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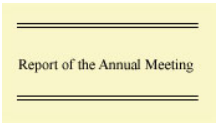

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D. G. Creighton

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SIR JOHN MACDONALD AND KINGSTON

D. G. CREIGHTON
University of Toronto

THERE are comparatively few men in Canadian public life who, in the popular imagination of their countrymen, remain fixed to a precise and particular spot of ground, like a building to its site or a tree to its own patch of hillside. We think—as is appropriate enough for citizens of a country of vast and often monotonously featureless areas—not so much of particular localities as of regions. Sir Wilfrid Laurier, we agree, represents Quebec; the rather solemn Sir Robert Borden stands for the gravity and high sense of responsibility of Nova Scotia; and there are times when Mr. Crerar seems to personify the earnest, slightly puzzled air of well-meaning aspiration which we associate with the West. Our geographical identifications are not often more precise. Almost any other French-Canadian village, we feel, would have done equally well for Sir Wilfrid as St. Lin. The fact that Sir Robert was born at Grand Pré is not charged, for us, with any peculiar significance; and nobody seems concerned to point out at what precise spot on the prairie frontier Mr. Crerar began to acquire his sensitive realization of the iniquities of the East. There are not many exceptions to this habit of regional or provincial identification; but there are some and they are highly significant. Joseph Howe, for all time, will remain inescapably attached to Halifax; George Brown speaks with the authentic assertive voice of mid-nineteenth-century Toronto. And Sir John Macdonald was a Kingstonian, the recognizable product of a town which, in the Canada of the nineteenth century, had its own distinctive character and its own definite role to play.

In a small memorandum book belonging to Hugh Macdonald, Sir John Macdonald's father, it is recorded that on July 17, 1820, Hugh and his wife and their four children "entered Colonel Macpherson's house at Kingston." Young John was about five and a half years old when his family, fresh from Glasgow, found a temporary refuge with their Kingston relatives. He grew up at Kingston, at Hay Bay, and at Glenora, in Prince Edward County; and long after his first partner and early friend, Sir Alexander Campbell, described him as a typical Midland District, Bay of Quinte boy, with the expressions and turns of phrase characteristic of the region. He went to the Midland District Grammar School on what is now Lower Union Street. He was articled to an able Kingston lawyer, George Mackenzie; and the tiny brick building in which he established his first professional office still stands on the east side of Wellington Street, between Brock and Princess. He was married to his first wife, Isabella Clark, in Kingston's St. Andrew's Church; and the house to which a few years later he brought the ailing Isabella, when she had returned at last from her long convalescence in the south, still looks out over Hales's cottages toward Lake Ontario. Macdonald was a member of the corporation of Kingston, although never its mayor. As an alder-

man he sat at the head table at the banquet which celebrated the completion of the town hall. Here he was elected to the provincial legislature for the first time in 1844 as member for Kingston. He sat for Kingston in the Assembly of the united province of Canada until Confederation ended its existence; and with two exceptions he continued as member for Kingston in every parliament of Canada from 1867 until his death. Kingston witnessed his electoral successes, his early professional triumphs, and many of the happy occasions and tragedies of his family life; and here he and his first wife, his eldest son, and his father and mother and sisters were buried.

