

Was Sir John A. our Best PM?

by Richard Gwyn

Of all of our 28 Prime Ministers since Confederation, we really remember just two: John A. Macdonald and Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

This doesn't mean that all the others (actually fewer than 28 in all because several served twice) are forgotten.

Wilfrid Laurier will always be admired for his elegance and eloquence. Mackenzie King always gets a high rating for leading Canada through the transition from an agricultural society to an urbanized, industrial one and for creating a modern civil service.

Lester Pearson will never be forgotten for his achievements in peace-keeping and with the Maple Leaf flag, and, far from least, for having won the Nobel Peace Prize. Even if John Diefenbaker disappointed, a memory endures that he stirred up a somnolent country and dared to challenge it with a Northern Vision.

Macdonald and Trudeau, though, stand apart from the rest. Both in a certain sense are still alive. Both still stir emotions, and of all kinds-- of admiration and of anger, of love and hate, of respect and of condemnation. We are interested in both, and feel strongly about both.

Each is that Canadian rarity, a hero; each is also to quite a few Canadians, a villain— Macdonald for executing Louis Riel, Trudeau for imposing the War Measures Act.

About Trudeau, the finest insight about him was that observation by the authors Christina McCall and Stephen Clarkson that, "He haunts us still".

Of Macdonald, it could be said: "He taunts us still". Every good portrait of him captures the amused, sardonic look with which he gazes outwards while calculating how to manipulate and seduce anyone watching into becoming a Conservative.

There are parallels between their careers. Both lost just one election and then was returned to office at the first available opportunity by an electorate relieved to get their hero/villain back.

Neither could be fitted into the formula of a typical Canadian. With Trudeau, this was more obvious: he always seemed as if he would be happier talking to some incomprehensible European intellectual, or to a silent Buddhist monk, than to any actual Canadian.

Macdonald broke an even more important Canadian rule. He had no interest in pretending to be respectable and proper. He not only drank but he did this openly and entirely unapologetically, once putting down a heckler by saying-- quite correctly-- that voters preferred, "John A. drunk to George Brown sober".

There were parallels in their policies. The purpose of each was to build Canada. For Trudeau, this meant patriation of the constitution and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and bilingualism, and multiculturalism.

For Macdonald this meant Confederation itself, and afterwards the National Policy of high tariffs to foster manufacturing here, and creating the NorthWest Mounted Police, (today, the RCMP), and, above all, by fulfilling his impossible dream of a trans-continental railway.

Besides building Canada, both were determined to save it. Trudeau's life-long mission was to ensure that Quebec did not leave Canada.

Macdonald's equivalent was to make certain that Americans did not take over Canada, nor-- an equal threat as he saw it-- that Canadians did not slip southwards by reaching for cross-border free trade before Confederation had, in his phrase, "hardened from gristle into bone".

Of the pair, time has actually been kinder to Macdonald than to Trudeau. Both were widely loved in their day and the funerals of both were occasions for national mourning.

Trudeau, though, remains a controversial figure in contemporary terms while Macdonald stirs kindlier thoughts and a readiness now to revel in his humour and his humanity (academic historians do tend to be censorious about him).

Macdonald's birthday—the evidence is unclear whether it actually was on January 10th or 11th—will be celebrated this week in places as far apart as his home-town of Kingston and Vancouver. After writing this piece I will go down to Hamilton to talk to a group now staging its third annual event, while a fellow biographer, Charlotte Gray, will be doing the same in Orillia.

Elsewhere, quite a few individuals across the country will, on the 10th or the 11th, raise a glass to Macdonald. More of us ought to do the same for Trudeau; except, of course, he drank very little.

Richard Gwyn is the author of the new, prize-winning, biography: John A; The Man Who Made Us, of which he is now working on the second volume. Among his earlier works was a biography of Trudeau, The Northern Magus.