

The Last Pre-Modern Premier

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THAT ANGUS L. MACDONALD RESTS IN THE PANTHEON of political Nova Scotians is beyond doubt. He was the dominant presence within the province across three tumultuous decades, from the Great Depression to post-war reconstruction. At the national level Macdonald has another claim as one of the front line political leaders at times of great distress to Canada. Throughout his career, Macdonald engaged with the central issues of federal governance through the Rowell-Sirois inquiry and the post-war first ministers' conferences. He also served at the centre of King's national wartime government before returning to his home province to resume the premiership in the face of Ottawa's ambitious development agenda.

Stephen T. Henderson, in his *Angus L. Macdonald: A Provincial Liberal* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), ably establishes the significance of Macdonald as a political figure with a remarkably successful career. He was, ultimately, a "provincial Liberal" in several respects. First, it was as premier that he felt most comfortable. In addition, it was the Nova Scotia Liberal Party that facilitated his rule. Finally, it was provincial society that served as the crucible for his beliefs and inclinations. For all this, however, the Macdonald that emerges from these pages seems a surprisingly uncomplicated figure. Perhaps this is the definitive measure of the man. Alternatively, some tantalizing fragments of the book may point to something more.

Henderson's portrait of Macdonald is presented in five tableaux. It opens with the life before politics, continues with the first two terms of provincial office and is punctuated by the five years in Ottawa before closing with interpretations of each post-war term back in Halifax. This is a reasonable periodization, and serves to underline the institutional transition points for Macdonald's governing career (in only three of those twenty-four years was he not a minister, and that was at the very outset). Indeed, the fact that for Macdonald "politics" meant "government" is a potentially defining feature of his public life. Perhaps more might have been made of this "executive" preoccupation. The life of the out-of-power elected representative was simply not part of his experience. Neither was that of a party leader hard pressed by surging opposition forces. In the only other biography of Macdonald, John Hawkins's 1969 *Life and Times of Angus L.*, more is made of the premier's governing personality and the shifts it undergoes over the course of his public life.¹

At the same time, though, Henderson's chronological structure does invite comparisons on the nature and extent of the changes that overtook Nova Scotian (and Canadian) politics during Macdonald's career. Just how different was the Great Depression culture from that of wartime and, in turn, from the reconstruction decade? This assumes more than passing importance, given that Henderson tends to emphasize cross-career continuities in Macdonald's version of liberalism, his style of decision-making, and his patterns of political accommodation. The reader might ask how far the swings from economic depression to wartime central management to post-war prosperity (albeit with regional variations) posed challenges to even deeply held

1 See John Hawkins, *Life and Times of Angus L.* (Windsor, NS: Lancelot Press, 1969).

personal inclinations. The transition from market to Keynesian capitalism took place during Macdonald's political tenure, and even though it may have been less compelling in a small Maritime province, his reluctance (if not outright resistance) to acknowledging such change seems to speak significantly to his political personality. This, again, might have invited more interpretive reflection.

In many respects, Macdonald's was a remarkable life. Born in 1890, when another Macdonald still ruled in Ottawa, Angus L. grew to maturity in the booming decades preceding the Great War. Henderson reminds us, however, that this trickled down differently to Inverness, Antigonish, and Halifax than to Toronto or the rural prairies. Henderson's account of the early years does well to ground Macdonald in the experience of his region. Born of humble origins in rural Cape Breton, he proved to be an enterprising and forthright character who rose, through university study, to a position of academic prominence at Dalhousie Law School and a position of note in Halifax society.

Two formative influences stand out for their prolonged duration. One was his association with St. Francis Xavier at a politically polarized moment between the socially conservative Catholic hierarchy of bishop and president and the socially engaged thrust of Father Jimmy Tompkins and the Antigonish Forward Movement. Henderson describes how this led, ultimately, to Macdonald's "first foray into public debate." The tensions crystallized around the 1922 proposal for a federated University of Nova Scotia. In siding with Tompkins and the pro-federationists, Macdonald earned the enmity of the Antigonish hierarchy, which in later years obstructed his nomination for an honorary degree at St. FX.

The other life-altering experience began in 1914. For Macdonald, as for his contemporaries who were touched by the fighting, the Great War both prolonged and transformed the formative phase of life. Macdonald's wartime enlistment in 1915 and the training and combat period that followed (in which he lost a brother) left indelible marks. Wounded in the final months of fighting, he returned to Nova Scotia, Henderson argues, "determined to make his mark on his community and country" (p. 20). His immediate outlet was the study of law and the decade of the 1920s was devoted to consolidating this choice of career.

