



John Alexander Macdonald

John A. Macdonald's Early Life on the Bay of Quinte and in Prince Edward County 1824-1835

Address to the Cataraqui Commemoration Ceremony

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When John Alexander Macdonald was born in Glasgow in January, 1815, Napoleon had not yet met his Waterloo, and the War of 1812 in North America was drawing to a close. John lived the first five years of his life during the hard economic times of post-war Europe.

In 1820, the Macdonald family left Scotland for British North America when John was only five. They experienced a perilous voyage across the North Atlantic in appalling conditions. They were among the very first of millions of immigrants to travel from Europe by ship over the next century and a half.

Six weeks into the voyage, the Macdonalds arrived in Quebec City and then, over the next three weeks, continued their difficult journey down the St. Lawrence. They passed the treacherous Lachine rapids by open bateaux on their way to the Great Lakes as so many French Canadians and United Empire Loyalists had done years earlier. John and his family didn't know it at the time, but their first experiences represented the story of immigration and settlement for many Canadians including many us here today.

Throughout the ordeal, John and his three siblings were in good hands in the care of their parents, Hugh and Helen. They arrived in Kingston nine weeks after they left Scotland and were warmly greeted by their clan relatives, the Macphersons. For the next four years, John's family lived in Kingston.

Hugh Macdonald settled into life there and ran first one shop, then another and mixed well with the community. Kingston was considered an important outpost at the time. It had played a vital role five years earlier as a fortress for the British during the War of 1812, but its population was only around 2,000ⁱ when they arrived.

When John was only nine, the Macdonalds moved to a small farming community thirty miles west of Kingston, a region of Upper Canada that seemed to hold promise for Hugh as a shopkeeper and merchant. This was the sparsely populated farming area known as the Bay of Quinte. This waterway is a ribbon of water that separates the largest island in Lake Ontario from the mainland. The island today is named Prince Edward County.

John's older cousin, Allan Macpherson, had already settled in the north east corner of the Bay of Quinte in the village of Napanee years earlier. He had quickly become a successful entrepreneur and community leader. He was married to the daughter of Judge Fisher of Hay Bay. So when the Macdonalds arrived in Hay Bay, they had family connections and sound prospects for success.

Over the next eleven years, John developed into a young man and came of age. From the age of nine to twenty, he called the Bay of Quinte and Prince Edward County home. Some of John's best memories were of his life in this region growing up as the son of a shopkeeper, and later, miller and justice-of-the-peace.

John started his formal education at the age of nine in a one room, log school house, three miles from his home on the south shore of Hay Bay. He walked three miles to school in Adolphustown every day with his two sisters along a dusty road.ⁱⁱ In later life, when campaigning in Lennox and Addington, he would address the farmers there telling them how he remembered well walking barefoot at Hay Bay. He loved to tell stories of how and how he once stole a black bass from a local fisherman and how he played tricks on Old Hughes, his strict school teacher, who administered discipline with a birch stick.ⁱⁱⁱ

John's home at Hay Bay was in the region where the first United Empire Loyalists had settled forty years earlier. John adjusted well to this Loyalist culture and learned their ways. He made many friends from this period in his life, but he stood out among his peers. He was said to have had superior talents, education and breeding. He was also quite mischievous at that age and fond of playing pranks on people, a habit he maintained until he left years later. His future law partner in Kingston, Alexander Campbell, was well-acquainted with Macdonald's mannerisms acquired during his time in the region. He wrote in his memoirs:

His power before a country jury was always marked chiefly, if not wholly, owing to his knowledge of the jurymen and his appreciation of their habits of thoughts and ways of speaking. He was in tone of voice and manner as thoroughly a Bay of Quinte boy as if he had been born there. I have for instance heard him say to a jury... 'he took and went and hit him a brick.'^{iv}

John adjusted to the manner of speech of the region, as child immigrants do at that age. He spoke not, as his parents did, with a full Scottish brogue, but with a Bay of Quinte accent. Yes, it's true.

And as several people including Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli noticed,^v he had a distinctive Canadian habit that everyone here will recognize. He sometimes ended his sentences with “eh.”

When John was just twelve, Hugh and Helen paid the considerable sum of seventy pounds a year to send him to private schools in Kingston to receive a formal grammar school education. He spent several years with his head in the books, but true to his restless nature and affections, John would travel frequently between Kingston and Hay Bay by steamboat and other means to visit his family.

When John was fourteen and still studying in Kingston, his family moved from Hay Bay on the mainland across the Bay of Quinte to the Stone Mills of Glenora in beautiful Prince Edward County. John was there to help his father in the flour and carding mills during the long summer vacations. These were some of the happiest times of his life. His home in the County was right next to the Glenora ferry, which is still running today.

About the time that the Macdonalds moved to the Stone Mills, John decided to enter the study of law. He was only fifteen when he passed his exams at the Law Society of Upper Canada in Toronto and remarkably, when all of us would have been in high school, he began articling with George Mackenzie, a prominent lawyer in Kingston. It was clear to all who knew him that he was a gifted young man with a promising future.

After only two years apprenticing at the law office, John was entrusted with running the practice briefly while his employer, George Mackenzie, travelled to Quebec. John was only seventeen when Mackenzie sent him to run a new branch law office in Napanee for a year.

When John was still only eighteen, he resigned from the Mackenzie law firm to take over the full law practice of his seriously ill cousin, Lowther Pennington Macpherson in Picton as a *pro tempore* lawyer. From 1833 to 1835 John ran the law practice from the office at the top of the town hill on Main Street. He was finally able to practise law as if he were a lawyer. In the evening he continued to study law in preparation for his exams.

