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SIR JOHN MACDONALD IN CARICATURE

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It is just one year short of half a century since the death of Sir John Macdonald. To say that his memory is still green is to make an understatement. It is true that for ten years past, he has been falling into the hands of the historians, those undertakers of society, which is a bad sign, since once the autopsy begins there really is little doubt of death. But, for all that, he is still a rather lively corpse, still potent to evoke old enthusiasms, warm memories, and ancient combats. He is one of the few figures in Canadian life about whom legends gather—legends found in all ranks and handed down not merely in books but by word of mouth.

Such a man must have had some remarkable qualities. Of verbal description of him, both complimentary and abusive, there has been no end. Another source as yet remains unused, the pictorial. How did he appear to the men of his day whose business it was to embody the essence of a situation or of a character in a few sharp, deftly turned lines, that is, to the caricaturists? That, it is the task of this paper to examine.

From the earliest times men seem to have delighted in making rude pictures of satirical intention: we find them in prehistoric caves, on the walls of Pompeii, in medieval manuscripts, and on the modern printed page. Apparently caricature meets some deep need in human nature. We desire to assure ourselves that great men are not really so very far beyond us; by picturing them as ridiculous, we reduce them to our level. That saves our ego. Another component in it may be malice; we cannot vent our feelings, or our spite, against "our betters" directly, so we give them a twist towards the semi-humorous, like a medieval court-jester, and put them into a picture. Again we preserve our ego. The psychology behind the cartoon is probably akin to that behind the verbal "anecdotes" that spring up so abundantly in countries where freedom of speech is abolished and that register some kind of score against the dictator of the day.

The political cartoon is merely a special type, then, of the satirical or semi-malicious drawing. It naturally flourishes best in countries where opinion is free. Obviously it would be rather unwise just now for the *Lustige Blätter*, of Berlin, to print cartoons making fun of Hitler. In unfree countries, internal subjects being virtually taboo, there only remain the potentialities of the international situation: "new orders" being by their nature very much in earnest, cartoons from dictator countries on international affairs are more likely to be grim and scathing than facetious and reproving. But in our English-speaking world the cartoonist is an old story. Many factors explain him: our sense of irreverence corresponds rather exactly to our conviction of our own merits, as compared with those of persons in higher stations: it is therefore strong. Again, self-government never ceases to throw up situations easily utilized for a sketch: there are always verbal "fisticuffs" going on; there is always some one in a tight-place; there are dozens of situations that attract our interest of themselves, still more when heightened and pointed up with a dash of wit.

No one needs to be reminded that England nearly one hundred years

ago equipped itself with a weekly publication devoted entirely to making people laugh over politics. The same weekly is still gallantly persevering, though one sometimes feels that time and the damp of the Atlantic have washed out most of the humour from the old subjects. In Canada, political cartoons began to appear in the 1840's—coincidentally with self-government—and towards the end of that decade, a special periodical was established devoted to them. This was *Punch-in-Canada*, which seemed to specialize in attacks on Lord Elgin. *Punch-in-Canada* was followed by *The Flysheet*, *Diogenes*, and *Grinchuckle*. All these publications carried intelligent and pointed cartoons. They were, however, destined to be overshadowed by the best of all Canadian political humorous periodicals, *Grip*, which made its appearance in 1873, captained by the celebrated J. W. Bengough. *Grip* had a relatively long life, as Canadian publications go, lasting until the 1890's. Its standard steadily rose, and in 1886, Principal Grant could say of Bengough, "*Grip's* humour is his own. It has a flavour of the soil. It is neither English nor American. It is Canadian."

Since Bengough passed off the stage there has been no successor to *Grip*, though there have been a number of good cartoonists. Cartoons have shifted into the daily papers, first to the front pages and now, alas, often to the inside: the diminution of interest in politics forces itself upon anyone looking through the press of the last sixty years; today it would in itself be humorous to think of a Canadian weekly devoted almost exclusively to extracting the humour from politics. No one would read it when *Little Orphan Annie* was available.

Nevertheless the comics are no substitute for the political cartoon. They do not indeed belong in the same species. They stem from different sources, either professedly "funny" or descendants of the fairy-story. But the political cartoon need not be despaired of, must indeed be reckoned in rather good health as long as it is being drawn by men like Low in England or our own Arch. Dale in Canada.