It is true that in the eighteen-sixties and particularly after 1867 the old intimate association between the town and its most famous son was interrupted by longer and longer absences. After the government of Canada had ceased to wander agitatedly from Kingston to Montreal and from Quebec to Toronto, like a harassed leaseholder looking for a new furnished apartment, and after Queen Victoria had, oddly enough, selected Ottawa as the permanent seat of government, Macdonald was obliged, of course, to settle down in that outlandish capital. But he never succumbed to the delusion, so prevalent now in that city's population, since the brave days when Canada became the spoil of bureaucrats, that Ottawa has, in and for itself, a mysterious symbolic importance for the country as a whole. Ottawa was then—and for that matter is now—a rather tasteless agglomeration of buildings with an untidy fringe of lumber yards. Situated on the interprovincial boundary, remote from the centres of civilization, Ottawa had at once the characterlessness of a border post and the rusticity of a backwoods village. And almost invariably Macdonald escaped from it as soon as was possible. He had a summer house at Rivière du Loup; he regularly visited Kingston; and sometimes, when he could get away for longer periods, he went abroad, not to some banal hotel set in Florida orange groves, but to London, where he could meet fresh faces, and go to theatres, and get good conversation. In 1873, when the Pacific Scandal gave him an even longer vacation from political worries, he moved up to Toronto, where his old legal firm had been transferred some years previously, and established himself in a house on St. George St. Kingston and Toronto—they were equally good places for a civilized Ontarian to live in; but Kingston still held for him a special place. In all kinds of little unobtrusive ways, as well as in more obvious efforts to cultivate his constituency, he kept up the old association; and its enduring strength is well illustrated in that last silent journey from Ottawa down to the old capital of the Midland District in June, 1891.

The long duration and the intimacy of the connection may be at once admitted; but what did it mean for Macdonald? Did the title "Kingstonian" identify him with anything more than a spot on the map? Did Kingston, like a little Manchester, connote a system of ideas, or at least imply a definite point of view? It is absolutely essential, out of common politeness to the intelligence of this audience, to begin with ideas. Our own age, which is chiefly remarkable for its obsession with considerations of power and for its inventive genius in the manufacture of engines of

mass destruction, shows a morbid, almost psychopathic interest in ideas. The figures of Canadian history—and for that matter everybody else with the important exception of ourselves—are judged by these rationalist intellectual standards. The possession of ideas makes a Canadian statesman; the failure to do anything much about them constitutes, apparently, his chief claim to the admiration of posterity. Mr. King wrote a book; William Lyon Mackenzie drafted a republican constitution; Edward Blake had a number of brilliant ideas on such important topics as the Hare system of proportional representation. Even Sir Wilfrid Laurier, at an important moment in his political career, changed the red garments of his anti-clerical republicanism for the sober habiliments of English liberalism; and this astute realization of a need for shifting his custom to a more reputable tailor is usually regarded as a supreme example of the intense intellectual activity so characteristic of the old Liberal leader.

Judged by these exacting rationalist standards, Macdonald seems to come off rather badly. He did not write a book, or edit a newspaper, or draft a manifesto on first principles, or deliver highly intellectual speeches of five hours' duration. It is true that, as D'Arcy McGee claims, he was the principal author of the Quebec Resolutions; but the Quebec Resolutions, like so many other of Macdonald's programmes and policies, suffer from the fatal defect of having been translated into action. They did not remain theory; they became reality; and, having lost the eternal glitter of abstraction, they have suffered from the wear and tear of usage and disrespectful familiarity. As everybody knows, an idea of the past which is unnoticed or unpopular in the present is regarded, not only as a poor idea, but also as virtually no idea at all. The murderous analysis to which we subject the notions of our ancestors is suitably matched by the bland complacency with which we accept our own at their portentous face value. We may as well admit that Macdonald's intellectual stock does not get very high quotations at the present moment. The sad fact is that he is not even studied in some graduate courses in Canadian political thought. Possibly the very word ideas—so appropriate when we speak of William Lyon Mackenzie, William McDougall, Goldwin Smith, Henri Bourassa, J. S. Ewart, Henry Wise Wood and William Aberhart—is seriously out of place in a discussion of Macdonald. Loyalties, convictions, habits of mind, assumptions, even prejudices—these humbler words will perhaps serve us better. In what ways, if at all, did Kingston influence their formation in Macdonald?

