

When life's work is done – the passing of Sir John A. Macdonald

By Graham Evan MacDonell

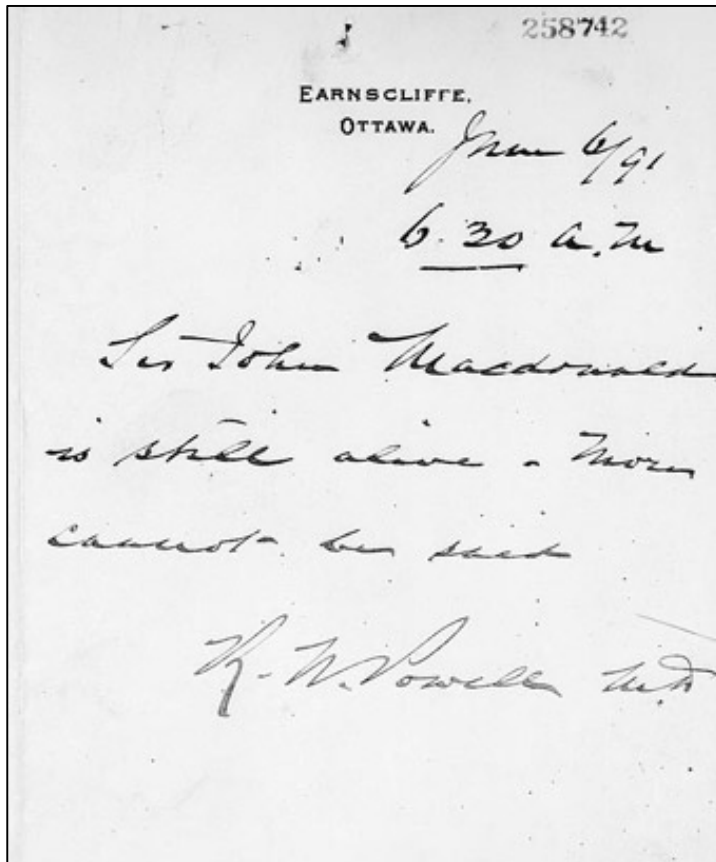
June 6 is a date that many older Canadians remember as the launch of the Normandy invasion in 1944. Others might recall an attempt on the life of Pope Benedict XVI in 2007; the attack by the Indian Army in 1984 on the Golden Temple in Amritsar as ordered by Indira Gandhi, with a death count nearing 6,000; and, the death of Senator Robert F. Kennedy in Los Angeles in 1968.

But Monday, June 6 is also a date in Canadian history, for in 1891 Canada's first prime minister, Sir John Alexander Macdonald, passed away -- 120 years ago. While most Canadians remember his legacy, few recall that he was born in Glasgow, Scotland, on January 10, 1815 and was one of two Scots-born prime ministers in the early years of the 'Dominion'.

After a half-century of public service, first as a councillor in Kingston, then as a member of the Upper Canada Legislature before becoming a member of Parliament, Macdonald (or Sir John A., as he is more often referred to) was to face his last of over a dozen elections at the civic, provincial and federal levels. During the 1891 federal election, Sir John became seriously ill, forcing him to have to learn the results while confined to his bed in Earnscliffe (then the prime minister's official residence in Ottawa, the nation's capital, and now the residence of the British High Commissioner) as recounted by his biographer, Joseph Pope, who was for many years his private secretary.

On Feb. 26, 1891, family physician Dr. Sullivan (had) diagnosed, "*commencing bronchitis, loss of voice, congested soft palate and pharynx, pain on inspiration over left lung, and a very weak and irregular pulse. There was no doubt of a congested chest and a threatened pneumonia.*" So it was reported in 'Historic Headlines - A Century of Canadian News Dramas' by the late noted Canadian author Pierre Burton. Seventy-six-year old John Alexander Macdonald had undergone heart failure then suffered a second stroke on May 29 and a third on June 5, 1891 -- the day before his untimely death.

