

**Maurry H. Epstein**

# **Sir William Macdonald**

**a biographical sketch**

Sir William Christopher Macdonald, philanthropist and benefactor to education, was not a self-made man in the Horatio Alger sense. From both sides of his family he inherited a tradition of leadership, prominence, wealth, and public service. On the paternal side, there was his grandfather, John. This sturdy forebear left Scotland because of religious persecution and established a colony on Prince Edward Island, then known as the Island of St. John. He later raised, trained and led supporters of the Crown during the American Revolution. William's father, Donald, served as a member of the colony's Legislative Council for almost a decade. On the maternal side, William's grandfather fought as a colonel for the Crown in the Revolutionary wars; while other prominent citizens from this family included a Speaker of the Assembly, a member of the Executive Council and Justice of the Supreme Court of the colony. In retrospect, one notes that William was to perpetuate but modify this heritage.

## **the early years**

William was born at Glenaladale, Prince Edward Island, in 1831, the youngest child of Donald and Anna Matilda Brechen MacDonald. His earliest schooling was gained at Tracadie, P.E.I., from his uncle John who was a Paris-educated priest. Later, he went to Charlottetown to attend the Central Academy which, as Prince of Wales College, was to become a recipient of his philanthropy. At the age of sixteen, the time he should have embarked on his secondary education, he had "a grievous quarrel with his father." According to MacDonald family tradition, one son in each generation was provided for the

Roman Catholic priesthood. William was apparently chosen for this honour. However, as an acolyte in the parish church at Tracadie, he conceived "a passionate aversion to the rituals and tenets of the Church."<sup>2</sup> His defection from the faith deeply grieved his father and led to a seven-year long estrangement between them. As a result, William's formal education was terminated and he was apprenticed to a cousin's general store in Charlottetown. Although this employment was not lengthy, this must have been where he learned his first lessons in commerce.

Accounts of William's life during the next few years are sketchy. It is known that he returned home very briefly, then went to Quebec where, it is believed, he worked as a clerk. Apparently he later went to Newfoundland where he operated a produce business in St. Johns with a partner. This endeavour failed. About 1848 he moved to Boston to join his brother, Augustine, who was studying law. William indicated in a letter that he was employed by Messrs. George H. Gray and Company and was "a minor in a counting house,"<sup>3</sup> earning a salary that would not pay half of his board, since the company evidently regarded the experience as worth double the money. Two years later, still in Boston, he initiated a new enterprise and a dream began to materialize.

In July 1851, he wrote to another brother, John Archibald, who was still living on Prince Edward Island, suggesting that he give up farming and open a store "in Charlottetown . . . to deal in West Indies goods and Yankee notions" that he, William, would ship north. William's confidence in his own business acumen was shown in his assurances that he could buy to better advantage than the traders from Prince Edward Island. He also foresaw the prospect of the eventual development of a wholesale, as well as a retail, business. The following year, however, William had some reason to doubt John Archibald's ability. After a disastrous initial shipment of merchandise aboard the "Responsible," William sent comprehensive and minute directions for the handling of goods, leaving little to his older brother's judgment. He even warned against political participation. The political involvement of his forebears, it would seem, did not interest William.

He continued giving advice to John Archibald as if he were the elder brother, but in so doing, William revealed something of his own character and ambition. This letter might well have been his own "credo," the basis upon which he built his whole life:

You must exert yourself and push on, let nothing stop you . . . If you loose [sic] all, stop not to grieve, it is unbecoming to a man as well as useless — but stop *only* to plan, continue and devise means to meet your ends — let your aim next to Heaven be Superiority; let Onward and Upward be your motto — never be second while it is in your power to be first. In the words of a Roman General, “If you are sleeping, awake; if you are standing, move; if you are moving, run; if you are running, fly!” Read Franklin’s life — see how he rose from a poor printer’s boy — a tallow chandler’s son, to be second only to the immortal Washington — how he persevered in his studies as well as his business — losing no time late or early — not only being industrious but endeavouring to appear so. Study, my dear brother you require much . . .<sup>4</sup>

The letter closed with a bold, precise, underlined signature. Beside it the young man, William, wrote what one might interpret as his life-long dream. “I shan’t stop until that signature is *GOLD* wherever it may go.”

After these stirring words, it is sad to report that, by July 1852, the brothers’ venture was a total failure. William, of course, held John Archibald to blame.