It is perfectly clear that Macdonald's main political convictions were formed long before he fought his first electoral contest in 1844. He was—it seems necessary to state the fact, if only for purposes of historical definition—a Conservative. At the present moment, the word Conservative has, perhaps, an old-fashioned sound, a distant and almost historical ring; it is heard faintly and far off, like a diminishing echo. We are, in fact, back in the quaint old days when people held different views on public questions, when the ancient system of government and opposition still maintained itself in lusty vigour, and when the citizens of the English-speaking world did not troop off, in great dutiful masses, to record

their votes in favour of what are virtually the official parties of the state. Nowadays, when the whole of humanity lives blanketed in the propaganda which emanates from the two super-powers, the United States and Russia, the analysis of any single person's political views and aspirations becomes a routine task, at once perfunctory and tedious. But in those days there was space, and air, and light, in which convictions and purposes could grow up from their own soil, taking colour and form from their own landscape. And Kingston, and the Midland District, meant more than a little for Macdonald.

He grew up in a community which was certainly conservative but which, at the same time, was not entirely comfortable inside the old Tory party, nor entirely satisfied with its leadership. The members of Macdonald's family, the solicitor to whom he was articled, and most of his early friends were all Conservatives. The little associations and institutions which held together the Scottish community of Kingston—the Celtic Society, the St. Andrews Society, and St. Andrew's Church—were resolute in their stand for the British connection, and in their opposition to French and American republicanism. And Kingston, ever since it had been given a seat in the provincial assembly, had regularly, with one rather doubtful exception, returned Conservative members. The political climate of the town seemed bland, unruffled, even perhaps a little stuffy; but there were, nevertheless, little insidious winds of criticism and occasional obstreperous gusts of revolt. Kingston, which had been the real, though not the titular, capital of the old Upper Canada, the Upper Canada of the Loyalists, had never submissively accepted the rule of Toronto as the seat of government; and St. Andrew's Church, which regarded itself as part of one of the two established churches of the Empire, with rights solemnly guaranteed by the Act of Union of England and Scotland, remained obstinately unimpressed by the claims and pretensions of the Anglican Tories of the capital. Finally, St. Andrew's, and Kingston, and the Midland District as a whole were set in the eastern part of the province, in the oldest established region of Upper Canada, the citizens of which, whether they were Reformers or Conservatives, always looked with a certain cautious and superior distrust on the agitations, extravagances, and crusades of Toronto and the West.

It was in this political atmosphere that Macdonald grew to manhood. And in his political inheritance the reservations and qualifications were almost as important as the main convictions and loyalties which they modified. He looked upon his fellow party members, the Toronto Tories, with irreverent detachment. In 1846, when he was still a very young parliamentarian, but old enough to know better, he spoke so disrespectfully one evening of the Boulton family, one of the main props of the Toronto compact, that young William Henry Boulton, a Conservative member for Toronto, challenged him to a duel. Everybody at the time regarded Macdonald as the protégé of William Henry Draper, the first of the liberal conservative leaders, whom the Toronto members hated and against whom they fought and intrigued for years; and when in 1847, at the youthful age of thirty-two, he joined the Conservative ministry as

Receiver-General, he did so partly, no doubt, in response to William Morris's plea for aid in the struggle inside the party against the Family Compact. For seven years more the conflict between the Toryism of the past and the Liberal-Conservatism of the future went on within the agitated and divided ranks of the party; and it was not until 1854 that Macdonald, constantly supported by the moderates, got at length the place which he deserved and the political alliances he had struggled so long to obtain.

In him, the eastern section of the province triumphed. Through him it wrenched the leadership away from Toronto and repudiated Toronto's extreme conservatism. It was an interesting achievement; and all the more interesting when we remember that the eastern Conservatives succeeded where the eastern Reformers dismally failed. The Toronto Tories, Boulton, and Sherwood, and Cameron, were put in their place; but George Brown and the Toronto Grits continued, on the whole, to dominate the Reform party. The success of John Alexander Macdonald of Kingston was clinched, for the Conservatives, by the relative failure of John Sandfield Macdonald of Cornwall. Kingston, perhaps alone of all the towns in the eastern part of the province, was sufficiently strong to lead its section to a real victory. And that victory meant the rejuvenation of the party. In 1847, in the general election which quickly followed Macdonald's first acceptance of office, Conservatism went down in a defeat which looked almost like annihilation. But by 1854, under Macdonald's leadership, it had achieved a remarkable recovery; and with few and brief intervals thereafter, it continued to dominate Canadian politics for another forty years. Macdonald, in fact, repeated after 1867 exactly the same kind of success which he had scored before Confederation. In the old province of Canada, he had made a truly provincial party, while the Reformers remained divided in sectional fragments. In the Dominion of Canada—if it is still permissible to use Macdonald's old term "dominion" despite the recent veto of the bureaucrats in the Department of External Affairs—he built a national party, while the Liberals, for a long time, still stuck to their old provincial loyalties.