A medical bulletin was issued by Dr. R.W. Powell on the day of Prime Minister John A. Macdonald's death. It read, "*June 6, 1891 6.30 a.m. Sir John Macdonald is still alive. More cannot be said. R.W. Powell, M.D.*"



The Globe of June 8, 1891, (now The Globe and Mail) ran a full-page article by-lined, "By Our Own Reporters" that led with a quote, "Gentlemen, Sir John Macdonald is dead."

The speaker was Mr. Joseph Pope. The place was the gate of Earnscliffe. At 10:25 a.m., Pope addressed a group of correspondents in a husky voice: "He died at 10:15 without pain and in peace."

Much like today's newspaper, radio and television reporters who 'camp out' near a significant location for their news gathering, The Globe story went on to describe the historic event of the day:

"The representatives of the press turned to the adjacent tent to which the telegraph instruments were already clicking off the fatal news by private messages, brought out by Mr. Pope, and they flashed the news by land and sea to newspapers in all parts of the English-speaking world."

The Globe article reported the brief announcement with, 'Sir John Macdonald is dead,' meant so much that the words kept ringing in the ears of those who heard it and the mind seemed hardly capable of realizing that the most prominent figure in the public life of Canada for 40 years had disappeared forever.

"But a few days ago, he was sitting in the councils of the nations, the directing spirit; but a few days ago, he was planning a political program for the future months. The tolling of the bell in the city tower rang out on the still night air telling Ottawa that her foremost citizen, the head of the Government, the great leader of a historic party was no more."

The people needed not to inquire the meaning of the tolling bell. They knew when they heard it that the master of Earnscliffe was dead.

Sir John had lived at Earnscliffe since 1883 after purchasing it from railway magnate Thomas Reynolds' son. (Thomas' sister used to take care of Sir John's only daughter, Mary, at the Macdonald's summer place at Riviere du Loup. Mary had been born encephalitic in 1869 and required a carer for her entire life.) For, after all, the media are and always have been society's first line historians, recording for posterity the events of the day with details that most take for granted.



Earnscliffe – the Macdonald home - 1883 to 1891

One has to envisage the scene: a wrought iron gate leading to a U-shaped driveway where horse-drawn carriages had ferried the nation's leader and guests, regal and political, on a daily basis, from the Scottish baronial style home in the prestigious suburb of Rockcliffe just less than a mile to Parliament Hill, which housed the House of Commons, the Senate and cabinet offices with the East and West blocks filling in the U-shaped complex of government buildings that constitute "The Hill."

With the advent of newspapers as a mass medium, a newspaper story of this magnitude automatically warranted front-page coverage for every daily and small town weekly during the early part of June, 1891.

The eloquence words of the unidentified staff reporters were to be digested by every literate citizen and listened to by those who lacked the prerequisite skills: *"And now, death, like a skilful armourer, was slowing encasing the wasted form (from) which the soul was soon to quit. The feet and limbs had grown old, and life was steadily leaving the body. Outside not a sound disturbed the still evening; not a leaf stirred in the motionless air. No one came to the house. The time for human help had gone. No one could now stay the silent reaper..."*

"The bright young spirit who had arduously and valiantly won a wide fame and remained in later years in the front of battle, had, at long length, reached the brink of eternity."

It was at this time that the reporter noted that Rev. Pollard of the 'English church' came down and was admitted to sick chamber. From that time till nine o' clock, the article noted, was one long period of suspense. The Premier (used then as inter changeable with the title 'Prime Minister') was unconscious, as indeed he had been during the past 24 hours, and in a comatose state.

At nine o'clock, the physician noticed a change and notified the family, who gathered round the bedside, conscious that the end was now at hand. His irregular and laboured breathing, which had been for hours a series of gasps, had now reached the rate of 56 a minute, ceased, and in its place there came a deep, regular and ordinary respiration.

For another hour the terrible waiting and suspense continued. At last, without a struggle, his heart stopped beating, the breath of life left the body, and Azrael departed with the soul of Sir John Alexander Macdonald. Like death, as little Elsie described it to the Prince, he simply ceased to breathe.

The reporters concluded their very moving account of Sir John's passing with a quote from the renowned Canadian poet D'Arcy McGee: *"It's easy to die when life's work is done, to pass from the earth like a harvest day's sun."*

Sir John Alexander Macdonald was aged 76 years and five months.