Angus L. Macdonald slipped seamlessly into the provincial political scene in 1930 at age 40. With only a modest background in party politics (one failed provincial candidacy and service to the party platform committee) Macdonald attended the Liberal leadership convention as a delegate. In a highly fluid phase of the proceedings, he was nominated from the floor, broke a deadlock, and became the party leader without any legislative position or experience. Three years later, in his first campaign as leader (and only his second bid for elected position), Macdonald displaced the two-term Conservative government begun in 1925 by E.N. Rhodes and continued by Gordon Harrington after Rhodes moved to R.B. Bennett's federal cabinet. Macdonald would follow a parallel path in joining Mackenzie King a decade later. Macdonald subsequently won two campaigns in the teeth of the Great Depression, demolishing the Conservatives in August 1933 by a margin of 14 seats (22 to 8) and again in June 1937 by a margin of 20 seats (25 to 5). As a result, he enjoyed seven years in power in Nova Scotia prior to the move to Ottawa.

For Henderson, Macdonald's philosophical coordinates were largely fixed by the time he gained the premiership. As the author puts it, Angus L. "inherited a local, partisan liberalism, but he developed it into a carefully considered political

philosophy” (p. 7). A convincing case is made for Macdonald’s life-long outlook as a pre-war liberal. This is presented as an amalgam of personal liberty, educational empowerment, classical federalism, infrastructure capitalism, and fiscal probity. A certain elasticity, though, accompanies the delineation of this value set, which shades to fit the problem at hand. It appears, variously, under different labels including pre-Keynesian liberalism (p. 5), infrastructure liberalism (p. 212), new liberalism (pp. 5, 215), and local, partisan liberalism (p. 7). Surprisingly, there do not appear to be any shining examples of Macdonald’s philosophical reflections in major speeches, pamphlets, or letters.

In part, Macdonald’s choices are explained by the challenge of steering between laissez-faire capitalism and labourite socialism while resisting the incipient threats from bureaucratic centralism in Ottawa. This is an intriguing hypothesis, supported on one side by Macdonald’s early exposure to Catholic social action and trade union struggles and on the other by the indifference of corporate capitalism to regional welfare exemplified by coal, steel, and railway practices (but not, curiously, by the banks). Another intriguing tangent is the degree of compatibility between the traditional Maritime political staples of patronage and partisanship and the liberal community of self-realizing citizens. Angus L. appreciated the need for old-style clientelism, but he was quite comfortable to delegate its practice to lieutenants like Stirling MacMillan.

The decisive, and perhaps the most perplexing, break in Angus L. Macdonald’s political career came in July 1940 when he joined the wartime King government as Minister of National Defense for Naval Services. As Henderson points out, this was less sudden than it appeared. As far back as the summer of 1938, the premier “began preparing his path to federal politics” (p. 87). An anticipated tour of western Canada had to be postponed for a year, however, and the outbreak of war and the spring 1940 election followed.

Henderson aptly captures Macdonald’s dilemma when the call came for wartime cabinet service. He moved to Ottawa, “but not on his own terms or with his own power base. These factors contributed to his ineffectiveness and unhappiness on the national scene” (p. 89). The roots of this shift, however, are not as fully developed as one might hope. Following the swing through the Prairies in 1939, Macdonald appears to wait at home for the call that did not come until Norman Rogers’s death in June 1940, which prompted a cabinet shuffle. Perhaps more of the story could be told from Mackenzie King’s perspective. How reluctant was King to recruit from the provinces? Was Macdonald regarded as part of a “B” team? Were there already “enough” Maritimers in the cabinet or did the early course of the war alter King’s calculations?

There followed five years in the federal cabinet, where Macdonald was in unfamiliar political territory, confined largely to the naval portfolio, increasingly out of sympathy with King, and, uncharacteristically, not in command. In many respects, Henderson’s analysis of Macdonald’s war years is the richest treatment in the book. Almost everything about cabinet politics in Ottawa was novel. As naval minister, Macdonald formed part of a team with National Defense Minister J.L. Ralston and Air Minister Chubby Power. In the “war of material” they presided over an extraordinary buildup of military assets and personnel. During Macdonald’s time at Naval Affairs, the department grew to 50 times its pre-war strength.

By 1942 the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) was playing a prominent role in North Atlantic convoy duty, but the massive buildup was causing both operational and political problems. The British complained about the quality of Canadian ships and sailors. In Quebec the closure of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, following severe U-boat damage, prompted parliamentary criticisms of both Macdonald and his department. By 1943 a full-blown “equipment crisis” had exploded and dramatic reassignments of convoy responsibilities served to downgrade the Canadian role.