The fact is, Macdonald was a nationalist; and this is, of course, one of his major defects in the eyes of the modern world. Nationalism in the nineteen-fifties is to a considerable extent an unpopular and slightly suspect creed. The enormous prestige which it enjoyed in the nineteenth century has been steadily eaten away by two forces of great potency—by internationalism on the one hand and provincialism and localism on the other. These two forces are apparently contradictory; but in their destructive effects on nationalism, they complement each other. And, in fact, it is easy for them to go together. People with limited knowledge and experience are notoriously susceptible to grandiose ideas. Mere bigness is the one thing which will intimidate them into respectful silence. Shrewd in small matters, they are easy marks for gigantic frauds. And there has been something specious, not to say spurious, in the fashionable internationalism of the last few years. The grand design of a world brotherhood of states has ended in harsh reality; and inside the surviving

shell of the United Nations the two great powers, the United States and Russia, try to appropriate the myth upon which the organization was founded, and struggle to extend and protect their own particular version of it. The whole world follows them, willingly or unwillingly; and in effect they now lead two great aggregations of satellite states. The old multiple divisions have been replaced by a single division; the old flexibility has given way to an intense rigidity; and all the small varied contradictions of the past have degenerated into a single and fatal antithesis.

The only force capable of opposing this bogus internationalism—this movement towards unification not for world peace but for world rivalry—was the old national state. But the national state was in no position to sustain this resistance. It had been ground down and weakened by a nether as well as by an upper millstone—by the disintegrating pressure of parochialism and provincialism as well as by the external weight of the internationalist idea. The obvious decay of national parliamentary life in Canada, the decline of old parties and the patent failure of new parties to take their place, the apathetic and uninterested acceptance by the populace of increasingly ponderous and mechanical forms of government, are all evidence of the submissive inertia of our national political existence. The strength of any real opposition resides mainly in the provinces and municipalities; vitality and creativeness are to be found chiefly in the cultural and political movements of regions. And in Europe and the East the process has gone even further. The organic political unities of the past—states, empires, and commonwealths—have disintegrated under the divisive force of these parochial agitations. The old national state has been fragmented, shredded away into nothing; and people, freed from their old loyalties, separated from the strong, viable unities of history, become like heaps of dust or sand, blown listlessly about by the great winds of power.

It is only, therefore, by an effort of the imagination that we can get back to Macdonald. Macdonald represented Kingston; and Kingston stood at the head of the St. Lawrence River, at the foot of the vast interconnecting system of the Great Lakes. To Kingston and Kingston's sons the river was the prime symbol of British North American unity and British North American growth; and the main task of Macdonald's entire career was to defend and enlarge the political union which the St. Lawrence required and to realize the possibilities which it seemed to promise. At first, during the early history of the united province of Canada, his role was largely a negative one. The western section of Canada West—Canada West beyond Toronto—was always full of impatient schemes for the break-up of the legislative union, for the alteration of the fundamental compromises upon which it was based, or for the substitution of some weak form of federal union loosely uniting the two sections of the province. But the great central part of old Canada—the stretch of territory which lay in general between Toronto and Montreal—instinctively and stubbornly opposed all these disintegrating schemes. Kingston, the unofficial capital of the upper St. Lawrence, was intent upon the survival of the river's unity; and for nearly fifteen years

Macdonald opposed the fatal division of the province with all the resources and infinite devices at his command. The only solution for the difficulties of the Canadian union which he ever accepted was the wider union of British North America. From the first he wished it to be a strong union—a legislative union; and, as everybody knows, he accepted the federal form regretfully as the only way in which his desire could be accomplished.