Every cartoonist will tell you that some men can be caricatured, others not. Certain faces lend themselves to the art. Mr R. B. Bennett, according to the man who drew him best, was "a gift of God." There must be some prominent object about the face, a big nose, a mop of hair; or some other object peculiarly personal, such as an umbrella. Lines must stand out. This is obvious. What is harder to decide is the element behind the lines. Not every face with the proper physical features can be caricatured. There must be some factor of personality present along with the face, giving the artist his opportunity to combine clever drawing with wit and analysis of character. No cartoon of any vitality can be made of a man whose outstanding traits are his simple dignity. Bengough did his best with Alexander Mackenzie but without success: all he produced in his various attempts was the recurring picture of a rather thin Scotsman. Who remembers today any cartoon of Sir Robert Borden? It would have been impossible to caricature Borden, and one dip into the vast repository of his Memoirs is enough to prove it.¹ In the same way, it is doubtful if there ever has been a good cartoon of the present Prime Minister.

¹I refer particularly to the anecdotes in various foot-notes which he all but labels "funny stories."

A man, to be cartoonable, must, it would seem, be something of a "character." There must be some foible about him. He must be capable of irrational actions, or actions which seem irrational to other people. That probably means that he must not be too self-conscious, in too tight control over himself. In other words, he should preferably be an extrovert. The cartoonist must say with Caesar, "let me have men about me that are fat . . . such as sleep o' nights"—amiable, companionable fellows who do not spin theories but take each day as it comes. Even in a country like this, where parties have gone so far adrift from their original philosophies, the odds are somewhat in favour of such men being found more often within the Conservative ranks than within the Liberal: the lean and hungry Liberal, despite the assertions to the contrary of people leaner even than he, still thinks too much. Such men are dangerous and very likely come within the scope of the Defence of Canada Regulations. It is perhaps no accident that the two best subjects for caricature in Canadian history have been two Conservative Prime Ministers, Sir John Macdonald and Mr R. B. Bennett.

Few others, indeed, are worth much attention. The Olympian wrath of George Brown, together with his size and gaunt face, one would think should have provided a good combination but Brown never became a notable cartoon character. Probably he was too unsympathetic. And, after Confederation, he rapidly receded from the centre of the stage.

Oddly enough, the most introspective of our politicians came in for a good deal of effective attention, Edward Blake. His face was easy to draw but it was never distorted. In every picture the massive head, calm, assured features and sensitive, intelligent mouth stood unchanged. What made Blake fair game was the mystery about him, the brooding indecision proceeding from a mind that penetrated so much deeper than those of his colleagues, all the hesitations of the intellectual who sees five paths where other people see only one or two. Devastating effects could be secured from such material, as, for example, in the cartoon in *Grip* of October 31, 1874, just after the Aurora speech. The *Globe* had termed the speech "disturbing." As Blake refused to go on and clarify his position, he was represented in acrobatic costume, lying on his back and holding up in the air on his toes a huge globe. Under his hand was a paper marked "Blake's intentions" and the caption read "Signor Blake in His Popular Act of Keeping the Globe in Suspense."

Sir Charles Tupper was too vehement for good representation: the fact of a cyclone can be affirmed but it becomes a dreary business to go on reaffirming it. Once Tupper had been portrayed as a noisy person (made up of "bluff, brass and bluster," it was remarked at the time) there was little else to do: there was not enough variety in his character to make him a good subject.

Sir Wilfrid Laurier was too close to the type represented by Sir Robert Borden or the present Prime Minister to constitute a good subject. His features could hardly have been improved on, but his personality was too serene to give the cartoonist the requisite hand-hold. There was not the least suspicion of the clown about him—and that appears to be necessary. On the other hand, a Conservative intellectual, Sir George Foster, by reason of a certain intensity of character, cartooned well. There comes to mind the picture carried in the old *Toronto News*, during one of the

naval debates in the last Laurier Parliament, representing him as a human question mark (to which his figure was well adapted), boring into the government's secrets. The caption carried the appropriate inscription

Thou comest in such questionable shape. . . .
 . . . So horribly to shake our disposition. . . .

Of living Canadian statesmen, Mr R. B. Bennett stands in a class by himself, in so far as cartooning goes. During the five years of his ministry, his face, represented in infinite situations but always the same, provided for the cartoonist of the *Winnipeg Free Press* as effective political ammunition as did his attitude on the tariff for the editor. An easy explanation lies in Mr Bennett's air of inscrutable wisdom, his tendency to pontificate, his sudden turns, his inexplicable tirades.

But even Mr Bennett, as a character, is surpassed by "John A." In a country of eminent respectability, where biographical whitewash has been customarily applied not with the ordinary brush but, as Disraeli said in not altogether dissimilar circumstances, with a trowel, he, almost alone, has been allowed to retain some part of his own, precious self. Not all of it, far from that. But the job of completely burying him with eulogy never seems to get done: the real man will keep poking up among the biographical tombstones.

