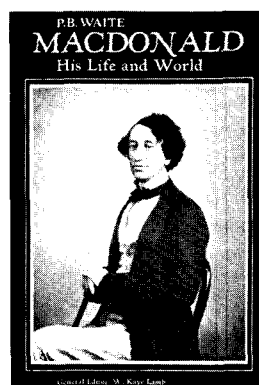


## Review Article

### Macdonald's World: Visual Approaches

by RICHARD J. HUYDA



**Macdonald: His Life and World.** P.B. Waite. General Editor: W. Kaye Lamb. Picture Editor: Paul Russell. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1975. Pp. 224. illus. \$12.95.

**The John A. Macdonald Album.** Lena Newman. Montreal: Tundra Books, 1974. Pp. 224. illus. \$25.00.

Few persons other than a small number of archivists seem to know that Lady Agnes Macdonald kept a photograph album which records a view of her world and that of her husband, the first Prime Minister of the Canadian federation. The album is not, of course, the only pictorial document of John A. Macdonald's life and world: surviving portraits indicate that Sir John visited photo studios several dozen times; Mrs. Eliza Grimason, a friend and confidant, maintained a photo album, as did other contemporaries such as Lady Dufferin, Sir Hastings Doyle, and Captain James Grant. Numerous professional and amateur photographers as well as talented artists, cartoonists, and caricaturists have left a rich heritage. Together with a vast mine of artifacts, cartographic and textual evidence, this varied documentation presents a spectrum of insights into the Macdonald era. Each type of evidence has its own particular semblance of reality; each presents its own truth or distortion. None presents the full reality; none were created with full objectivity. All constitute raw evidence to be interpreted and presented by the researcher.

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As custodians of visual documentation, archivists occupy a privileged position enabling them to make comparison between originals and the employment of these documents by researchers. The limitations of modern reproduction technology inevitably inhibit the perfect duplication of the original; however, archivists properly expect that researchers and publishers should meet certain standards in the use of illustrations. The selection must be appropriate and adequate; a proper respect must be shown for the format and historical integrity of the original and for the intention of its creator. Mutilation through poorly bled prints, false colour renditions and faulty cropping, reducing and enlarging should be avoided. Proper captions and credits must be provided. It is the archivist's responsibility to care for the originals, but perhaps his role includes reviewing and commenting upon their publication.

In two books recently published, a noted Canadian historian and a professional journalist each have consciously integrated pictorial and textual evidence to display their interpretations of the life and world of John A. Macdonald. Professor Peter B. Waite, the historian, entitles his book *Macdonald: His Life and World*. This is the first volume of a series on each Prime Minister. Waite is aware that pictorial evidence has an intrinsic quality capable of communicating important information about the past. In this consciousness, he little resembles most Canadian historians who have treated the picture as an afterthought, a supplementary adjunct hastily assembled after the "scholarly" labours have ceased, and included often for no better reason than to break the tedium of relentless text. Waite pursued research for this book on two fronts simultaneously, probing both visual and textual sources to reveal his vision of Macdonald's life.

A lucid and lively literary style, hallmarks of Waite's writing, create a graphic narrative. The grand issues of politics, progress and expansion in the last half of the nineteenth century are enhanced and humanized by detailed sketches of daily life. The author faced and executed successfully, within the confines of a single volume, the depiction of both the vast panorama of an era of nation and empire-building, and the personal life of an accomplished individual. Yet, one must ask if the author has succeeded fully in his visual presentation.

Images have been used extensively throughout this book. Although the final selection of illustrations for any publication often leaves aside many of those originally chosen by the author, it is still obvious here that Waite has consulted the archival collections of probably all major Canadian repositories. Waite seems to have spent much time and effort upon his research in archives where he appears to have been served well. A number of the best Canadian historical pictures have been reproduced, but the adequacy and even the appropriateness of some of the pictures published are uneven. Those relating directly to Macdonald and to his family are well chosen for aesthetic and technical qualities. The portraits properly reflect changing physical characteristics and personality traits. Still, as there are so

few illustrations available showing Macdonald in action, it is regrettable that some have not appeared, especially the appealing photograph of him being made an honorary Indian Chief.

Selecting pictures representative of Macdonald's world is obviously a difficult and subjective exercise. Consequently, the choice is certainly open to criticism. For the most part, Waite and his editors have chosen a pictorial cross-section of urban and rural activities, objects and scenes in addition to images representing political milestones of the Confederation years. As was to be expected, the author chose to include such visual clichés as the photograph of the Fathers of Confederation gathered at Charlottetown, the photograph of the last spike being driven at Craigellachie on the CPR, and cartoons concerning the Pacific Scandal and the National Policy. Fortunately, Waite has gone beyond the clichés. His selection of cartoons and caricatures, newspaper clippings and other graphic material is as refreshing as is the choice of paintings and posters reproduced in full colour. The inclusion of a reproduction showing Macdonald's handwriting was an excellent decision—of all the manuscripts that exist, what could be a better example than this Father of Confederation's own draft of the BNA Act?