At half past 10, 15 minutes after death, the following bulletin, the last of all, was posted on the gate:

"Earnscliffe, 10.30 p.m. Sir John Macdonald died at 10.15 p.m."

It was signed by R.W. Powell, M.D. Regrettably, the bulletin had not been posted for (more than) an hour before some ghoulish-minded intruder stole it.

Canada was a parliamentary monarch premised on the British model -- a form staunchly advocated by Sir John to counter the republicanism that occasionally swept through the Upper Canada, now called Ontario, as a result of its proximity to the United States.

And, as such, there was a definite protocol to be followed upon Sir John's passing.

A special messenger almost immediately left Earnscliffe for Rideau Hall to convey the news to his Excellency, who sent his secretary, Captain Colville, over with his expression of his and Lady Stanley's deep sympathy for Lady Macdonald and the family.

His Excellency Lord Stanley (Governor-General Sir Frederick Arthur Stanley, 1st Baron Stanley of Preston, 16th Earl of Derby, 1888-1893) received the notification of Sir John's death and immediately cabled the news to the Queen (Victoria), Lord Salisbury (the prime minister) and Lord Knutsford (secretary of state for the colonies). With the death of the prime minister, the governor-general was, for the first time in the history of the Dominion, left without an adviser. In essence, a constitutional crisis (as Canada has a written constitution -- then known as the British North America Act, 1867 and now known as the Constitutional Act of 1982) had been created by the prime minister's passing.

How long Her Majesty could remain without an adviser depended altogether on the governor-general. The media pundits of the day thought that he would send for someone of the Privy Council the following day.

(It was not until 1933 that Canada gained complete independence from Britain and the Supreme Court became the highest body of resolution for constitutional matters. Until then, the Privy Council was the last court of appeal or decision -al body for issues of constitutional concern.)

Then, as The Globe article recounted:

"Then Dr. Powell summoned the family to the bedside.

Around the bed gathered:

** Lady (Agnes) Macdonald*

** Mr. Hugh John Macdonald, the premier's son*

** Mrs. (Gertie) Macdonald, and her sister, Mrs. Fitzgibbons*

** Miss Marjorie Stewart*

** Hon. Edgar & Mrs. Dewdney*

** Mr. John Pope, the Prime Minister's secretary*

** Mr. Fred White*

** Mr. George Sparkes, a relative of Sir John's*

** Dr. Powell, the physician*

** Ben Chilton, the Premier's trusted messenger for many years.*

Lady Agnes was Sara Agnes Bernard, Sir John's second wife, a Jamaican-born Canadian of English ancestry and a French Huguenot background.

His second son, Hugh John, also became a lawyer and, for a while, practised with his father and, during 1890, sat as an MP with his father before returning to his adopted home of Manitoba to become the premier of that prairie province. (Sir John's first son, John Alexander, sired by his first wife, Isabella Clark of Dalnavert, near Rothiemurchus, died at 13 months from convulsions after a fall at their Kingston home.)



Hugh John Macdonald

Gertie, or Gertrude Agnes Vankoughnet, was Hugh's second wife and was mother to his only son, John Alexander, who was named after his grandfather, Sir John, but died an untimely death at age 19 on April 25, 1905 while his father, Hugh John was campaigning in an election.

George Sparkes is cited as "Sparkes" but could be "Sparks" of the Nicholas Sparks family and Sparks Road (and Mall); however, as to the relationship with Sir John, that has not been determined.

Under Macdonald's will, dated 4 Sept. 1890, rights of administration were given to Edgar Dewdney, Frederick White (a former secretary), and Joseph Pope, his

secretary since 1882. The three men were, with Agnes, the official guardians of Mary, his handicapped daughter, who would live until 1933. All of Macdonald's real estate and property in Ottawa (mainly Earnscliffe, the family's home since 1882) went to Agnes free of rent.

Her income was provided by her marriage settlement and by the testimonial gift of \$67,000 presented to the Macdonalds in 1872.

Macdonald's two insurance policies, each worth £2,000, were to be invested for the benefit of Hugh John (his son, then aged 41), who also received some estate and stock left to Sir John by his sister, Louisa (who had died in 1889). Not counting the Earnscliffe property, Macdonald left about \$80,000 plus the Testimonial Fund income.