Overall, Henderson concludes that “Macdonald’s administration of Naval Affairs did not rise to brilliance” (p. 95). At the same time, the challenges of political management were formidable. A civilian minister from the provincial sphere, he faced a uniformed establishment that in addition was culturally anglophile and prone to self-identify as a “junior Royal Navy.” In virtually all key decision-making forums – the naval board, the war cabinet and the cabinet itself – Macdonald found himself hemmed in by control agencies such as the Treasury Board. Consequently his initiatives to “Canadianize” the navy during a time of frenzied expansion were forced to cruise between Scylla and Charybdis.

In some respects this is a familiar Canadian political syndrome of the talented provincial leader transplanted to Ottawa. Whether in government or opposition, party leader or front bench associate, he faces an unfamiliar political environment on an unfamiliar scale. It would be interesting, in such a context, to learn more about Macdonald’s deeper views on wartime politics. How did he find Ottawa? Evidently the press culture, the King style, and the complications of Quebec all surprised the Nova Scotian in ways that far from engaging his competitive instincts seemed to discourage him. In truth, he was operating in a completely new domain, under the rigours of wartime urgency, and in a department whose operational burden was unprecedented. At the same time, the King cabinet seems a crowded place, full of regional strongmen. Where Macdonald bestrode Nova Scotian public life easily and completely during the 1930s, not even King enjoyed a similar status nationally during the war.

For Macdonald, however, conscription was above all other political issues during the war. This obviously extended well beyond his portfolio and it was at full cabinet that its divisive potential played out. For Henderson, this was the issue that led to Macdonald’s early estrangement from King. Angus L. supported conscription in principle and was appalled by King’s apparently limitless pragmatism and endless temporizing. King, for his part, became impatient with Macdonald’s apparently simpleminded stubbornness. Following the late-1941 cabinet catharsis, King gave up on Macdonald as a minister of substance, finding him narrow and parochial and unsuited to the national stage. Macdonald, as well, abandoned the prospect of a possible federal career.

Three years later, when the conscription crisis emerged full blown, Macdonald was again at the centre of events. “For a brief period,” Henderson points out, “Macdonald held the power to bring down King” (p. 129). In the end, it was Ralston who resigned and Macdonald who stayed on, albeit as a lame duck minister. It is fascinating to be reminded, from Macdonald’s perspective, of just how unstable the cabinet was at that time. Threats of resignation, actual or implied, abounded. This deepest of Canadian social contradictions came close to unraveling the wartime administration of an aged and conflicted prime minister.

Macdonald’s return to Nova Scotia and the premiership in the summer of 1945 was

a transition carefully managed by Angus L., who sought to slide seamlessly back into office in Halifax. Henderson provides a careful explication of Macdonald's handling of the federal-provincial file during the post-war years. This had been a matter of consuming interest to Macdonald since the 1930s and the time of the Rowell-Sirois commission's report. Yet in contrast to the open and fluid character of these matters during the Great Depression, Ottawa's strategy in King's twilight years was not open to change.

Another prominent concern for Henderson is the Macdonald approach to lifting Nova Scotia back toward the economic mainstream. This is where infrastructure liberalism comes to the forefront. The roads programme, the Halifax Bridge, and the Canso Causeway blended with the promotion of tourism to yield "tartanism" as an official provincial identity. This is presented, for the most part, in a rather benign form. There is, however another way of viewing Macdonald's determined Scottishness. In the earlier biography, Hawkins describes Macdonald's antipathy to the RCMP, which provided policing services under contract in the province. More than once the premier referred pejoratively to the Mounties as "the men of the west with the unpronounceable names." In Hawkins's view, this evidenced "a very thinly disguised prejudice regarding Scots and others" (pp. 158-9). This was not a view that harmed Macdonald's electoral prospects, however, as he recorded two strong mandates during his second stint in provincial office.

Provided that the critical query remains within the terms of the biographic subject, it seems fair to ask whether any expected or necessary themes are downplayed or absent. Here I would mention three possibilities. The first is the relationship between Macdonald and the Nova Scotia elite. Despite humble origins in Inverness County and an introductory college experience at St. Francis Xavier, Macdonald spent most of his adult life in the provincial capital of Halifax. There he established positions in a variety of networks, including Dalhousie University, the Nova Scotia legal profession, the provincial Liberal Party, and, ultimately, the provincial state. Furthermore, his contacts in and contributions to Canada's wartime government were, in the end, of the first order.

Would not such experiences have opened to Macdonald a broad array of contacts with the social establishment rooted in the city? This is not to say that Macdonald aspired to elite status, or that he traded upon his political successes to achieve the same. Henderson's account provides little impression of how Macdonald's political prominence translated into social terms. The omission is regrettable, since Macdonald's career could, by its location and its duration, offer a fascinating insight into the Nova Scotian power structures as they related to party and government.