In caricature it is only the real man who is of much value. Plaster saints do not make good models. Hence Macdonald's public failings were the cartoonists' prizes. They, however, did not go beyond that point; they left his private life alone. He seems to have appeared late in the pages of the caricaturing periodicals. In the collection most consulted for this paper² the first mention of him is not until 1868, and then only incidentally. It is in a cartoon from *The Flysheet*, directed against John Sandfield Macdonald, then Premier of Ontario. He is dubbed "The Axe Grinder" from his propensity of never doing anything for a political friend without getting something in return. As an example of the rough humour of the times and as inclusive of the slight reference to Sir John, the verse affixed to the cartoon may be quoted:

Needy Axe-Grinder, whither are you going?
 Rough is the road, your wheel is out of order,
 Bleak blows the blast, your hat has a hole in it,
 So have your breeches.
 Tell me, Axe-Grinder, how came you to grind axes?
 Did some rich man tyrannically use you?
 Was it John A.?

Both *Diogenes* and *Grinchuck* thereafter carried numerous cartoons of Macdonald, but none of them were of much significance; neither had succeeded in making him into a "character." This feat was reserved for Mr E. Jump, in the *Canadian Illustrated News*. His "Mid-Day Gun at Ottawa"³ merely shows a collection of notables setting their watches by the gun, but the drawing of Macdonald picks out those traits that were to become so familiar later on—his nose, his mop of hair, and a certain air of jaunty good-fellowship. Another excellent cartoon by Mr Jump appeared on April 12, 1873, entitled "πολύμητις ὁδυσσεύς—The Many Counsellor Odysseus." (The Greek inscription no doubt flattered the audience even

²*The Caricature History of Canadian Politics*, 2 vols. (Toronto, 1886).

³*Canadian Illustrated News*, May 11, 1872.

in 1873, but who would think of trying to flatter a Canadian audience that way today?) As a drawing Jump's cartoon was excellent; it represented the Prime Minister in pseudo-classical costume, holding a plumed helmet in one hand and a pair of spectacles in the other. The verse attached was taken from Pope's translation of the *Iliad*:

Ulysses, first in public cares she found
For prudent counsels like the Gods renowned.

From 1873 *Grip* dominates the scene and presents such a wealth of material that only a small selection of it can be referred to. From the first, Bengough caught the same jauntiness that Jump had noticed and added to it many observations of his own: the expressive eyes, the large nose (it became larger and larger as he proceeded), the flexible mouth registering every emotion but (for there was always a shade of melancholy about it) never convulsed with spontaneous and tumultuous laughter.

One of the best cartoons ever produced in Canada must surely have been that in *Grip* of July 19, 1873. The Pacific Scandal, it is true, was affording beautiful opportunities, but Bengough made the most of them and perhaps touched as high a point that first year as ever afterward. The cartoon of July 19 parodied the well-known Laocoon group. A gigantic, bearded old man, labelled "Allan Line" struggled with a serpent called *Perfidy*. A small figure to his right flourished aloft a placard "Disavowal," while trying to disengage himself from the toils of *Suspicion*. This was Sir Francis Hincks. On the left, Sir John, his eyes starting from his head, is caught up in the coils of the same serpent, here called *Bribery*, *The Charter*, etc. It is biting off the tips of his fingers. The cartoon again attests the wide knowledge of the classics pervading the Canada of the 1870's for the legend under it reads:

"CANADA'S LAOCOON;
OR, VIRGIL ON THE POLITICAL SITUATION.

'Ecce autem gemini a Tenedo, tranquilla per alta, &c.'

'When lo! two snakes (perhaps from the Yankee shore)
Together trail their folds across the floor,
With precious scandals reared in front they wind,
Charge after charge, in long drawn length behind!
While opposition benches cheer the while
And John A. smiles a very ghastly smile!
And—'

Everybody knows the rest!"

Stronger and much more devastating than the Laocoon cartoon was that of August 8, 1873, entitled "Whither are we drifting?" It shows Macdonald with a Pecksniffian leer on his face, standing on the prostrate body of a woman named "Canada," holding in his right hand a bill marked "Prorogation, and Suppression of the Investigation." He is uttering his famous phrase "These hands are clean," but in the palm of his left hand, raised to heaven, is printed "Send me another \$10,000."

This cartoon also contains the only allusion to his personal weaknesses that I have noticed, for sticking out of his hip-pocket is a flask inscribed *Taktix*. Those who know the inside story of the Pacific Scandal period and the real meaning, in the Macdonald sense, of *tactics* will appreciate the ironical significance of this stroke.

Another of the same sort, hardly as severe, is that of September 27. "I admit I took the money and bribed the electors with it," Macdonald is represented as saying. "Is there anything wrong with that?"