For someone who came from a working class background in the (now) Merchant City section of Glasgow, Sir John, who rose to prominence as Canada's foremost prime minister and elder statesman, died relatively poorly for a lawyer and politician of his day. (His father Hugh had a business on Brunswick Lane off Argyll Street in Glasgow – a building which is slated for demolition so that a Selfridges department store can be built – part of the Galen Weston empire.)

His kindness to his fellow man was perchance the reason why he never amassed great wealth for he was always, it seemed, one step ahead of his creditors. He just helped too many others with no thought for himself; however, his estate was enough for his widow, Lady Agnes, to live the rest of her life in relative comfort. (She died in Eastbourne, England, on Sept. 5, 1920, and is buried in Ocklynge Cemetery.)

The House of Commons was solemnly decorated in black bunting; his office left as he had last used it -- to this day for posterity; and a cortege with horse-drawn carriages made its way from Parliament Hill to Union Station on the edge of Confederation Square for transportation to Kingston, where his funeral was to be held.

The newspaper's descriptive reporting stated:

"Canadians felt a great sense of loss when Sir John A. Macdonald died. Thousands lined the streets as his funeral procession left Parliament on June 10, 1891 and made its way to St. Alban's Church for the Service."

His body had lain in state for the previous three days before being moved for a memorial service at St. Alban's (in Ottawa) for the benefit of those who would not be travelling to Kingston for the burial. There, after an 80-mile train trip, another cortege, assembled in front of City Hall, would move through the streets to Cataraqui (the Huron term for the location of Kingston) Cemetery.

While his initial burial was marked by a simple place citing his name, those of his parents, his date of death and age, the government of Canada has, over the years, commemorated his legacy with a more grand marker and plaque.

Today, a simple grey cross on a base with an inscription, "*John Alexander Macdonald, 1815-1891, At Rest*" sits on a white granite pedestal.

The site includes:

- * his father, Hugh, who died in 1841
- * his mother, Helen, who died in 1862 (five years before he accomplished his greatest achievement in becoming the first prime minister of Canada)
- * his first wife, Isabella Clark, who died in 1857
- * his first son, John Alexander, who succumbed in 1848
- * his elder sister, Margaret, who died in 1876
- * her husband, university professor James Williamson.



Sir John Alexander Macdonald's final resting place

The passing of a monarch, an emperor or a president is a moving experience for any nation as we recall the passing of King George VI, American President John Fitzgerald Kennedy or Japanese Emperor Hirohito even though they are now several decades past. For Canada, the passing of its first prime minister has never been surpassed by anyone since 1891 in evoking such a national response, perhaps with the exception of Terry Fox in 1981 or Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Canada's 15th prime minister, who also attained the country's highest office in two segments (1968-79 and 1980-84) like Sir John, and died in 2000.

However, even the anniversary of Sir John's death will pass by as seemingly another day on Monday. Few will realize the linkage that Canada has with Scotland through him albeit it was a country that he left at the age of five and only ever returned to once again -- in 1842 -- and then, only to Edinburgh and not his hometown of Glasgow.



Canada's first and third prime minister - Sir John Alexander Macdonald – shortly before his passing on June 6, 1891

His legacy as a politician is immeasurable. His contribution to the founding of Canada is unmatched. But death is one part of life that none of us can evade and Sir John Alexander Macdonald may have hoped to contribute more.

But, there comes a time when, *"It's easy to die when life's work is done, to pass from the earth like a harvest day's sun."*

And Sir John's 'work' was certainly more than enough for anyone to die with ease, with a sense of satisfaction in making a contribution for the betterment of his fellow man, to pass from earth like a harvest day's sun.

Graham Evan MacDonell is the principal researcher of Scot-Can Genealogical Research Services in Abbotsford, B.C. and formerly provided genealogical research services through 'The Great Glen Genealogical Research Centre' in Inverness, Scotland. He is the world's leading genealogist on Sir John A. Macdonald, having traced his ancestry to Somerled and descendency to three living generations through an adopted son of his grand-daughter, Isabella Mary (Daisy) Macdonald Gainsford.