Image source: Lady Agnes Macdonald comes from Library and Archives Canada, online MIKAN no. 3496597

LADY AGNES MACDONALD AND EARLY CANADIAN HISTORY: A SUMMARY

Sarah Cole
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Carleton University
October 17 2016

 Historians of confederation often overlook the role of women in creating the historical record of Canada’s early nationhood. Similarly, biographical accounts of Canada’s first prime minister too often overlook the influence of his personal life upon his political life. The few historians of Canadian history who refer to Lady Agnes Macdonald, Macdonald’s second wife and herself a diarist and published writer, often discuss her in terms of domestic life and ignore her considerable contributions to the extant record of early Canadian history. Ged Martin refers only briefly to Lady Macdonald in his 2014 essay on biographical approaches to Sir John A. Macdonald’s life, “Understanding Macdonald: Reviewing a Biographical Project.” In a footnote, he dismisses her diary as a significant source using a quote from Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest,* calling it “simply a very young girl’s record of her own thoughts and impressions.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Putting aside the fact that Lady Macdonald was thirty years old when she married and began her diary – hardly a “very young girl” – this approach undermines the significance of her writings and her actions to scholars of Sir John A. Macdonald and of early Canadian history as a whole.

 Historiographic surveys of Sir John A. Macdonald’s life, and of early Canadian political history, are incomplete without attention to Agnes MacDonald’s role in preserving and promoting her husband’s memory and his Conservative policies. Lady Macdonald’s work, especially the texts produced in the early years of her marriage and her later years of widowhood, display a keen sense of her place within history as the wife of Canada’s first Prime Minister. She kept a diary detailing both domestic and political affairs in early Ottawa. Her published travel writings, particularly the two-part publication about a trip on the Canadian Pacific Railway entitled “By Car and By Cowcatcher,” promote her husband’s political achievement and the imperial project of westward expansion that was so critical to nineteenth century Canadian nationalism. Later in that century, she was among the first and most vocal to make efforts to preserve Sir John A. Macdonald’s written records, which now reside in the Macdonald fonds (MG 26-A) at Library and Archives Canada.

The consolidation, at her request, of her husband’s papers contrasts starkly with the difficulty of locating Lady Macdonald, and women in general, in the archive. Lady Macdonald’s writings are scattered across several archival locations, but her husband’s personal and professional papers can be consulted from a single location. The paucity of competent practices for archiving women’s papers, even those of women as privileged and influential as Lady Macdonald, limits the ability of historians to construct inclusive histories. As a consequence, the actions of women in shaping and recording history has been overlooked. Lady Macdonald is only one among many women who contributed to the historical record and received little credit in return.

Lady Macdonald existed within a system of Victorian gender norms that nominally excluded her from public life, but her actions in preserving Sir John A. Macdonald’s memory show that for women of her status, influence over public memory was accessible and even actively sought after. Particularly in matters of memory, the boundary between the private sphere of domesticity and the public sphere of politics was permeable. Agnes Macdonald’s diary and other writings cannot be read only as personal, private documents; rather, they are the writings of a woman who recognized and actively promoted herself as both an observer and an agent of the national history of Canada.

Works Cited

Martin, Ged. “Understanding Macdonald: *Reviewing* a Biographical Project.” In *Macdonald at 200: New Reflections and Legacies*, edited by Patrice Dutil and Roger Hall, 405-436. Toronto: Dundurn, 2014.

1. Quoted in Ged Martin, “Understanding Macdonald: Reviewing a Biographical Project,” in *Macdonald at 200: New Reflections and Legacies,* ed. Patrice Dutil and Roger Hall (Toronto: Dundurn, 2014), 429. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)