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THE CONTRIBUTION OF MACDONALD CONSERVATISM TO NATIONAL UNITY, 1854-78

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The purpose of this paper is to survey—at least in some of its aspects—the usefulness of Macdonald Conservatism to national unity, from 1854 to 1878. In party history, the period covers the change from “fossil” Toryism to National Policy. In the affairs of Canada, it takes in the quarter-century when sectional discord almost destroyed the union, to be followed by the achievement of Federation, and then, the wide perspective of creating a united people.

Old Toryism, as it existed in the early 1850's, had little to commend it. Rated from the viewpoint of unity, its contribution was negative—as in 1849, when it pyramided such errors as abuse of the French race, denunciation of the constitution, and a peevish movement towards annexation. MacNab Toryism was a lingering player on the political scene, fanning the air on issues already decided. “The party nowhere—,” exclaimed young John A. Macdonald in 1854, “damned—everlastingly damned.”¹

That the party had to re-orientate was only slowly realized. Under the new order of things, it was a case of “stand up and fight” on equal terms, and the index of a party was its ability to secure a broad basis in popular support. The coalition of September, 1854, which gave birth to the Liberal Conservative party, appears in retrospect as an event of some significance. Contemporaries did not think so. Friendly newspapers said it was “astonishing” and “not likely to last.” The Rouge and the Grit press less charitably spoke of “unholy alliances,” “crass political immorality,” and the “wrigglings of apostates.”²

In point of fact, the coalition had a worthy and thoughtful parentage. Among its sponsors were Lord Elgin, John A. Macdonald, Hincks, Baldwin, and Cauchon, all of them convinced enemies of sectionalism. The Elgin-Grey correspondence, so far back as 1850, has many references like the following: “It is more than probable that ere long the French and the Conservatives of Upper Canada will come together to resist the radicals. . . . No doubt the French are essentially conservative and their alliance with a destructive party is unnatural.”³ “That they will fall, sooner or later, into a political alliance with any section of the British which prefers British to United States institutions is my conviction. . . . It is of the utmost importance that any such British party should stand on a pretty wide basis in Upper Canada.”⁴ Excerpts of this kind clearly foreshadow the three-way character of the 1854 combination; and they help to explain why the appearance of the coalition was assailed as “the governor's *coup d'état*.”

For the Conservatives, John A. Macdonald had gradually assumed the position of party tactician. His colleagues in the House were already

¹Public Archives of Canada, *Macdonald papers*, A. Campbell to John A. Macdonald, March 8, 1855.

²Quoted in the *North American*, Sept. 20, 1854.

³Public Archives of Canada, *Elgin-Grey correspondence*, Elgin to Grey, Nov. 22, 1850.

⁴*Ibid.*, Elgin to Grey, June 14, 1851.

commenting on his genius as a "manager of men" and as a conciliator⁵—that tendency which Principal Grant described as an inclination "to build bridges, rather than dig ditches, between himself and those who differed from him." It is possible to discern the evolution in Macdonald's attitude towards the Lower Canadians. In 1849, he regarded "no domination by the French" as the chief reason for the founding of the British American League.⁶ In the following year, he became conspicuous in the House for his good personal relations with the French. Just prior to the election of 1854, he wrote to a political friend: "I believe that there must be a change of ministry after the next election, and from my friendly relations with the French, I am inclined to think my assistance will be sought. Our aim should be to enlarge the bounds of our party so as to embrace every person desirous of being counted as a 'progressive Conservative'."⁷ Two years after the anticipated "broadening out" had occurred, Macdonald ousted "fossil" Toryism in the person of Sir Allan McNab. The change in leadership had the full co-operation of the French. That the "wheel had gone full circle" is shown in a letter from Macdonald to Chamberlin of the *Montreal Gazette*: "The truth is you British Canadians never can forget that you were once supreme. . . . No man in his senses can suppose that the country can for a century to come be governed by a totally unfrenchified government. If a British Canadian desires to conquer, he must "stoop to conquer." He must make friends of the French without sacrificing the status of his race or his religion. He must respect their nationality. Treat them as a nation and they will act as a free people generally do—call them a faction and they become factious."⁸

Another aspect of the coalition which laid its foundations on a sound basis was the inclusion of the Baldwin Reformers. At once, the Liberal Conservatives became heirs of those ideas of government to which Baldwin had devoted himself. Responsible government and a faith in the continuity of political development were legacies of great value. They served to root Macdonald Conservatism in the best traditions of the past, and at the same time, gave the assurance that "the great measures" of the future would be handled with due regard to historic spontaneity.

