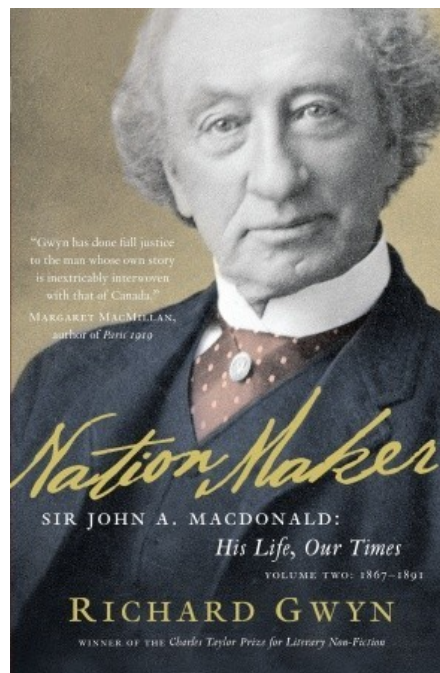




Nation Maker: Sir John A. Macdonald: His Life, Our Times

Richard Gwyn

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#1 NATIONAL BESTSELLER

An exciting story, passionately told and rich in detail, this major biography is the second volume of the bestselling, award-winning **John A: The Man Who Made Us**, by well-known journalist and highly respected author Richard Gwyn.

John A. Macdonald, Canada's first and most important prime minister, is the man who made Confederation happen, who built this country over the next quarter century, and who shaped what it is today. From Confederation Day in 1867, where this volume picks up, Macdonald finessed a reluctant union of four provinces in central and eastern Canada into a strong nation, despite indifference from Britain and annexationist sentiment in the United States.

But it wasn't easy. The wily Macdonald faced constant crises throughout these years, from Louis Riel's two rebellions through to the Pacific Scandal that almost undid his government and his quest to find the spine of the nation: the railroad that would link east to west. Gwyn paints a superb portrait of Canada and its leaders through these formative years and also delves deep to show us Macdonald the man, as he marries for the second time, deals with the birth of a disabled child, and the assassination of his close friend Darcy McGee, and wrestles with whether Riel should hang.

Indelibly, Gwyn shows us Macdonald's love of this country and his ability to joust with forces who would have been just as happy to see the end of Canada before it had really begun, creating a must-read for all Canadians.

Nation Maker: Sir John A. Macdonald: His Life, Our Times Details

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Al says

A superbly well-written book about our founding father and first Prime Minister and the early days of Canada as a nation following Confederation in 1867. This is an important book for Canadians wishing to understand the foundation of our country and the issues and events of that time that have shaped us into what we are today. This book should be a must read in all of our schools. And to Sir John A, thanks!

Adrian says

Capital job of covering the life of Canada's first, best prime minister. The events you expect to be covered well- building of the CPR and clash with Riel- are. But there are surprises in Gwynn's analysis. He points to the Washington Conference at which Canada was only a subsidiary player in negotiations between Britain and the US where JAM first established himself and where Canada proved to be a nation in its own right. Macdonald is criticized here for his lackadaisical attitude toward British control over Canadian affairs (it's unbelievable that the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London undercut our Supreme Court for years!) and for a racist policy toward the Chinese who built the railway. But on balance JAM ruled wisely and his Franchise Bill of 1885 proves his attitude toward natives and women's suffrage were well ahead of their time. Excellent.

Colleen Fidlin says

An interesting read for those of us wanting to learn more about the founder of our country.

Jodi Ann says

A very easy and enjoyable read. Gwyn's "Nation Maker" looks at Sir John A. Macdonald's post-Confederation career. Just as Canadian Confederation was not a guarantee, neither was the young country's success as an independent state on the North American continent. Gwyn shows both the personal and professional lives of a complicated man both of his time and ahead of it and how he helped make Canada what it is today. Gwyn's style makes this volume, with its companion "John A.: The Man Who Made Us", a very approachable biography to Canada's first prime minister.

In this era of reconciliation, it was interesting to read of Macdonald's efforts to include indigenous peoples in the government of the country and of his response to both the collapse of the bison and the Metis uprising of 1885. It would seem his failings, just as his successes, played their part in shaping the country's history.

Carolyn Harris says

The definitive biography of Canada's first Prime Minister from Confederation in 1867 until his death in 1891. The book is very much a "life and times" and includes fascinating little known episodes from late 19th century Canadian history including the earliest parliamentary debate in Canada concerning womens' suffrage. Gwyn does an excellent job of capturing the personality and character of Macdonald and the political figures of his time, including his famous adversary Louis Riel. The focus of the book is Macdonald's political achievements including Confederation and the railway but Gwyn also analyzes Macdonald's shortcomings and provides a balanced assessment of his legacy.