It is this, in part, which has led to his comparative neglect and disparagement in recent times. The liveliness of provincial politics and of regional cultural movements, as well as the gaudy attractions of the international arena as it is managed by the two big-time operators, have sufficed to turn attention away from Macdonald and the other nationalists of the past. The effects are clearly visible in Canadian history and the Canadian social sciences. Soon everybody in the country will be writing either about international affairs or about provincial protest movements. One group of scholars will be eagerly ploughing through the vast masses of literature in which the Department of External Affairs annually celebrates its activities abroad, in pursuit of that mysterious something usually referred to as the role of Canada in world affairs; and another group of scholars, equally zealous and filled with equal admiration and respect for their subject, will be analysing all the local agitations, and protests, and grievances in our history. Two decades ago there was apparently a scheme proposed for a co-operative history of Canada in several volumes. The volumes, of course, have not made their appearance; there is now little likelihood that they will. But, on the other hand, a series of no fewer than ten or twelve studies on Social Credit in Alberta is being vigorously prosecuted; and the first two admirable volumes in the series have already been published. The theme of national unity and its symbol, the St. Lawrence, are not only neglected; they have been politely, but vigorously questioned and historians who have, so to speak, taken their stand on the east-west axis have been lumped together, not altogether sympathetically, as the "Laurentian School." A few years ago a distinguished Western historian declared that the West "must realize its latent nationalism" and that it might with French Canada "end the Laurentian domination." "The west," he observed, "must first work out its own historical experience—and free itself and find itself."

One does not need to be a major prophet to predict with reasonable accuracy where the West would "find itself" if it "freed itself" from what has been called the "Laurentian domination." And this brings up the question of foreign policy, the last aspect of Macdonald's Kingston inheritance upon which I should like to touch. It sometimes seems to be assumed by the able army of bureaucrats who at present direct our external relations that up until the fortunate moment of their own arrival at the East Block in Ottawa, Canada had, in fact, no foreign policy at all. This assumption is perhaps not altogether unnatural since our modern corps of diplomatists was mainly recruited after the virtual abandonment of the only great historic foreign policy which Canada has ever had. That policy was the creation of Macdonald; and its prime object was the secure establishment of a new nationality, autonomous within the British

Empire and separate and distinct on the North American continent. Canada, Macdonald reasoned, was—and for a long time would remain—too weak to stand alone; and the basic condition of its survival and growth toward self-sufficiency was a relative balance of power within the English-speaking world. Of the two imperialisms, American and British, with which we had to deal, the former was by far the more dangerous. After 1783 the United States was the only expansive force on the North American continent. There was always the acute embarrassment of its proximity; and, after the Civil War, the further danger of its conscious power. To meet that danger, to maintain the balance of power by which alone it could be met with success, the British connection was necessary, for the British connection was, in essence, simply an Anglo-Canadian *entente*. By the Anglo-Canadian *entente*, Macdonald hoped to escape the peril of North American continentalism until, at last, Canada might stand alone.

The convictions upon which this policy was based were strengthened and confirmed as Macdonald grew up in the Kingston period. Kingston, as I have suggested, was the real though not the official capital of the old province of Upper Canada, the province of the Loyalists. The Loyalist tradition is the historic source of resistance to North American continentalism; and Kingston, in a special and concrete sense, was the physical embodiment of that resistance, in the upper St. Lawrence valley. As the Canadian naval base on Lake Ontario, as the western terminus of the life-line of the St. Lawrence, Kingston's security was essential to the survival of Upper Canada; and the fortifications which were built to protect it, the largest fortifications ever constructed in the upper province, testify still to the strategic importance which was once attached to the place. For nearly a century, from 1783 to 1871, Kingston stood warily upon the defensive. The War of 1812 was not the only danger; and the peace of Ghent, which is popularly supposed to have inaugurated the period of the "unguarded frontier," was actually the prelude to a series of threats, and to the greatest programme of defence construction in the history of Upper Canada. In the western part of the province, the Rebellion of 1837 at least *began* as a native uprising; but for Kingston in the upper St. Lawrence valley, it began, continued, and ended as a series of American raids.