The decade from 1854 to 1864 has properly been labelled "stalemate." The period was a heyday of close political manoeuvring, petty treacheries, and spasmodic, half-honest efforts "to find a way out." At least on one issue the battleline was clearly drawn, namely—the demand of Upper Canada for organic change. The Clear Grits existed to champion the Upper Canadian case. That they did so with a convincing weight of argument is not disputed. From another viewpoint, however, the movement was a threat to the well-being of the country and a misdirection in the main current of Canadian development. "The Western peninsula must not get control of the ship," wrote Macdonald in 1856. "It is occupied by Yankees and Covenanters—in fact, the most yeasty and unsafe of populations."⁹ Throughout the ten-year period, the Liberal Conservatives put up inflexible resistance. Having regard to the preservation of the union, their stand

⁵*Macdonald papers*, A. Campbell to J. A. M., March 8, 1855.

⁶Ontario Archives, *Stevenson papers*, J. A. M. to Stevenson, July 5, 1849.

⁷*Macdonald papers*, J. A. M. to Captain Strachan, Feb. 9, 1854.

⁸Public Archives of Canada, *Chamberlin papers*, J. A. M. to Chamberlin, June 21, 1856.

⁹*Ibid.*, J. A. M. to Chamberlin, June 21, 1856.

was well taken. In the first place, Clear Gritism was intensely sectional. Lower Canada was attacked with shrieking malice. By 1864, the crusading zeal of George Brown had stirred up so much animosity that even his supporters in the House were hopeful that he would quit public life.¹⁰

Another major count on which the Liberal Conservatives indicted the Grits was on their disavowal of responsible government. There is much evidence to show that the famous Reform Convention of 1859 was adroitly "steered" into the semblance of moderation,¹¹ yet it produced officially such vagrant notions as "a written constitution," "a people's convention to determine organic change," "a system of checks and balances," and "ministers who are heads of departments—no more and no less." The *Globe* summed up: "The system of government we desire to see adopted [in Canada] resembles most closely that in force in those states formed out of what was the North-West Territory. We suggest Ohio or Illinois."¹² The ridicule which proposals of this kind drew from the Liberal Conservative party was timely; and it was a fortunate happening that public opinion—both Conservative and old-time Reform—prevented digressions towards the "American System." Federation was already casting its shadow. One wonders how the great project would have fared at the hands of "people's conventions" and without the lubricating influence of a British technique.

The Intercolonial Railway was another matter on which Macdonald Conservatism took up cudgels on behalf of the wider view. The hostility of the Clear Grits and of the Rouges to the project was bitter and consistent. In both cases, the objections sprang from sectionalism—the Grits objected to the expense and the Rouges to the political implications. That Federation was a corollary of the I.C.R. was seen by everyone. When George Brown in 1863 blasted the negotiations, sentiment in the Maritimes was outraged at what was termed "the bad faith" of "political outlaws."¹³ The *Globe* in retort, declared that if £50,000, spent in the East, was the price of Confederation, "the union must be postponed for an indefinite period."¹⁴

In contrast, the Toronto *Leader* expressed the typical view of the Liberal Conservative party and its press: "A patriotic legislature will not stop to enquire which one section of the country may possibly reap the larger share of the benefit. We have always protested against treating the I.C.R. upon such narrow grounds and when it is a question of pushing improvements with the North-West, we would not alter our policy. . . . At present the various parts of British North America are isolated and distinct with only a feeble and doubtful tendency towards union. . . . A fine opportunity has been thrown away."¹⁵ Conservative support of the Intercolonial, it may be said, was not exclusively based on these high grounds. Cartier's association with the Grand Trunk and Macdonald's intimacy with Brydges and D. L. McPherson played a part. Yet if the latter could write to Macdonald about "advantages to you, both political and material"—"We owe you \$5,000; also we will return your draft on us for \$11,000"¹⁶—it is also a fact that the "railroad friends" sometimes did their lobbying in quarters where the national interest was benefited. A

¹⁰Ontario Archives, *Charles Clarke papers*, Dr. Parker to Clarke, April 10, 1864.