The second theme is Macdonald's relationship to the wider Canadian polity. This complaint may seem somewhat suspect for a book whose protagonist is absorbed by matters of federal governance and spends the entire Second World War on the national stage with Mackenzie King. However, I intend it in a particular sense. How much did Macdonald understand about the wider Canada of the 1930-55 period? At several junctures, one quite seriously in 1942-43 and another less plausibly in 1948-49, Macdonald was regarded, by informed and influential people, as a potential national leader for the Liberal Party. The temptation is to argue that his view of a clean, classical federal division of powers and his commitment to provincial rights had a pan-Canadian relevance that would have facilitated a national standing. This

may be true. If we consider, however, the political mysteries of the nation on other levels – cultural, electoral, and material – does the evidence hold up?

It could be argued that Macdonald's wartime experience in Ottawa offers a compelling experimental test for the differences of political scale and even complexity between the federal and provincial domains. Macdonald's quarrels with King seem largely rooted in such differences. Take perhaps the two most challenging political conundrums of the war: managing the imperial connection and managing the solitude of French Quebec. It seems that Macdonald entertained a rather simple understanding of each. For him, policy was to be guided by considerations of fairness and efficiency. If soldiers are needed at a time when the war effort hung in the balance, the principled position was one of equity and timeliness in applying conscription. Macdonald appears surprisingly untroubled by the near unanimous aversion in French Quebec or the possible consequences that a sudden application of conscription might provoke.

The third missing theme involves Macdonald and his relation to the left. Although Nova Scotia is not generally associated with populist and socialist challenges to the capitalist mainstream, the province has seen a number of such movements. During Macdonald's adult life, these ranged from the United Farmers to the Antigonish Movement as well as the Amherst General Strike, the One Big Union, the United Mine Workers, and the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation. Admittedly, Henderson does offer an informative discussion of Macdonald's early encounters with the emerging labour movement. The first was his participation in 1927 on a federal conciliation board addressing an OBU-UMW rivalry in organizing workers at Inverness Railway and Coal. While Macdonald was part of the majority recommendation for a supervised referendum on union affiliation, this was not followed. It is perhaps revealing that rather than championing the rights of dissident workers by pursuing the issue, Macdonald the lawyer advised the "losing-side" OBU to go back to the UMW and their jobs (pp. 168-70). There is also a description of a further instalment – one that involves the 1937 Trade Union Act, which was embraced in consultation with the Cape Breton Steelworkers organizing group. It has been widely viewed as "Canada's first piece of modern labour legislation" (p. 78) and Angus L. Macdonald is well-known as its far-sighted sponsor. Yet Henderson presents it less as a product of the premier's personal political values than as a response to force majeure – the mine unions were coming and a regulatory regime could forestall upheaval. Macdonald's brother, a priest in the New Waterford parish, brokered the contacts and the opposition Conservative Party attempted to outdo the Liberals in supporting the idea. As it turned out, this may have been the highwater moment of progressive industrial policy in Nova Scotia, and quite out of character with Macdonald's business liberalism.

One is still left wondering, though, as to the nature of Macdonald's view of the working man's agenda and the socialist and unionist left? Did he see these as simply the outburst of a Cape Breton enclave to be managed within an otherwise petty bourgeois Nova Scotia? Or were these legitimate extensions of the rights frontier that deserved to be recognized in an evolving social contract? There is a lingering sense of opportunism about Macdonald's political calculations on working-class issues. Perhaps the most evocative example involved the fishers and fish-plant workers strike in 1946-47. It arose when limited organizing rights obtained under the wartime labour

board were eliminated through a mid-strike ruling by the Nova Scotia Supreme Court. The latter restored the “co-adventurer” concept that had previously excluded fishers from “employee” status. Here, less than a decade after the Trade Union Act, Macdonald’s government spurned all requests by fishers for an amendment to override the court decision. Henderson stresses the complicating role of communists in the fish union leadership (whom Macdonald staunchly resisted), along with Macdonald’s convictions on the need to observe industrial legality and resist illegal strikes (such as the fishers’ had become). This fascinating pattern of thought and action invites further reflection.

Taken as a whole, Stephen Henderson’s biography offers readers a valuable roadmap to an important public figure in Nova Scotia. It will stand durably alongside studies of Macdonald’s contemporaries in other provinces – figures like Jimmy Gardiner, Mitch Hepburn, and Maurice Duplessis. It also provides a telling point of reference for a province in the grip of modernizing forces that had not, as yet, become dominant.

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