When the new Picton Court House opened in April 1834, John attended the very first session with his father, a justice-of-the peace and member of the very first grand jury. John must have felt proud of his father, Hugh, sitting in the great court house on Union Street. He was still only nineteen.

But later that year, John played a prank on a local doctor and found himself sparring with him in front of local tavern on Main Street. Both appear to have filed a charge of assault against one another, but the doctor went to trial first before a judge and jury and lost. John went next and presented his very first case defending himself and won.^{vi} It appears that not only was John good in court, but it's also likely that the doctor threw the first punch.

During John's time in Picton, he attended lower court a number of times to assist clients and friends. He was popular in town and his career was looking promising with his early successes. The following year, while still living in Picton, John received a license to practice as an attorney.

There are other stories of Macdonald in Picton that live on as part of the legend. The anecdotes of Macdonald's frugality--how he would take off his shoes to walk the five miles from Glenora to Picton to save shoe leather^{vii}--how he erected a fence with his friends on Main Street to stop a street-racer,^{viii} and on another occasion, placing a frozen horse in the Methodist church pulpit.^{ix} These are all part of the legend of a teenager coming of age in Prince Edward County.

One day during the summer of 1834, John heard of the tragic death of his former employer, George Mackenzie, during a cholera epidemic. John realized that greater opportunities lay ahead in Kingston, and so, in spite of the fact that the leading citizens of Picton offered him one hundred pounds to stay, John moved to Kingston in the summer of 1835 to open his own law practice. He was only twenty. The following year, he was called to the bar by the Law Society of Upper Canada and he quickly acquired a reputation for ingenuity and quick-wittedness as a defence attorney.^x His family soon followed him to his new home on Rideau Street. He had now become the main breadwinner of the family.

Several years later, after he had developed a successful law practice, John entered politics and served for many years as the representative for Kingston in the legislature. In his remarkable career, he rose to become Joint Premier of the Province of Canada and later the principal architect of the British North America Act of 1867. On July 1, 1867, he became the first Prime Minister of the Dominion of Canada.

But for the people of Prince Edward County, John Alexander Macdonald was always a Quinte boy. One time in 1861, Macdonald paid a brief visit to Picton. By now he was the Hon. John A. Macdonald, the Attorney General, and Joint Premier of the Province of Canada. He spoke at the courthouse where he had first demonstrated his talents as a budding lawyer. He began by saying he had been absent for many years, but had not forgotten

...the good old County...my early associations are connected with Prince Edward – some of the happiest days of my life were spent here – I here obtained my earliest professional education, and here, in this good old town of Picton, I earned my first fee and made my first speech to a jury in this very Court House.^{xi}

Macdonald is reported to have said once—somewhat tongue-in-cheek: “I love the people of Prince Edward County. They vote for me time after time and they never ask me for anything. And they never get anything.”^{xii}

The truth is that all his political life, people of the County wrote to him unabashedly to ask for favours, and he wrote back promptly to offer his assistance as if he were their Member of Parliament. He must have felt great pride when he officiated as Prime Minister at the opening of the Murray canal in 1886. The canal turned the peninsula of Prince Edward County into the island it is today.

Sir John A. Macdonald travelled extensively throughout his life and lived and stayed in many places in Canada and abroad. But his secretary, Joseph Pope, wrote that Sir John A was probably

most at home along the eastern shores of Lake Ontario. He called this area home, especially Kingston, where he had strong family roots and civic interests. However, as he became more of a statesman involved with all regions of what was to become the Dominion of Canada, he considered his home to be more than the many places where he had lived during his long career: Kingston, the Bay of Quinte, Montreal, Québec City, Toronto, Ottawa, and Rivières-du-Loup (yes, he had a summer home in Quebec for 18 years).

His home was Canada. He was proud to call himself Canadian. He said in a speech in St. Thomas in 1860:

Since I was five years old, I have been in Canada. All my hopes and dreams and my remembrances are Canadian; not only are my principles and prejudices Canadian but what-- as a Scotchman--I feel as much as anyone else, my interests are Canadian.

ⁱ Frederick H. Armstrong, *Handbook of Upper Canadian Chronology*. (Toronto: Dundurn Press), 1985, p. 275.

ⁱⁱ Emerson Bristol Biggar, *Anecdotal Life of Sir John A. Macdonald* (Bibliolife:1891), Chapter III.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lena Newman, *The John A. Macdonald Album*, (Montreal: Tundra Books), 1974, pp. 22-24.

^{iv} "Campbell Papers," Archives of Ontario, undated memorandum.

^v Ged Martin "Sir John Eh? Macdonald" *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, xvii,(2004)
http://www.gedmartin.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=15&Itemid=11

^{vi} Transcriptions of the 1834 and 1835 Quarter Sessions provided by Linda Corupe UE,
<http://www.lindacorupe.com>.

^{vii} Janet and Richard Lunn, *The County*, (Picton: The Picton Gazette Publishing, 1967) 245.

^{viii} Biggar, *Anecdotal Life*, VI.

^{ix} Gordon Walmsley Q.C., *Picton Times* (Centennial edition), May 30, 1954 (as related to him by Miss Anne Merrill).

^x J. K. Johnson, P.B. Waits, *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*.
<http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?BioId=40370>

^{xi} Alan Capon, "You'll never die, John A.!" *The County Weekly News*, 2007.
<http://www.countyweeklynews.ca/PrintGenArticle.aspx?e=2591>

^{xii} Lunn, *The County*, 9.