During the past quarter-century, Macdonald's policy has disappeared with the passing of the moral and material bases upon which it was founded. The decline of Great Britain ended the old balance of power in the English-speaking world just as it did on the continent of Europe. Lord Halifax's vain appeal in Toronto in January, 1944 was probably invalidated by the facts. But it was also instantly repudiated in Canada; and the very automatic rapidity of that repudiation suggests how completely the intellectual as well as the physical bases of the old policy had been eaten away. That pious labour of destruction was the work of the Canadian nationalists of the nineteen-twenties and thirties. For two decades they presented themselves proudly to enraptured Canadian audiences as the real defenders of Canadian nationalism. Publicly they abominated imperialism. Publicly, with eyes lifted to heaven, they aspired

to autonomy. These declarations were extremely solemn; they were, no doubt, in many cases, completely sincere. But, whether they deceived themselves or not, the nationalists certainly misled a considerable section of the Canadian people. For in their nationalist crusade there was a large element of North Americanism. North America is not a nation but a continent; and the continentalism which was latent in all of them was open and blatantly avowed in some, just as it was in their spiritual father, Goldwin Smith. What they disliked was the wrong type of imperialism—that is, British imperialism; but for the right type of imperialism—that is, American imperialism—they seem to have had nothing but the highest approval. And when, in the summer of 1940, at the first sign of real danger to Great Britain, Canada instantly and openly reversed this historic policy of the Anglo-Canadian *entente* the nationalists greeted the Ogdensburg agreement with either quiet satisfaction or rapturous delight. To the eyes of a historian, the Ogdensburg agreement, with its subsequent extensions and confirmations, looks like an old-fashioned military alliance, so old-fashioned, indeed, that its like has never been seen on the North American continent before. Without definite time limits, and without any very precise conditions, provisoes, or declared purposes, it appears to rest on the assumption that mere geographic proximity means absolute and eternal identity of interest.

In the military realm continentalism could hardly have gone further. Even Goldwin Smith could scarcely have wished for more. The nationalists became silent, with the silence of satisfied men. The discussions of Canadian foreign policy, so agitated during the nineteen-thirties, died away. The references to Canadian autonomy have grown increasingly discreet. "Imperialism," and "neutrality," the key words of the nineteen-thirties, are now virtually taboo. Like so many Colonel Blimps, the nationalists of yesteryear rest comfortably in the deep arm-chairs of the Continental Club; and if occasionally, with offended pomposity, they write to the papers it is only to denounce some misguided Canadian who has dared to criticize the Truman doctrine, or the Monroe doctrine, or the Hickenlooper doctrine, or some one of those policies with theological titles by which Americans like to indicate the intimacy of their partnership with God.

In June, 1951 it will be sixty years since Macdonald died. His portrait on the wall of the Memorial Hall in the Kingston Municipal Buildings makes him look astonishingly alive, but in many ways nobody could be more dead and forgotten than he. Whether it is possible or desirable that there should be a reincarnation of his spirit or a revival of his policies is a difficult question which I shall leave to the joint wisdom of these two societies to determine. All I have tried to do is to recall him to your attention. Nowadays it is fashionable to talk about curtains, iron curtains and gold curtains; and it sometimes seems as if there is a curtain, thick and impenetrable, which separates us from our Canadian past. I have attempted to lift that curtain for a moment, in order to give you a glimpse of Macdonald, and of the Kingston in which his views and hopes were shaped. But, like a sensible showman, I realize that the play is now played out; and, pending a revival, I ring down the curtain once again.