Irish bigotry of the United States, McGee came to see Canada as a place of cultural accommodation in which liberal individualism might let English, Irish and French mold a society of tolerance. Moderation and gradualism, not revolution, became McGee's creed, a creed that coincided with the prescience of Macdonald and Cartier.

Wilson's tracing of McGee's genesis as a political theorist is brilliantly chronicled. Unfortunately, he is less able to delve into the mind of McGee, a man alternately given to binge drinking and ardent temperance, prone to nasty vituperation and often oblivious to the emotional and material well-being of his family. For all his literary output, McGee left behind no body of personal papers which might allow an historian to probe his inner motivations and phobias. Wilson gives us hints of what traumas might have lurked below McGee's surface: the death of his mother Dorcas when he was but a lad of eight, the ignominy he felt in the wake of the collapse of the "cabbage-patch revolution" of 1848 in Ireland, for instance. We get glimpses of McGee's long-suffering wife Mary but little sense of her reaction to her husband's frequent absences and pecuniary abandon. Whatever inner demons McGee sought escape from, Wilson has put us in a position to view McGee's erratic personality against a backdrop of the emergence of the gestation of a coherent political philosophy. This is his triumph as a biographer.

The late twentieth century witnessed an often heated debate in Canadian history over the purpose of history in our society. After decades of ascendant "new history," practitioners of the "old" history went on the counter-offensive, arguing that society craved synthesizing narrative – a "story" of national development. It was a scrappy and largely unproductive debate in which each side frequently failed to acknowledge the utility of the other's approach to the human condition. Through this fog of contention, the writing of biography offered evidence – a continuo – that some forms of historical investigation are indeed eternal. Biography is a vessel into which the wine of new and old history can be poured. Mature nations employ biography as a litmus test of their development. Richard Gwyn's immensely sympathetic updating of Macdonald, our *primus inter pares* of Confederation, and David Wilson's portrait

of McGee as the father of "open-minded nationalism" in Canada transcend the parochial bickering amongst historians of the last decades. Two centuries ago, another Scot, James Boswell, boasted that he had "Johnsonised the land." Boswell's art, it seems, is coming alive again in Canada.

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