

Sir John A Macdonald

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Sir John Alexander Macdonald

(Cons.) 1867-1873, 1878-1891

A Father of Confederation and probably its chief architect, Sir John A. Macdonald was the new nation's first Prime Minister and directed its destinies a total of nineteen years.

For twenty-three years before Confederation he had been a powerful force in the development of the Canada of that day and it has been said the story of Sir John's adult life is the history of Canada.

Glasgow-born in 1815, he was brought to Canada at five, left school to help his family at fifteen, studied while he worked and was admitted to the Bar at twenty-one. His natural gifts led him into local politics and in 1844 he won the Kingston seat for the Conservatives in the legislature of Upper Canada. Three years later he was in the cabinet and in 1857 he became Conservative leader and Prime Minister of the united Canadas.

With the co-operation from Liberal and French-Canadian leadership, he sparked into action the long-smouldering urge for provincial union of all Canada. He helped form the great coalition which went to the historic Charlottetown Conference in 1864 and started the move that never lost momentum until Confederation was proclaimed July 1, 1867.

He was chosen first Prime Minister by the Queen's Canadian representative, with instructions to form a government and hold immediate general elections. His party won with 101 seats to 80 and Sir John launched the great united Canada experiment.

Manitoba in 1870, British Columbia in 1871 and Prince Edward Island in 1873 joined the charter members—Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. There were to be no more accessions until 1904.

British Columbia had come in with the promise of a railway linking it to the east. That promise brought the famous Canadian Pacific scandal and Sir John his most bitter political experience. Alleged political-financial misdeeds brought Sir John's resignation in 1873 and his party's defeat at the polls in 1874. He came back with a sweeping victory in 1878 and was Prime Minister until his death in 1891.

A tall, handsome man with gracious manners and a fine gift of oratory, possessed of strengths and weaknesses which endeared him to all classes, he was equally at ease in a royal palace or a humble cottage. He laid much of the foundation of the Canada of today.

Completely exhausted by the strain of winning the 1891 general election, he nevertheless insisted on presiding at the new Parliament but suffered a stroke a few weeks later and died within ten days. He is buried in Cataraqui Cemetery near Kingston.