Jeff V says

Excellent work! Thank you Mr. Gwyn.

Anita says

A honest narrative on the man who made us. Re-wrote into history the fact that Sir John A. wanted to extend the vote to women. And, that two of Canada's Fathers of Confederation were assassinated...and I won't tell you who!

Nina Usherwood says

Again a excellent book about a very interesting person. Will look for more information about him. Highly recommend.

Daniel Kukwa says

This is the WOW to end all WOW's! God in heaven, where is Sir John A Macdonald now, when we need him more than ever. If you ever wondered what ever happened to the giants that once bestrode the Earth like gods...read this second volume of Richard Gywn's masterful overview of Macdonald's life. None of us could ever be as interesting as Canada's titanic first Prime Minister.

Sheila says

We cannot understand Canada if we do not know anything about the Nation Builder 'Sir John A Macdonald'.

I wanted to read Canadian history and how Canada was created as a country.

I was impressed as to how long and tirelessly hard Macdonald worked to create confederation of Canada. The fact is Sir Macdonald was the greatest Prime Minister of Canada. To join east coast to west coast Canadian Pacific Railway was built with a scandal of corruption and deceit involving Sir Macdonald but finally the railway was completed as planned. Cheap labour of Chinese temporary workers was abused and

how head tax was implemented. Macdonald was good politician, however the rights of Aboriginals and Metis was never resolved satisfactorily. Even today the very people who own this land are still living in poverty, lacking housing, education, development of their reserves and healthcare. The differences of Quebec and rest of Canada erupted over the hanging of Louis Riel. Quebec still claims to be distinct society status. Annexation sentiment of USA further enforced resolution of Sir Macdonald to establish union of provinces to create a strong nation. Biography includes federal powers, laws, provincial powers, economics, involvement of the British monarchy and United States and the sad time of depression.

Canadian history is not very old, however it is very interesting how confederation was created. Biography of Sir John A. Macdonald by Richard Gwyn is well researched and well written. I should have read 'The Man Who Made Us' first. I am going to read it now. I would recommend this book for every Canadian.

Brian Ross says

Nation-Maker is the second of a two-part biography by Richard Gwyn. An excellent read; historical critics laud it for incorporating lots of new research that didn't appear in the classic Creighton biography of Sir John A, but also Richard Gwyn is a journalist and has that a narrative flair which makes this an excellent piece of popular history. Highly recommended to anyone who wants to know about the origins of this country. It gave me an appreciation of both what is, what might have been, and helps make sense of some of the issues that plague us today. Plus ca change!

I especially like the interweaving of the personal (the man) with the context (the times).

I'll re-read both volumes sometime later.

Matt says

Gwyn concludes his biography of Sir John A. Macdonald, wasting no time in recounting the many post-Confederation tales involving Canada's first Prime Minister. While not essential, any curious reader ought to dive into the first volume to have a better idea of the momentum garnered, bringing the story to this point. These post-Confederation years in Macdonald's life are filled with adventure, controversy, and political actors that bring out the best (and worst) in Macdonald's acumen. At times a little denser than Volume One, Gwyn tackles many of the major issues in Macdonald's life, which end up also shaping Canada as a whole. Expected subjects like the Canadian Pacific Scandal, National Policy, and settling the North-West (and their subsequent rebellions) are detailed thoroughly and leave the reader with a better understanding of these subjects that may receive a paragraph or two in school textbooks. A comprehensive examination of the execution of Riel leave the reader with a well-rounded approach to Macdonald and the political scene of the latter decades of the 19th century.

At the outset, Gwyn paints a portrait of Confederation that the birth of Canada was less by desire and more by need, in contrast to the other territorial unions emerging around the world in 1867. This theme, the identity of the Canadian State, reemerges throughout, with even Macdonald questioning its foundation. From the pact approach (that all provinces came together to grant Canada its existence) to the unification under one political umbrella, Gwyn poses anew the question hotly contested by Canadian historians and political scientists alike. The additional intervention of the British Judicial Committee of the Privy Council (the last court of appeal in Canada until 1949) that redefined the form of federalism Canada would espouse for

decades to come contravened the idea that Macdonald had and acts to derail some of the expectations that Macdonald saw as inherent.

Gwyn also presents some of the lesser known areas that Macdonald strove to achieve, including early suffrage for women, Canada's place at the table with the US and UK governments, and his eventual self-doubt about Canada's role on the world scene. While hindsight is always clearer, the reader may not know until reading books like this just how trapped Canada was, a plaything of Imperial Britain and the annex-hungry United States. Placed in a precarious position during the US Civil War (one of the impetuses for Confederation), Canada was to be used as a bargaining chip by the British to appease the snubbed Americans, led by Grant and Seward.

