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WILLIAM FONG. *Sir William C. Macdonald: A biography.*
Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press (2007).
336 pp. CDN \$34.95 (Cloth). (ISBN: 9780773533042)

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[See table of contents](#)

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BOOK REVIEW

WILLIAM FONG. *Sir William C. Macdonald: A biography*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press (2007). 336 pp. CDN \$34.95 (Cloth). (ISBN: 9780773533042)

The “great man” approach to the writing of history has been challenged by scholars who argue for the contingency of individual action as limited by time and place. The accomplishments of Canada’s first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, for example, were not due to a manifest set of personal and professional skills that swept up history in its path. Rather, one side of the argument is that he was allowed to govern at a time that was conducive to his ambitions and inclinations. He worked as an active agent within a complicated set of social, political, economic, and intellectual forces that he and millions of other Canadians had a hand in constructing and manipulating. He was part of a larger chorus of builders of real and ideological conceptions of the new Canada rather than the sole leader of the pack. People are intertwined with historical developments, facing choices that they themselves have created but are predicated on existing conditions. They slip into the historical stream of events, but with both a paddle and sail.

In this light, historical biographies can be tricky to write. They need to strike a balance between analyzing the energy, activity, and impact of historical figures and the controlling nature of their environment and surroundings. Concentrating too much on the former renders the scholarship hagiographic; the latter, and the historical agent becomes impotent and voiceless. *Sir William C. Macdonald: A Biography* is an example of a biography done right. Spending several years researching and writing a biography can make the author a fan of the subject. The temptation to overemphasize one person’s crucial role in history can be overwhelming. *Macdonald* starts off, somewhat alarmingly, with the phrase “This is a story of a remarkable man” (p. xvii), written in a brief Introduction by the Chancellor of McGill University. As the book unravels the life of one of the major benefactors in McGill’s history, and considering it is published on the centenary of the university’s Macdonald College in St. Anne de Bellevue, the statement is forgivable. The book, however, does not

proceed with high and uncontested reverence. It places Macdonald in the historical milieu in which his actions were efficacious. *Macdonald* is a critical history text in the guise of a biography. The reader gets both worlds: we read history through an individual life.

Written “for a broad audience” (p. xv), and pieced together through numerous archival sources, some of which were apparently not too terribly explicative of who the man really was, the life of William Christopher Macdonald (1831-1917) is framed by an attempt to understand Macdonald’s personality and motivations. Was he a tobacco baron who could ruthlessly face a workers’ strike, or was he a rationalist looking after his economic interests that would benefit Canadian higher education through generous contributions? Was eschewing his rural Prince Edward Island and his religious background an indication of a growing self-sufficiency and the casting away of a past that was an obstacle to a maturing financial acumen and growing personal fortune? Was this independence reflected in his funding and promotion of various educational initiatives and university programs, departments, and faculties where others could gain a sense of freedom to learn, teach, and conduct research according to their own intellectual curiosities?

In the pursuit of these questions, the final chapter is the most enlightening of the book. Macdonald, once a bookkeeper in Boston in 1849, had, at the age of fifty, risen to become one of the richest men in Canada. During this period, he was also one of the country’s most assiduous philanthropists. He is depicted as an atypical Victorian, “a rebel from the start” (p. 271), being variously described as “practical,” “secular,” “democratic,” and a “committed financier of transformation,” as if embodying the very character of Canada as it was emerging from a nebulous colony-state to a sovereign jurisdiction cognizant of its British past but focused on its future. Macdonald funded a host of educational initiatives, for example helping to inspire a consolidated schools movement as well as supporting agricultural, nature, and industrial projects and teacher training. In the latter part of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, he also ushered in numerous massive research and infrastructure projects associated with the expansion of McGill University. He sponsored and helped direct projects ranging from “the training of homemakers and small farmers...to nuclear engineering” (p. 272). These ventures, which included the building of the Macdonald Institute at the University of Guelph in 1903 for women studying domestic science, showed a man intent to not only improve himself beyond the purview of his own industrial interests, but along the way to improve the community and state. Indeed, a case might be made here that history is altered by the actions of a single person just as surely as this person is a product of circumstance.

This diminutive, unassuming, private, and frugal man who never married or had children left an impressive legacy that helped shape modern Montreal

and McGill. Macdonald's fusing of industrialism and education reveals his intellectual dexterity. This is explored in chronological chapters (a timeline of his life would have been helpful in the appendix, but this is a minor quibble) that include helpful subheadings and images of Macdonald, the people in his life, and the buildings and educational spaces he imagined and funded. In the book, the research alone on Macdonald's genealogy is impressive, and offers the reader a primer on Scottish history and immigration to Canada. The book switches gears nicely throughout; chapters detail the development of financial practices in the rising industrialism of the eastern seaboard of the United States as well as in Montreal in the nineteenth century. The book melds business, educational, labour, and social histories. Macdonald's vaunted mental flexibility is a metaphor for how these intellectual currents intersected.

For readers interested in the history of education, the discussion of the Macdonald-Robertson movement for agricultural and manual training of students and teachers is of note, while those wanting to know more of McGill's past are well advised to pick up the book for the examination of the sheer size and frequency of Macdonald's exhaustive donations to McGill. Chapter 8 discusses Macdonald as McGill's "greatest builder of all...he became known as the second founder of the university" (p. 209), and one is hard pressed to disagree. His role in helping to develop programs related to engineering, physics, architecture, chemistry, law, and history, which included the establishment of research chairs and funds for buildings and various campus facilities (laboratories were built that "were reminiscent of his tobacco works," p. 220), lend credence to the assertion that he was a "facilitator [and] catalyst" (p. 239). Aware of the intellectual and built heritage he was overseeing, he saw himself as a "pioneer" (p. 239).

This is a good book on what appears to be a good man. A reader might argue that Macdonald is analogous to a modern day, self-aggrandizing industrial magnate who made his fortune using exploitative labour practices and manufacturing a product that supported a deadly addiction. This judgement might be softened by considering the social acceptance of tobacco in the nineteenth century, compared to today, and also by Macdonald's philanthropy. His prodigious charity for social betterment is undeniable, but one that history has offered for contestation and discussion. A biography of Macdonald could have fallen squarely on one side of the debate or the other — the evidence is presented that Macdonald and his legacy are less straightforward than simply a self-made man on a mission. *Macdonald* is a vigorous analysis of someone with whom many readers could relate. He was a person who did what he felt was right for society with the resources at hand.

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