¹¹*Ibid.*, George Sheppard to Chas. Clarke, July 5, 1859.

¹²*The Globe*, June 1, 1859.

¹³*Morning Telegraph*, cited by the Toronto *Leader*, Oct. 29, 1863.

¹⁴*The Globe*, Nov. 4, 1863.

¹⁵Toronto *Leader*, June 23, 1863.

¹⁶*Macdonald papers*, D. L. Macpherson to J. A. M., June 17, 1863.

good instance of this is revealed in a letter from Brydges to Macdonald, four months before "the great events": "I told you I had seen Brown. . . . I offered him the chair of the Canada Board of Hudson's Bay at which, I think, he was a good deal impressed, but would not say 'yes' positively. I showed him that nothing could be done about the North-West without the Intercolonial. On the latter part, he seems much mollified. . . . He does not object, I think, to the *marrying* of the North-West and the Intercolonial, but wants the number of items enlarged. . . . You can judge from this if it is desirable for me to press him further."¹⁷

The great coalition came in June of 1864. It is not possible here to trace the relationship of the Liberal Conservatives to the Confederation idea, or to assess the value of the propaganda carried on by the party press during the period of so-called "hibernation." In common with men like D'Arcy McGee and Dr. Tupper, the Conservative newspapers played up the arguments of "national destiny" and "a new nationality," while they scouted the notion that union was justified simply as an escape from the sectional difficulties of the Canadas.¹⁸

When the federation compromise arrived, it embodied both concepts—"the Larger Scheme" and "the Lesser Scheme." In view of its ideology, the Conservative party adjusted itself naturally to the promotion of the "Larger Scheme." It was otherwise with the Clear Grits. The wide vision which characterized Mr. Brown's speech in the *Confederation Debates* seemed short-lived. Though the bargain of 1864 was faithfully adhered to, sectionalism died hard, and the Clear Grits continued to regard the great project and all its works through Upper Canadian spectacles. Thus in 1865, Brown wrote to Alexander Mackenzie: "Whatever happens now . . . my fifteen years' labour is amply recompensed by the consent, recorded beyond recall . . . in favour of representation by population. I feel now quite relieved of all uneasiness as to what may hereafter happen."¹⁹

In the crucial years between 1864 and the defeat of the repeal movement, the services of the Liberal Conservative party were invaluable. Upper Canada presented no difficulty, unless it was public apathy—a complaint to be found many times in the letters of party workers. In Lower Canada, on the other hand, there were memories of 1840. Federation could not have won except for the confidence with which Cartier was regarded by the people and by the church, and it was no small achievement that in ten years the coalition of 1854 had prepared the ground for so fruitful a partnership of the two races.

Tested by "great events," Macdonald rose to a level of dynamic statesmanship which dwarfed that of his colleagues. Intuitively he saw the project in its right perspective. "An event which will make us historical," he told Lord Monck, "—not with my will, would another person take my position in completing the scheme for which I have worked so earnestly."²⁰ His letters for the period show a serenity that is extraordinary. Faced with a series of reverses, he countered the despair of his supporters with the phrase, "Stick with the ship until she rights."²¹ In August of 1866,

¹⁷*Ibid.*, C. J. Brydges to J. A. M., Feb. 24, 1864.

¹⁸*Toronto Leader*, Nov. 30, 1863.

¹⁹Alexander Mackenzie, *The life and speeches of the Hon. George Brown* (Toronto, 1882), 232.

²⁰*Macdonald papers*, J. A. M. to Viscount Monck, June 26, 1866.

²¹*Ibid.*, J. A. M. to J. H. Gray, March 27, 1865.

even Galt, whose early record for Confederation was more consistent than that of any other man, wavered. Galt wrote: "I do not care now much as regards Nova Scotia" ". . . indeed, I should not grieve greatly if that province were not to come in now . . . as you then could have a legislative union with New Brunswick and save all the trouble about local governments and guarantees."²²

Macdonald's handling of the difficulties in the Maritimes shows not only the expert tactician, but the conciliator. In regard to New Brunswick, Lord Monck suggested coercive methods,²³ but Macdonald opposed "brow-beating." Howe's Repeal Movement in Nova Scotia was more serious. Macdonald thought Tupper "had zeal without discretion." "The bulk of the people are sincere in their desire for repeal," he wrote to Archibald, "but the leaders, I think, are not sincere."²⁴ "The anti-feeling can be worn out, not snuffed out." The tactics used by Macdonald were calculated to leave the least possible scar.