## pipe dreams

Sometime between 1852 and 1854, after a brief period in New York, William went into business with his brother Augustine in Montreal. The City Directories of the period listed “MacDonald Bros. & Co.” under “Oil merchant and manufacture.” The Directories of 1857-58 and 1858-59 described William as an “importer and general commission merchant.” In 1859, the brothers entered the tobacco manufacturing business under the firm name of MacDonald Brothers & Co.<sup>5</sup> The tobacco business was to lead to imprisonment and obscurity for Augustine but prominence and wealth for William.

The initial success of the Montreal enterprises was evident in a letter from William’s father to John Archibald, still on Prince Edward Island. Donald was visiting Montreal at this time with his daughter, Margaret, prior to enrolling her at a convent in Quebec city. He stated:

The boys are doing an excellent business. During the last year they operated to the extent of forty thousand pounds and during the next year they expect to deal to the extent of One hundred Thousand Pounds and if their Profitts [sic] are very moderate yet they operate to such an extent that they can have a very handsome income. What

would you think of one thousand pounds in the next five years if all goes as it has in the last eighteen months.<sup>6</sup>

The MacDonald tobacco enterprise continued to enjoy great prosperity. The threat of civil war in the United States created an extraordinarily favourable condition for the establishment of a tobacco manufacturing business in Canada. It may well have been that William's success stemmed from circumstances, or from shrewd observation and calculation, or from the jealously guarded recipe for the manufacture of plug tobacco. An unsigned paper in the files of Dr. J. Snell indicated that:

...tobacco was a Canadian Institution. Lumber camps were as much in need of tobacco as a modern army. Hard tack, fat pork, and molasses needed plug tobacco to complete the luxury of living. The tobacco made by MacDonald was one of the first Canadian-made to go to the outposts...

It would not be an exaggeration to conclude that, as a result of the tobacco business, William's dream of GOLD came true. He was quoted as saying, in later life, that he had "no competitors, only imitators."<sup>7</sup>

## family relationships

It was conceivable that William's ambitions and actions were responses made, in part, to situations and relationships in his immediate family.

His early letters indicated a persistent antipathy to, and contempt for, his father, contrasting with his concern and affection for his mother, sisters and brothers so long as they commanded his respect and conformed to his ideas. William's letters show most vividly the patronizing air in which he addressed his brother, John Archibald, who was some five and a half years his senior. In a letter bearing a 1851 Boston postmark, he warned John Archibald against any business connections with their father, advising that "on no account open with him for your life... he has no credit at home or any place... He is regarded everywhere contemptuously." In 1852, William's letters directed John Archibald that "for no consideration to bring [Father] in contact with me in any way." By 1854, however, there were indications that the rift was being mended and that Donald MacDonald even planned to join his prospering sons in Montreal. Before he could put this plan into effect, he contracted cholera and died.

William held his mother in the highest esteem and his love appeared not to have wavered or diminished over the years. In a bitter letter to his father in 1849 requesting financial assistance and threatening to run off to California if it was not forthcoming, William specified that his mother not be informed of his intentions, for should she send money he would immediately return it to her, "whose Maternal affection and Generosity I shall never forget." He further indicated that he wished to spare her worry about his safety and comfort in rounding the Horn. In his subsequent letters to John Archibald, William invariably closed with the desire that he "Give my kind love to mother and sisters."

After his father's death in 1854, William's mother and sister, Helen, continued to live on Prince Edward Island. During the summer of 1868, William was known to have visited them and wrote each a letter from St. John, New Brunswick, on his way back to Montreal. Their life on Prince Edward Island may have prompted this correspondence for he wrote his mother "While I lay awake dreaming it came to me that under the existing state of things you and Helen might be happier living with me in Montreal and I concluded to make the proposal for careful and joint consideration of you both." He promised them a house "having all the modern improvements such as Gas and Water, hot and cold baths, closets, etc., and would furnish it handsomely, . . ." they would have three or four servants, horses, carriages and sleighs, a retreat at a "watering place... (away) from the extreme heat of summer" and he suggested that the women might join the "Methodist Church... on Great St. James Street..." He wished, he said, "to do everything in my power to make both of you comfortable and happy." In the accompanying letter to Helen he reiterated his generous intentions, "My desire is to make Mamma and yourself comfortable and happy and whatever will tend in that direction will be cheerfully acceded to by me, whether you remain in Charlotte Town or come to live with me in Montreal."

Helen and his mother accepted William's offer and accordingly he built a home on property he had purchased earlier from McGill University at 3 Prince of Wales Terrace, on what is now Sherbrooke Street West. They made this residence their home for the remainder of their lives. Mrs. MacDonald died in 1878, and contrary to Catholic doctrine, was cremated and buried in Mount Royal Cemetery. Helen died while visiting Florence, Italy, some twenty years later.