Among the few inappropriate selections is one whose use is as unforgivable as it is sad commentary upon the lingering naiveté of academic historians who attempt to depict historical Canadian highlights even though no appropriate illustration exists. Note in this respect the use on page 60 of modern photographs of the plaque commemorating the London Conference and of the empty room used for this gathering. Waite is not solely to be blamed. He is following fellow historians who myopically resort to similar illustrations, mainly, I suspect, because at some point their texts have become so long and weighty discussing political and constitutional intricacies that a need is felt to insert an illustration if only for relief. Archivists must share the blame. Obviously, archivists should provide the requested evidence, but surely they also have a responsibility to caution researchers on the appropriateness of its use and to dissuade from injudicious practices. The Canadian visual heritage is ample enough to permit an insistence upon a conscious effort by archivists to signal new directions and to indicate alternatives. On the whole, nevertheless, Waite's indiscretions are few and his selection commendable. Regrettably, however, the publishers and editors fail to do justice to the author's choice of images. Flashes of brilliance in parts of the books are impaired by a number of abuses.

The tone, design and reproduction of the book jacket is superb, exploiting the quality and impact of the Notman portrait of Sir John and the skill of the engravers for the *Canadian Illustrated News*. The oval portrait of Macdonald (page 9) is a most suitable complement to the text. Image and text communicate separately and together. Other delightful and appropriate examples of the use of material are provided by another oval portrait of the subject, the full-page layout of the 1891 Election poster and pages from

*Grip*, the *Canadian Illustrated News* and *Massey's Illustrated*. The composite spreads depicting McGee's and Macdonald's funerals demonstrate good manipulation of illustrations as does the use of the single picture for pages 178-179. Commendably, the overworked Harris painting of the Fathers of Confederation at Québec is downplayed while emphasis is lent to lesser-known material such as the Macdonald draft of the BNA Act. Overall, the pictures keep pace well with the text and are grouped harmoniously.

Cropping and producing properly-bled prints are challenging techniques requiring more than the journeyman's skill. Cropping has been used effectively in Waite's book in some instances (for example, page 198), and improperly in others (see page 86). Bled prints, that is, illustrations printed to the limits of the page without using borders, succeed if executed effectively as on pages 34 and 69, but most often the technique fails. The frontispiece is a glaring example of unjustified bleeding and cropping inasmuch as it creates a new and false centre of focus—a bottom white block—never intended by the portraitist, Fosbery. Nor did Fosbery paint such a yellow-green Macdonald.

Colour rendition throughout the book is generally poor, probably because of the reproductions supplied but also, I suspect, because of the inadequacies of the printers and editors alike. Black and white reproductions are tolerable for the most part, and the poorer renditions might be attributable to the mediocre quality of material supplied by repositories.

Horizontal images spread across two pages seldom work well in any book, and this publication is no exception with its split images and distressing gutter creases. Only the image on pages 148-149 is acceptable.

The use of enlarged or reduced illustrations is another critical factor. The enlargement of the oval portraits of Macdonald and of Wilfrid Laurier, and a few other examples, fare well enough, but the layout on pages 100-101 is a dismal failure. In this last instance, Edward Blake is represented by a dominant enlargement, while Sir Hugh Allan appears humbled by excessive reduction. A more perfect visual interplay was missed. How much more forceful and meaningful would have been the portraits if reproduced in the same size! Another lost opportunity exists on page 166 where a photograph should have been carefully cropped and enlarged. Reduction has obscured the information in the photograph on page 143 and deprived another on page 175 of its acknowledged artistic and documentary excellence. Crammed into a bottom corner, bled to death, encumbered by gratuitous text, unbalanced by the caption, this treatment of the superb Notman view of lumber ships in the timber coves of Sillery epitomizes the faults in the book.

Improper enlargements and reductions, wretched cropping and bleeding, ill-conceived two-page spreads, and inaccurate tonal renditions pervert and distort pictorial evidence as untruthful representations of their creators' intent and work. Such faults in this book detract from the textual excellence

which demands equal treatment and care for the illustrations chosen by the author.