On the Federation settlement, itself, Macdonald left an imprint that has been enduring. In a hypothetical state of affairs—such as did not exist—his own inclination would have been for a legislative union. This was due partly to his observation of the American scene, and partly, no doubt, to the innate conservative spirit which puts unity before local interests and specialities. In any case, his preference was shared by others—for instance, Lord Elgin, Sir Edmund Head, Lord Monck, E. W. Archibald, John Rose, and Sandfield Macdonald.

Macdonald was too intimately associated with Cartier to confuse what was "desirable" with what was "possible." At Quebec, the Clear Grit idea for "co-ordinate—not subordinate"²⁵ local governments was defeated. The Federation plan, as it came into effect in 1867, was substantially pleasing to the national party. Macdonald made the prediction that "within the ordinary age of man," the general Government would swallow the provincial ones. Like several of his long-range prophecies, this one was unfulfilled. Within two years, Brown had established the *Globe* as the guardian of provincial autonomy, and was engaged in berating Sandfield Macdonald for his submissiveness to the Government at Ottawa. John A. wrote to the editor of the *Gazette*: "I fully concur with you as to apprehension ere long of conflict between the Dominion and the states' rights people. We must meet it, however, as best we may. . . . My own opinion is that the general government should pay no more regard to the status or position of the local governments than they would to the ruling party in a corporation like Quebec or Ontario."²⁶

With the appearance in 1871 of Oliver Mowat as Liberal Prime Minister of Ontario, the provincial rights movement acquired an aggressive champion. Hostilities were delayed by the change in Government at Ottawa, but for the battle which was to come, Macdonald Conservatism was already equipped with the conviction that narrow, provincial loyalties must give way to national sentiment and attachment to the interests of the Dominion. The conviction, indeed, has remained a permanent one; and, looking to the constitutional issues of the present day, it may be assumed

²²*Ibid.*, Alexander Galt to J. A. M., Aug. 31, 1866.

²³*Ibid.*, Viscount Monck to J. A. M., April 17, 1866.

²⁴*Ibid.*, J. A. M. to E. W. Archibald, July 4, 1868.

²⁵C. R. Biggar, *Sir Oliver Mowat* (Toronto, 1905), I, 132.

²⁶*Macdonald papers*, J. A. M. to Chamberlin, Dec. 22, 1868.

that Conservatives—whether federal or provincial—would re-assert the historic position of the party.

The physical extension of the Dominion to take in the North-west and British Columbia was a spur to the development of national unity. It stirred "the feeling for greatness"—a feeling which Lord Hugh Cecil lists as one of the ingredients in all Conservatism.

As regards the North-west, Macdonald's attitude in 1865 was summed up in a letter to Watkin. "The opening of the prairie lands would drain away our youth and strength. I am perfectly willing personally to leave the whole country a wilderness for the next half century, but I fear if the English do not go in, the Yankees will, and with that apprehension, I would gladly see a crown colony established there."²⁷ A distrust of the United States and a dislike for things American was a part of Macdonald's Canadianism. It was an impelling motive in the latter part of 1867 and caused him to swing over to Macdougall's demand for immediate action on Rupert's Land. The plan was carried in the Cabinet against the lukewarmness—if not, the opposition—of the French, headed by Cartier and aided by Alexander Campbell.²⁸ It was this display of sectionalism which caused Macdonald to comment to Sir John Young. "The natural tendency of public men is in that direction. Each member of your government holds his position from his supposed influence in his own province. . . . We are all yet mere provincial politicians—Bye and bye, it is hoped that some of us may rise to the level of National Statesmen."²⁹

The inclusion of British Columbia followed quickly after the North-west. The promise of a Pacific railroad, viewed by the opposition as the price paid for the province, was not so regarded by Macdonald. A railroad was needed, in any case, as a check against the dangers of American penetration. Macdonald had a sincere apprehension at this time that deliberate acts might be expected from Washington.³⁰ It is not surprising, therefore, the initiative for railroad construction came from the Government, and not—as in the case of the Intercolonial—from outside interests.