It was evident that William remained in contact with John Archibald over the years and, indeed, gave him considerable financial help. John married in 1866, at the age of forty-one, and subsequently had twelve children. One of his daughters, Anna, reported that William supported her brothers' education for some years. As a young girl, in 1894, Anna came to Montreal to live with her relatives. When Helen passed away, Anna took over as mistress of the MacDonald household. Some time later she advised her uncle of her proposed marriage to a distant cousin, Alain C. MacDonald, a Roman Catholic. William "took strong objection to it on religious grounds. I tried to discuss it with him, but he would have none of it." She went ahead with her plans in the strong-headed family tradition, and as a result William terminated his support of her family, leaving the boys who were "not worldly wise" stranded, penniless abroad, and their father, possibly a cripple, with no means of support.<sup>8</sup> The separation was absolute and ended only at his deathbed when, unable to talk, he "affectionately pressed my hand."<sup>9</sup>

William's early close relationship with Augustine appeared also to have deteriorated to a very low level. Augustine had left the Montreal firm around 1863-65, going to the United States. He became embroiled there in a legal case which resulted in a prison sentence. It was said that Augustine, in old age, blamed William for allowing him to live in prison. "It was further... said that a fund for Augustine's defense was raised in Montreal and that Sir William resented this interference in his family affairs." One story had it that William did, indeed, aid Augustine after his release from jail. It was alleged that "William sent him cheques regularly but he never cashed one of them, they were all found in a trunk after Augustine's death at Tracadie..."<sup>10</sup>

William's dream of success and prestige may have been prompted, in one or another, by his personal relationships. His family life, it seemed, was marked by little joy, great responsibility and repeated disappointment. The dream of gold appeared unfulfilled in this regard.

## **the dream of gold**

William Macdonald was evidently a very quiet, unassuming shy man. When once questioned about his religious views, he

is reported to have replied that he "could not conceive how so sacred a matter should interest anyone but himself." As a young man he had given a good account of himself while in the employment of George H. Gray and Company, for he carried with him from Boston to New York a letter saying, in part, "We can recommend him to you for industry, integrity, as capable of filling any situation for which he might represent himself qualified."

In his later years, he led a solitary boarder's life until 1869 when he moved into his own home and when his mother and sister joined him. In a reminiscence by Percy Nobbs, we get an indication of the Macdonald life style:

He did not entertain; he lived frugally and aloof, with a certain dignity, it is true, but no advertisement of wealth; he took no visible part in politics; he outraged no conventions; he had but little affinity with his relatives; he laid no special claim on culture, nor to learning... he was also a very kind, a very punctilious and a very modest old gentleman; in a word... he had warm blood in his veins.<sup>11</sup>

His business office methods were equally unpretentious, frugal and direct.

In addition to being the sole directing influence of his huge tobacco business, Macdonald was a governor of The Montreal General Hospital, the Lady Stanley Institute, in Ottawa, a director and largest shareholder of the Bank of Montreal, a director of the Royal Trust Company, a director of the Montreal Parks and Playgrounds Association, in 1903 an associate member of the Protestant Committee of the Quebec Provincial Council of Public Instruction, and vice-president of the St. John Ambulance Association. He constructed the Mount Royal Crematorium as a gift to the City of Montreal and he contributed to The Montreal General Hospital over the years. He purchased the site of the Maternity Hospital. He was known to have aided for life, a number of people who had been in his employ after they had been injured in a fire at the company's plant. This last and many other acts of generosity may never be documented fully, for he was said to have made them with the stipulation that they remain anonymous.

Macdonald was a generous supporter of many causes, but his most memorable philanthropies were probably his contributions to education.

His direct involvement in education started around the mid-1860's. Though he is perhaps best known for the college that he conceived and that bears his name, he developed and

fostered a plan for the improvement of rural and teacher education nationally<sup>12</sup> and contributed to the growth of McGill University locally. The Macdonald Chemistry, Physics, and Engineering Buildings continue to bear witness to his benefactions to McGill. His interest in Macdonald College extended in all directions from choosing the location, buying the land, supervising the construction and even recruiting the faculty members. It is estimated that his financial support for this institution alone amounted to more than seven and a half million dollars, or about half his total known support to Canadian education.<sup>13</sup>

On October 29, 1898, Lord Strathcona wrote to the Prime Minister, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, suggesting that, "W. C. Mac Donald should be made Knight Commander of the Order of St. Michael and St. George." Lord Minto also wrote Prime Minister Laurier, on the 6th of December, 1898, suggesting that MacDonald should be recommended for the New Year's Honours List. In a letter dated December 1st, 1898, Mac Donald wrote to Lord Minto declining the honour of knighthood. However, a second letter to Minto from Macdonald on December 3, 1898, reluctantly but with pride informed Minto that he would accept the accolade on the grounds that "well-meaning, but unthinking friends... [had] pushed the matter so far that persistence in his reluctance would appear as a lack of respect to the throne." This letter is signed "Macdonald" and this is the spelling that persisted for the rest of his life.

