

BEHIND THE POLITICS OF SIR JOHN A. MACDONALD: THE PRIVATE LIFE OF A 'FATHER OF CONFEDERATION'

Emma Kreiner

This exhibition explores the personal life of the first Prime Minister of Canada, Sir John A. Macdonald (1815-1891). The dominant historical narratives of Macdonald as a fiery and tenacious leader seem to systematically set aside the presence and importance of his wife Susan Agnes Macdonald. His second wife, often referred to as Agnes, stood by him through his alcoholism, while raising their daughter, Mary, who was born hydrocephalic. The following photographs depict the development of John A. Macdonald's personal life, through the portrayal of his first wife, Isabelle Macdonald (née Clarke) (1811-1857), his second wife, Susan Agnes Macdonald (née Bernard) (1836-1920), the First Baroness of Earncliffe, and their disabled child, Mary Margaret Theodora Macdonald (1869-1933). In observing these photographs of Susan Agnes (more commonly known as Agnes), the viewer is given a fast-forward view of this woman's aging process. The following images, photographed by William James Topley from 1869-1893, illustrate an astounding change in Susan's demeanor, from the mid 1880s, where she is shown first, leisurely reclining, then sitting extremely straight with shockingly white hair, and finally, completely hidden behind a black robe as she posed for a photograph with her daughter Mary. One can surmise that the adverse effects of her husband's alcoholism and her difficulty in raising a differently-abled child, all negotiated with her intense religious piety, contributed to the transformation apparent in Topley's portraits. Ged Martin cites, "By 1856, and at intervals for twenty years, Macdonald was a problem drinker, subject to intermittent binges that rendered him incapable of tending to his responsibilities."¹ It is reasonable to assume that Agnes had to endure

and probably cover up for a husband whose behaviour at home and in public was intolerable.

This exhibition will attempt to create a time-lapse portrait of the strong woman behind the father figure of Canada.



Daguerreotype of John A. MacDonald contained in a gold locket. (n.d.)

Photographer unknown.

Photograph: daguerreotype in gold locket.

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3623774&rec_nbr_list=3192702,3623774

It is appropriate to commence this exhibition with a daguerreotype of Sir John A. Macdonald.

This object would have been carried around as a talisman of affection, probably by his first-wife, Isabelle who died of tuberculosis in 1857. John is pictured in an intimate manner. The intense closeness, and simple, unembellished nature of John's image depicted in this daguerreotype would have been kept private from the public eye. Fundamentally, this image depicts how John's closest kin saw him. This intimate portrait sets the stage for the rest of this exhibition, which will attempt to uncover the tumultuous private life of one of Canada's fathers of confederation.



Madame John A. MacDonald (née Isabelle Clark), miniature inserted into a gold medallion. (Copy of an oil painting by William Sawyer).
 Photographer Unknown. After 1852. Photograph; approximately 28 mm in a 37 mm gold medallion
 Positive Non-paper - daguerreotype.
http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3207928&rec_nbr_list=3207928

This daguerreotype of Isabelle Clark would have also had a sentimental use, perhaps held by her husband, John. This daguerreotype of Isabelle is a copy of a portrait by the painter William Sawyer (1820-1889). Sawyer faced serious criticism for painting from photographs,² yet here his painting is transformed into a photographic image.³ This 'double exposure' speaks to the emotional value of the *painted* portrait at a time when photography was still considered a new invention.



Lady S. Agnes Macdonald and daughter Mary. June, 1869

William James Topley Studio, Ottawa.

5 x 7 in. Approx Negative - glass plate

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3218771&rec_nbr_list=3218771

The first of a group of six photographs taken at the Topley studio in Ottawa, in this image Agnes is shown hovering over her infant daughter with a melancholy gaze. She focuses not on the child at her side but inward and apart. Her ornate yet conservative clothing, as well as the plush furniture contained in the scene, communicate Lady Macdonald's elevated social standing. In her diary, Agnes writes of the "sad disappointment" of her Mary, yet she draws on her courage to say she will gain "lessons in humility and sacrifice"⁴ in raising her. Agnes Macdonald cared for her

daughter until her death in England in 1920, at the age of eighty-four years. About five years after her husband's death in 1891, Susan Agnes moved back to England.



Lady S. Agnes Macdonald (née Bernard) 1871

William James Topley Studio. Ottawa

5 x 7 in. approx.