In his efforts to round out Confederation as a physical unity, Macdonald was obstructed by the heterogeneous Liberal groups. Both as regards "better terms" for the Lower Provinces and the Pacific railroad, sectionalism of this sort was a hampering influence. For narrow self-interests, the best antidote was that supplied by Macdonald. The national domain opened up a wide and safe field for enterprise, and, at the same time, created a popular pride in the young Dominion.

The political task of governing the country was another matter which was interwoven with the growth of co-operation and national unity. A date, possibly as late as 1896, should be fixed for the complete application of the two party system on national lines.³¹ This fact, however, does not detract from the work of Macdonald Conservatism during the first fifteen years of Confederation in extending party contacts to the new provinces. In 1867, an idealistic impulse in some quarters was to denounce parties as

²⁷*Ibid.*, J. A. M. to E. W. Watkin, March 26, 1865.

²⁸*Ibid.*, Alexander Campbell to J. A. M., Feb. 12, 1868.

²⁹*Ibid.*, Letter-book, no. 12, 443-7.

³⁰*Ibid.*, J. A. M. to John Rose, June 28, 1870.

³¹Escott Reid, "The rise of national parties in Canada" (*Proceedings of Canadian Political Science Association*, 1932).

a mode of government.³² Being himself the chief contributor to "the spirit of the times," Macdonald agreed to latitudinarian principles. "I believe that a great party is arising of moderate men. There are many men who think alike about the future of British America who have been hitherto divided by their political antecedents. All this ought to be forgotten now, and I hope that men, whatever their antecedents, who think alike, will act together. This is the true and only principle of party."³³ The first Dominion Cabinet set something of a standard in combining the diverse regional, racial, and religious elements in the country. In the Ontario section, the coalition principle held; and this fact, together with the looseness of the relationship with the Maritimers, gave the administration a group, rather than a party, aspect.

In carrying on the work of government, the Cabinet was soon racked by internal dissensions. Sectional feuds on such questions as the Inter-colonial, the North-west, banking policy, and immigration distressed Macdonald. He wrote to Chamberlin, "The difficulty is that there is no great party interested in fighting the battle of the Dominion."³⁴ Convinced that there was need of a well-knit party in which Conservative principles should predominate, he worked to that end, as changes in the personnel of the Cabinet showed. Macdougall went off to the North-west, disgruntled at being sacrificed, as he said "to create a new political party."³⁵

In the Maritimes, conditions were unfavourable to the extension of party sovereignty. This was due to a variety of causes—among them, the aversion with which the Brownite Liberals were regarded as "the selfish Ontario party." Among the provincial Reformers, there was resentment that Brown had broken the historic Liberal front by his failure to consult them in the coalition of 1864.³⁶ Since public men—anti-unionists as well as unionists—were disinclined to work with Dominion opposition—a division on national party lines was ruled out and the tendency was to give an independent support to Macdonald. This kind of relationship was hardly conducive to thinking in terms of national unity. Against it, is to be set the nucleus of key men—such as, Tupper, Tilley, Archibald, McCully, Mitchell, and Bishop Connelly—who were true friends of the national viewpoint. Newspapers like the *British Colonist* and the *Saint John Daily News* aided in the work of identifying Maritime interests with those of the Dominion. Possibly by 1872 a fair degree of integration in party affairs had been reached, since in the election of that year, thirty-four of the thirty-seven members had been expressly "pledged" to support of the Macdonald Government.³⁷ On the other hand, there were later events which suggest that the sovereignty for the national parties was not fully attained until 1878.

In the case of British Columbia, the Conservatives did a similar work in pioneering for political contacts, although here again a two-party division was retarded by the failure of the opposition to nationalize their influence. Only a small "Grit element" was to be found in the province, and this was

³²E.g. Egerton Ryerson, *The New Canadian Dominion* (Toronto, 1867).

³³*Macdonald papers*, J. A. M. to Alexander MacClenaghan, Nov. 8, 1866.

³⁴*Ibid.*, J. A. M. to Chamberlin, Dec. 26, 1868.

³⁵*Ibid.*, William Macdougall to J. A. M., June 16, 1869.