It is encouraging to see academics of the calibre of P.B. Waite learning to use pictures effectively and extensively in research and publications. As researchers and publishers gain more experience in this area, readers will have increasing access to better illustrated historical publications. Archivists may perhaps then be left with the minor task of convincing writers that while a picture is worth a thousand words, there is no need to supply a thousand in the caption, a tendency which mars *Macdonald: His Life and World*.

The approach to the life and world of Macdonald in the late Lena Newman's work, *The John A. Macdonald Album*, differs somewhat from that of the academic historian. Newman was a professional journalist who recognized the effectiveness of placing the raw historical material in one of today's most familiar formats—the daily newspaper. Those who do not appreciate this format, with its disjointedness and many interruptions, might readily condemn Newman's book. Like a newspaper, this *Album* is not meant to be read from the beginning to the end, line by line, picture by picture. Order and coherence do exist in the book, but they are not to be found in a standard, continuous narrative. Lena Newman was a master of the journalistic craft, and this book is a fine example of her particular perceptiveness and skill.

Unencumbered by the rigours of historical methodology and academic formalities, Newman's aim was to present original evidence in a virgin state, integrated with excerpts from secondary sources and linked through a simple narration of the events of the Macdonald era. In this, she has succeeded. Her concise and easily read text is not a synthesis, but rather a potpourri of related facts and details. There is no pretence at providing novel interpretations or profound analyses. The textural strength of the work resides in brief asides, insertions, hearsay reports, quotes, excerpts from diaries, letters and writings, and in facsimiles of invoices and advertisements. These delight and titillate the reader, intrigue him and immerse him in the spirit of the age, spurring natural curiosity for knowledge of the everyday aspects of a notable person's life. There are times when the reader might even feel of the more intimate entries that he is being led into a confidence which perhaps should not be violated. This slightly unsettling sensation, however, undoubtedly may be soothed by the thought that the information brings a better understanding of Macdonald and his family.

More than a narrative, the *Album* is a book of illustrations and graphics. The format itself is a visual stimulus adorned with a multiplicity of type faces, borders, boxes and lines. The generous size lends itself to bold pictorial layout, and Tundra Books has capitalized on such features. The book is crammed with illustrations. In her search for Macdonald memorabilia, Newman must have ransacked large and small repositories and not a few private collections, as well as contemporary newspapers and the

pages of superbly endowed periodicals such as *Grip* and *Canadian Illustrated News*. For the most part, the pictures have been chosen prudently, including the better and more important portraits of Macdonald, his family, friends, colleagues and antagonists. The book provides a worthy selection of views of places, things and activities of the Macdonald years, and it is particularly substantial in its array of contemporary cartoons and caricatures. Only the inclusion of the modern photograph of artist Rex Woods painting a facsimile of Harris' Fathers of Confederation oilpainting is incongruous in this book. This jarring inclusion and the entry on Diefenbaker's interest in Macdonald seem out of place.

A particularly conspicuous omission from a book which relies so heavily upon illustration is the lack of adequate mention of the artists, illustrators, cartoonists and photographers who played a significant role as critics and communicators in their own period as well as being the creators of today's invaluable historical documentation. By its nature, this book demands more than scant reference to their place in 19th century Canadian life.

The pictures themselves have been treated with respect, being reproduced in a size capable of conveying the appropriate message and having the maximum impact on the reader. There is no unwarranted individual dominance or subjugation. Each picture stands on its own merit, yet works well with its neighbours. Particularly noteworthy are the portraits of Macdonald (pages 110-111) and the impressive enlargements of the very moving portraits of Mary Macdonald and her mother in mourning. Further, *at last* 19th century cartoons and caricatures appear in a size capable of revealing their exquisite detail.

The technical quality of the reproductions is commendable. The subtle line definitions of the engravings have been retained; the tonal qualities of the photographs are fairly well reproduced; and bleeding, cropping and double-page spreads are avoided or handled with discretion and skill.

The *John A. Macdonald Album* is a tribute to Lena Newman and a credit to Tundra Books. This volume should be studied with care as an example of a small but growing stock of publications which properly handle pictorial documentation in conjunction with text. It is a pity that we have been deprived of further assistance in this area by the death of Mrs. Newman.

Finally, *Macdonald: His Life and World* and *The John A. Macdonald Album* represent different approaches to and perceptions of the Macdonald era. Each volume has merit and shortcomings. Both indicate a growing awareness of the Canadian pictorial heritage. Even so, a full appreciation and understanding of the potential of the visual document has yet to flower, and publishers still are not masters of the demanding art of presenting illustrations. Archivists concerned with visual evidence must continue to advise, support and encourage researchers, but not fail to offer criticism and praise when warranted by publications.