Negative - glass

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3497707&rec_nbr_list=3194711,3497707,3624846

In this photograph Agnes Macdonald conforms to the four cardinal virtues of the ideal Victorian woman: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.⁵ Her piety is communicated through the large cross she wears around her neck, her purity through the flowers woven into her hair. Agnes' submissiveness is secured in her vacant, distant gaze, and she seems to be posed in a

drawing room, alluding to her domesticity. The visual analysis of this image corresponds to much of Agnes' writing which was highly moralistic, and mainly directed at trying to enlighten her husband. In her journal she wrote, "One earnest Prayer I daily offer – may the all wise Disposer, see fit to give my Darling the Strength he needs – that will answer my prayers."⁶ Clearly, much of Agnes' prayer was directed at John's drinking habits. His alcoholism raged at the historical moment when the Canadian temperance movement gained a wide following.



Lady Susan Agnes Macdonald (née Bernard), wife of John A. Macdonald. Sept. 1873
William James Topley Studio. Ottawa, Ont.

Photograph negative - glass

http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3194713&rec_nbr_list=3194713,3507068,3624847

In this striking portrait, Lady Agnes is depicted as a determined woman leader. With her shoulders back and eyes focused straight ahead, she seems to be highly concentrated on the task before her. Agnes was concerned with leading by example in her daily life. She writes, "I have given up wine – this is for example's sake, and because I think it unnecessary and therefore wasteful."⁷ Agnes was very aware of her position, the responsibilities she had in her marriage and in the public sphere.



Lady Susan Agnes Macdonald (née Bernard), wife of Sir John A. Macdonald, May 1881
 William James Topley Studio, Ottawa, Ont.
 Photograph ; 8 x 10 in. Negative - glass
http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3218767&rec_nbr_list=3218767

In this image, Lady Agnes is pictured reclining on a plush chair covered in fur in front of one of Topley's conventional interior backdrops. Objects that communicate her lavish lifestyle surround Agnes, but unlike in the earlier photographs, she seems to be submissive. Contrasting previous images of Agnes, it is obvious that in this photograph she is tightly bound in a corset and purposefully elegant, in a semi-reclining position that was in vogue. Although this photograph was taken from far enough away that her expression is hardly readable, the total affect conveys an overall feeling of ease. This is the last image of Lady Agnes where she is quite so serene.



Agnes Macdonald, Baroness of Earnscliffe fonds 1880-1886

Place Undertermined

Watercolour

<http://www.lac->

[bac.gc.ca/pam_archives/public_mikan/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=161120&rec_nbr_list=161120](http://www.lac-bac.gc.ca/pam_archives/public_mikan/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=161120&rec_nbr_list=161120)

The Baroness of Earnscliffe fonds contain twenty-four watercolours by Agnes Macdonald.

Reading Agnes' own works of art, instead of those made with her as the subject, can further contribute to an understanding of her emotional state. Agnes' painting is possibly the only avenue to enter her mental state, as she acknowledges that she heavily censored her own writings. This particular scene depicts the Macdonald's vacation home at Rivière du Loup. Instead of showing a lively recreational scene, Agnes has painted a sharp and foreboding rock formation, flanked by a lone sailboat without a sail. The solitary and unmoving boat in the centre of the image has strong metaphorical meaning, and may very well echo her feelings of disconnect from the people around her, notably her husband, John.



Agnes Macdonald, Baroness of Earnscliffe fonds 1880-1886

From the West Beach Looking S. West, "Pilgrim Island"

Place Undertermined

Watercolour

<http://www.lac->

[bac.gc.ca/pam_archives/public_mikan/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3007593&rec_nbr_list=3007593](http://www.lac-bac.gc.ca/pam_archives/public_mikan/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3007593&rec_nbr_list=3007593)

This related watercolour also communicates a sense of loneliness. The vast expanse and looming sky convey a gloomy emptiness and isolation. Furthermore, the muted colour palate suggests a feeling of ennui.



Lady Susan Agnes Macdonald (Née Bernard) (Wife of Sir John A MacDonald) Jan. 1885
William James Topely Studio (Assumed to be in Ottawa)

Photograph; 4.25 x 6.5 in. approx. Negative - glass.

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3486506&rec_nbr_list=3486507,3486506

Only four years after the image of Lady Agnes reclining, she confronts the camera with snow-white hair and a notably worn expression. The speed at which she has aged in the four years between these portraits is incredible. Even if her life was privileged, it was definitely not been easy. Dealing with an alcoholic husband and raising a differently-abled child had taken a large toll on her. P.B. Waite writes that Agnes was “an earnest woman with a temper and not much ability to laugh when things went wrong.”⁸ Surely, Agnes’ dutiful and stern demeanor influenced the ways she managed the stresses in her life, and induced her hyper-aging.