Laurier, in a letter to Sir Julien Pauncefote, dated December 11, 1898, stated that he was opposed to the granting of any honour at that time, but did not clarify his objections in any way. Five days later a copy of this letter was sent to Lord Minto. Despite the opposition, preparations were already being made for knighting Macdonald, and on January 6, 1899, it was announced in the New Year's Honours List that letters patent of knighthood had been granted to W.C. Macdonald, merchant of Montreal. He was now a Knight Bachelor<sup>14</sup>.

His friends, it appeared, were not yet satisfied. Lord Strathcona had originally suggested that Sir William be made Knight Commander. A letter from Joseph Chamberlain to Lord Minto, dated August 17, 1901, indicated that the matter had not been left to rest. In it Chamberlain indicated that Dr. Peterson, then Principal of McGill University, a friend and neighbour of Sir William, and Lord Strathcona had "most strongly recommended" extending Sir William's honours to include a K.C.M.G. It further appeared that Laurier was still in opposi-



tion, for unspecified reasons, but the accolade was granted in 1901<sup>15</sup>.

On June 9, 1917, at the age of eighty-six, Sir William died. He had been ill for three years, though during these last years of failing health he was still seen about. He was said to be sharp of mind to the end. He was cremated, as was his wish, at the Mount Royal Crematorium which he had built. A very simple eulogy, the only concession to ritual, was delivered by Dr. Peterson.

Although he had received the highest honour not only from his colleagues at McGill University, but also from his King, Sir William died, in his own words, "a lonely old man."<sup>16</sup> Sir William Macdonald had had a dream that one day his name would be GOLD wherever it went. This dream was realized but with an element of pathos for the lonely old bachelor who lived the last twenty years of his life companionless, with only his tobacco company and educational philanthropies from which to derive pleasure. His achievements, nevertheless, endure.

## notes and references

1. Anonymous. An untitled family record from the files of Hon. W. J. MacDonald, Lieutenant-Governor of Prince Edward Island, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, n.d.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Letter from William MacDonald to John Archibald MacDonald, July, 1849, *Macdonald Files*, Macdonald College Archives.
4. Letter from William MacDonald to John Archibald MacDonald, November 10, 1852, *Macdonald Files*, Macdonald College Archives.
5. John Lovell (ed.), *Montreal Annual Directory*, Montreal: John Lovell and Sons, 1857-1858, 1858-1859, 1859-1860.
6. Letter from Donald MacDonald to John Archibald MacDonald, July 13, 1854, *Macdonald Files*, Macdonald College Archives.
7. Letter from Mrs. Anna (MacDonald) Walsh to Dr. J.F. Snell, n.d., *Dr. Snell Papers*, Macdonald College Archives.
8. Letter from Mrs. J. McCarey to M. Epstein, March 6, 1969, Macdonald College Archives. Mrs. McCarey is a native of Tracadie, Prince Edward Island and is knowledgeable of the local history.

9. Letter from Mrs. Anna (MacDonald) Walsh to Dr. J.F. Snell, May 2, 1943, *Dr. Snell Papers*, Macdonald College Archives.
10. Letter from Mrs. J.J. MacDonald to M. Epstein, December 11, 1968, Macdonald College Archives. Mrs. MacDonald is the wife of Senator J.J. MacDonald who is the grand-nephew of Sir William Macdonald. Mrs. MacDonald herself is a grand-daughter of one of Sir William Macdonald's first cousins.
11. Percy Nobbs, "Sir William Macdonald," *The McGill News*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (June 1923).
12. Cf. Robert M. Stamp, "Urbanization and Education in Ontario and Quebec, 1867-1914," *McGill Journal of Education*, Vol. III, No. 2 (Fall 1968), pp. 127-135.
13. This writer's research indicates that Sir William Macdonald's educational philanthropy amounted to in excess of fourteen million dollars. M. H. Epstein, "Sir William C. Macdonald: Benefactor to Education," unpublished M.A. thesis, McGill University, 1969.
14. *London Gazette*, January 6, 1899, p. 83.
15. National Archives, *Minto Papers*, Ottawa: Mg 27, L1 B1, Vol. 14, p. 78.
16. Lorn Graydon, "Reminiscence," McGill University Archives, 1928.