Gwyn makes his mark by illustrating how decided Macdonald appeared to be when it came to leaving Canada in a strong position before he stepped away. Macdonald's ideas were numerous and his desire to quell dissent was not only political or partisan in nature, but also in an effort to keep the pristine image of this new nation as the 20th century appeared on the horizon. His passion, sometimes jaded, was deep and his dedication without doubt. He sought to steer Canada through its troubled early years, while also keeping the British connection stronger than ever. Gwyn personifies Macdonald in ways forgotten by the history books. A reckless drinker and power seeker may be the surface image known by many, but Gwyn delves deeper to show a softer side to Macdonald as he deals with his daughter, a more melancholic side as he contemplates his place in the larger political machine, and a side that presents a world-class diplomat when handling British concerns. It was only until the end of his career that Macdonald became tied to a strong Canada-US relations debate, one which caused his National Policy to flex its protectionist muscle.

Gwyn uses a plethora of sources to solidify his stories and the historical narration found throughout. While Donald Creighton was key in Volume One's foundation (and the entire two-volume project, a resurrection of his only 1950s through biography of Macdonald), this second volume is supported by articles, books, political cartoons, and correspondence/diary entries to flesh out these historical events. Gwyn is no two-bit historian, he has invested much time in this project and the results are well worth any reader's time, whose curiosity in Canada's first Prime Minister is high. Well worth the invested time and completely readable by the everyday Canadian, Gwyn masters the art of storytelling in an award-winning fashion.

Kudos Mr. Gwyn for such a thorough and detailed account of Sir John A. With the 200th anniversary of his birth just around the corner, this is a fabulous literary investment for any reader and surely complements Creighton's seminal work, of which I will invest time in the not too distant future. As Gwyn concludes the biography, let me conclude this review: without Macdonald Canada may, most assuredly, have never existed.

Gerardo says

Great book reflecting what happened during the first decades of Confederation. Easy to read, looks very well documented. Only negative side is the author is a captive fan of Macdonald. There is nothing wrong about it except the narrative in several key passages looks strongly biased.

Other than that, if you know nothing or almost nothing about Canadian history from 1867 to 1891, this book is an excellent start point.

Paul Heidebrecht says

Historical biography at its very best! And what a person to write about--few human beings can claim to have

envisioned and created a nation but John A. Macdonald did. You can't understand Canada if you don't know anything about this man. He managed to finesse both Britain and the United States and patch together an almost incompatible collection of peoples stretched across half the top half of a continent using a railroad to do it. No one did politics better than this man but few were more loved or respected in Canada's history. I can't recommend Gwynn's two-volume set on John A. enough.

Rick says

Nation maker is an excellent and much-needed modern biography of Sir John A. Macdonald. I would have given it 5 stars except for the omission of one very important subject from the book (which I will discuss later). The book reinforced and enhanced my view of Macdonald as a political master with few peers in Canadian History. I haven't actually read much on Macdonald since my university days so the book greatly expanded my views on him. The author also found new material that was previously under reported. The following points stood out for me. Macdonald's personal life was even more heart breaking than I thought and his natural optimism was even greater than I imagined. His drinking problem was even worse than I thought, and did at times impact his job performance. His role in Confederation was even more important than I believed, as was his role in preserving his fragile creation until his death in 1891. The book makes a good argument that without Macdonald Canada would likely have become part of the US. Macdonald also created the template for political success in Canada by making his Conservative Party a big tent party that stood for tolerance and compromise (current Conservatives should take note). The book also makes a strong case that Macdonald was far ahead of most of his contemporaries in terms of tolerance on race and religious issues. He even extended the right to vote to First Nations men (taken away by a later government) and tried to extend the franchise to widows and unmarried women. His speech would be seen as racist today, but really reflected the terms commonly used then. His actions and detailed views on these issues actually were surprisingly liberal. However, there are two major exceptions to this. His support for a Chinese head tax and his views of the Chinese, as well as his support for setting up Residential schools. The book failed to explore his role in setting up Residential Schools, which was a terrible omission. The TRC report (published 7 or 8 years after this book) has one damning quote from Macdonald on the horrid school system as it was being set up in the 1880s. Gwynn's book does show that up to that point, Macdonald actually was often a bit of a protective buffer from the generally odious, racist view of First Nations held by the Canadian public and politicians. The book shows that those who want Macdonald to have honours taken away from him due to his role in establishing residential school should recognize it is a more complex issue than it appears. Macdonald's record and views on First Nations are different than I believed and the most harmful policies were actually implemented after his time in office. He is hardly innocent on the school issue, but he was also not the ringleader he has been portrayed as. History often does not provide an easy guide to how we should remember. It is usually quite complex, as this book shows.