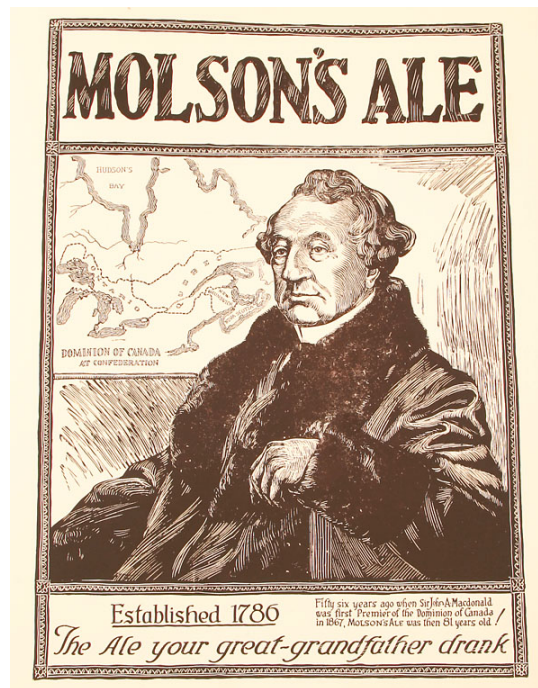
Baroness Macdonald of Earnscliffe and daughter Mary. May 1893

William James Topley. Ottawa, Ont.

Photograph; 107 x 165 mm approx. Negative - glass.

http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3192011&rec_nbr_list=3192011,3467536

This final Topley image speaks volumes about the tragic development of Agnes in her personal and public life. She is depicted shielding her face from the lens with a dark, funerary veil. Taken two years after her husband died, it is likely that Agnes was still in mourning, and though it was customary for Victorian women to be in mourning for two years, the reasons for this appearance could also be related to her daughter's condition. This photograph communicates both sadness and shame. Seen but anonymous, visible, yet hidden, in this photograph, Agnes is highly ambiguous. Although this may simply be an image to commemorate Agnes' mourning, the many years of stress in managing her husband's alcoholism and her needy child come to a head in this image of the widow of John A. Macdonald.



Molson's Ale, Sir John A. Macdonald. 1924

Artist Unknown.

reproduction: photomechanical print on wove paper. Support: 35 x 43.2 cm, Image: 27 x 37.9 cm

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3000462&rec_nbr_list=3000462

This advertisement depicts Sir John A. as the 'great-grandfather' of the nation, and a drinker.

Ged Martin noted that a strong marriage and growing public disapproval of his drinking probably changed Macdonald's drinking habits in the late 1870s.⁹ This image illustrates the jovial narrative of Macdonald's alcoholism. The poster ignores the negative impact MacDonald's alcoholism had on his family life, or his political career for that matter. John as a strong leader who was occasionally fond of a strong drink, is part of a celebratory story that attempts to unite the nation and forget the damaging behavior of its founding father, and the effect it had on his family.

LESSON PLAN

This lesson plan is directed towards students in grade three and four. The students will be shown a group of images exclusively of Lady Susan Agnes Macdonald, without any captions. The students will be shown all of the images in chronological order, and then be asked to recount what they see by creating a narrative about the unnamed Lady Agnes. The students will have twenty minutes for independent creative writing. They will be told to keep their pens moving for the entire twenty minutes, always trying to relate their story back to the images they were shown. The symbols and props in the photographs, such as costume, background, and pose of the sitter will be highlighted for the students before they begin writing. After the students have finished writing, the instructor will facilitate and workshop their ideas, and reveal the identity of Lady Agnes Macdonald. The children will then get to compare their perceptions with the dominant historical narrative concerning Agnes Macdonald. Hopefully, this exercise will illustrate the persuasive power of portraiture in conveying ideas about someone's stature and importance. Additionally, this lesson plan has been created in the hope that the students will receive a somewhat revisionist history of the early years of Canada in acknowledging the wife of Sir John A. Macdonald.

¹ Ged Martin, "John A MacDonald and the Bottle," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 40 no. 3 (Fall 2006): 162-3.

² Michael Ball, *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, "William Sawyer," University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2000. http://biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=5822

³ Ibid.

⁴ P.B. Waite, *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, "Susan Agnes Bernard" (Baroness Macdonald). http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=7208

⁵ Robin Sutherland, "Good Housekeeping," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 29 no. 1 (2004): 40.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ P.B. Waite, *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, "Susan Agnes Bernard" (Baroness Macdonald).

⁹ Ged Martin, "John A. MacDonald and The Bottle," 162.

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