Still kinder is the drawing of October 18, just before the famous session of the 23rd. Macdonald, as a circus rider, has just jumped through a largish hoop held by Lord Dufferin and marked "Prorogation, August 13." Now, on horseback, at the gallop, he has to face a very small hoop marked October 23, held by a man in clown's costume, with his finger to his nose, looking like Alexander Mackenzie. There are various languidly interested spectators. The look of dismay and intentness, the forlorn expression on the Prime Minister's face, is a triumph.

It is a tribute to Macdonald's dominating place in Canadian life that even during the five years of opposition, he remained the centre of attention in the pages of *Grip*. He was "the irrepressible Jack,"⁴ the bad boy at school⁵ and so on. Signs of his political renaissance dated from the winter of 1876, when talk of protection as the country's salvation began to be heard. He was depicted on a raft "running before the protection wind" to a distant shore labelled "office."⁶ Thereafter his every appearance had something to do with "office" and *Grip* pictured him as caring nothing for the merits of any policy, so long as it led that way. There was a long series of cartoons representing his National Policy as a mere ruse to get back to power.⁷ One of the best of these was "the Great Political Conjuror."⁸ Out of the one bottle, *National Policy*, Professor John A. Wizard, is pouring at the same time two kinds of wine, "No increase of taxes" into a Maritime goblet and "Retaliatory Tariffs" into that of the upper provinces. A conjurer's hat stands beside him, filled with eggs marked "promises."

So the years went on, each one bringing its grist of "take-offs," good and bad. During the eighties the great enemy was "Sindy-Kate" (the C.P.R. syndicate). Thus Sir John is represented⁹ as an old nurse, Buttercup, to wit. He holds two rather anaemic babies, "Sindy-Kate" and "Cabi-Nett." "Lawks, I've mixed the twins, don't know which is which," he is represented as saying. In similar vein he came in for a severe drubbing over the Rebellion of 1885 and the question of the execution of Louis Riel. Even the humorous paper went to the length of printing the following stinging indictment: "It is felt universally that Sir John has nobody but himself to thank for the Riel case from first to last, and the awful responsibility which is at this moment in his hands is but the natural result of the 'tactics' which for a long time he has practised under the name of statesmanship."¹⁰ Indignation like that inevitably cut down the quality of the cartoons, for rage and whimsicality do not go together.

The old power flared up in the last years of the Old Man, responsive to the increased importance of the issues then arising—commercial union, unrestricted reciprocity, and so on. On April 18, 1891, *Miss Canada* was represented as holding up two masks, one that of Sir Richard Cartwright,

⁴*Grip*, Nov. 27, 1873.

⁵*Ibid.*, Feb. 7, 1874.

⁶*Ibid.*, March 18, 1876.

⁷*Ibid.*, Dec. 7, 1876; Feb. 17, Nov. 24, 1877; July 6, 1878; Aug. 3, 1878, etc.

⁸*Ibid.*, Aug. 3, 1878.

⁹*Ibid.*, Nov. 22, 1884.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, Oct. 31, 1885.

the other that of Sir John. "Queer, isn't it," she says, "that when I propose to negotiate with the States, the act is treasonable or patriotic just as I happen to wear one of these faces or the other!"

This was really the last significant caricature of Sir John, for less than two months later came his death. *Grip* rose to that occasion by publishing "The Empty Saddle"—the Conservative horse, rather thin, standing silhouetted against the setting sun.¹¹ In the next issue¹² it announced, apropos of Sir John Thompson's accession to the Prime Ministership, that

Grip still has a Sir John
But the Grand Old Face has gone.

It concludes the long association, grown increasingly pleasant (probably for both parties) and increasingly mellow, too, with a few verses, themselves in the half-art that cartooning is, but indicative of the spirit and attitude in which the dead man had been accepted all his life. These may well conclude this paper also:

Sir J.—A.—M.—

"Dead! dead!" And now before
The threshold of bereaved Earnscliffe stand
In spirit, all who dwell within our land
From shore to shore.

Before that black-draped gate,
Men, women, children mourn the Premier gone
For many loved and worshipped old Sir John
And none could hate.

What! can there yet be house and Members here
And no John A.? . . .

So long he lived and reigned
Like merry monarch of some olden time,
Whose subjects questioned not his right divine
But just obeyed
His will's e'en faintest breath,
We had forgotten—'midst affairs of State,
'Midst Hansard, Second Readings and Debate—
Such things as Death!

. . . he passed
With silent lips
But not insensate heart!
He was no harsh, self-righteous Pharisee.

As to his Statesman-fame
Let History calm his wondrous record read
And write the Truth, and give him honest meed
Of praise or blame!¹³

¹¹*Ibid.*, June 13, 1891.

¹²*Ibid.*, June 20, 1891.

¹³*Ibid.*, June 13, 1891.