³⁶Sir Francis Hincks, Pembroke Speech, Oct. 27, 1870 (pamphlet in Public Archives of Canada).

³⁷*Macdonald papers*, J. A. M. to Lord Lisgar, Sept. 2, 1872.

made up of transplanted Canadians whose political faith was kept nourished by the *Globe*.³⁸ Indeed, until 1903 non-party government prevailed in the local Legislature.

The circumstances under which British Columbia entered Confederation, gave Macdonald a strong personal hold on her public leaders. The beginnings of responsible government had been interlinked with the movement for union, and for both, Macdonald had been the champion who won victory over the Governor Seymour's official clique. As a consequence his reputation stood high. "No one," wrote Joseph Trutch in 1872, "unless pledged to support your government consistently could have been elected, and therefore, turning on personal considerations of a trivial character, the elections were without excitement."³⁹

During the Mackenzie administration, the attitude of the Government towards the railway promise confirmed the province in its attachment to Macdonald. Most of her public men—including the Lieutenant-Governor—continued to carry on an intimate political correspondence with the Leader of the Dominion opposition—a fact that gives additional point to Richard Cartwright's remark about living "in a glass hive." It was in line with Macdonald's fidelity to a united Canada that he advised against agitation.⁴⁰

A small minority party, favourable to compromise with Mackenzie, made its appearance, and this provided at least the beginnings of national party lines in 1878. G. A. Walkem sums up in a letter to Macdonald. "You may remember me telling you back in 1874 that we knew nothing, comparatively speaking, of your Canadian party lines. Our M. P.'s were a doleful B.C. chorus—neglecting all questions which did not directly affect their own home. . . . A great change has been brought about by Mackenzie's conduct. Party lines have been drawn some time back and have gradually been defined by Richards, Dupont and Robson on behalf of Mackenzie until the clearness of the lines has become unmistakable—and the province with the exception of New Westminster has become thoroughly Conservative."⁴¹

The coping stone which rounded off the services of Macdonald Conservatism to unity was its enunciation in 1878 of National Policy. Much has been said and written on the "insincerity" of Macdonald in advocating protection, while, on the other hand, an attenuated case can be made out for consistency. Possibly Macdonald's pragmatic attitude is best revealed in a letter written to D. L. MacPherson in 1872—the election year in which some of the constituencies were given a mild review of N.P. "Mackenzie, Brown and Co. are thoroughly committed to free trade. Now you are, I know, a hot free-trader, so am I; but I quite agree with Patterson [of the *Toronto Mail*] that our game is to coquet with the protectionists. The word 'protection' itself must be taboo, but we can ring the changes on National Policy, paying U.S. in their own coin, etc."⁴²

A study of the origins of National Policy—as it appeared, full-dress, in 1878—reveals that the Conservative leaders were not so much the spon-

³⁸*Ibid.*, G. A. Walkem to J. A. M., April 17, 1873.

³⁹*Ibid.*, Joseph Trutch to J. A. M., Sept. 10, 1872.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, Joseph Trutch to J. A. M., June 20, 1876.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, G. A. Walkem to J. A. M., Sept. 28, 1878.

⁴²*Ibid.*, J. A. M. to D. L. MacPherson, Feb. 20, 1872.

sors, as the recipients of it. Hundreds of letters and press articles testify to this fact. Goldwin Smith remarked that national sentiment was ripe for protection and to refuse it was "to slam the door in the people's faces."⁴³ Macdonald was amazed at the popularity of the demand, and proceeded hastily to educate himself in the finer points of "industrial politics." E. W. Mackintosh, Isaac Buchanan, Adam Brown, and R. W. Phipps were among his informants. Macdonald's own contribution to National Policy was to put behind it the vehicle of party and to present the case to the electors. It was significant that for the first time, a Dominion leader—backed by a united party—stumped not only Central Canada, but the Maritimes as well.⁴⁴

National Policy was in substance economic nationalism. As such, it tested the aspirations of Canadians and the degree to which the forces of cohesion had done their work. The acceptance of the policy in every province, except New Brunswick, marked a determinant achievement in national unity.

⁴³*Ibid.*, Goldwin Smith to J. A. M., Oct. 4, 1878.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, J. A. M. to H. R. Macdonald, Aug. 12, 1872.