
Published in celebration of the centenary of McGill University’s Macdonald College, William Fong documents the life of one of McGill’s most important benefactors in his biography of Sir William C. Macdonald. Macdonald was born into a landowning family in Prince Edward Island near Charlottetown in 1831. His grandfather, a leading Jacobite, had settled on the island more than fifty years earlier in an effort to establish Highland Catholics in a political climate more favourable than post-Culloden Scotland. His father, greatly despised by local tenant farmers but well-connected through marriage, became a member of the Legislative Council in 1839. William broke from this Catholic and landowning and somewhat pre-capitalist heritage. Having rejected Catholicism in his teens, Macdonald left the island in 1848 to work in business (a vocation first imposed upon him as punishment by his father), first in Boston, then in New York, and finally in Montreal. It was in Montreal, as a manufacturer of tobacco beginning in the 1850s, where Macdonald became the ‘father of the Canadian tobacco industry,’ accumulating the fortune from which he would dispense his philanthropic largesse. In the later part of his life, until the deterioration of his health in 1914 and death in 1917, Macdonald vigorously threw himself behind numerous philanthropic initiatives in the field of education, many of which centred on McGill but also embraced broader initiatives such as the promotion of practical education in the ‘Macdonald-Robertson’ movement.
The book essentially presents three dimensions of Macdonald’s life: the businessman, the private citizen, and the philanthropist. Macdonald’s business life began in 1849 in the book-keeping department of Boston hardware wholesaler George H. Gray & Co. Within two years Macdonald was also investing in Montreal railway lines, and soon after he moved to Montreal and formed a business partnership with his brother, Augustine, as commission agents. His brother, who sold tobacco imported from the United States, also aided Macdonald’s entry into the tobacco business as the pair formed a tobacco manufacturing business in Montreal in 1859. Macdonald became the sole proprietor of the business by 1863, setting the path for a solitary life that evinced the values of self-reliance he so cherished. Macdonald’s commitment to the spirit of competitive capitalism was such that, as his position in the marketplace became more entrenched later in the century, he would not cooperate with the price-fixing schemes of wholesalers who bought his products; one contemporary described Macdonald’s business offices as ‘a bit of counting house from the pages of Dickens’ (p. 77). The even more stern side of this philosophy is revealed in Fong’s examination of the operations at Macdonald’s factory, which was moved outside Montreal to a new, spacious building in Hochelaga in 1874. Macdonald’s resolve to run his factory without the inference of his employees, - most of whom were women and children, - was unflinching. Fong’s characterization of Macdonald as a ‘fairly humane’ employer for his time is probably too generous.

A lifelong bachelor, Macdonald became increasingly estranged from his family during the course of his life. The most significant break came in 1892, when Macdonald had a falling out with a favoured niece who was living with him; Fong concludes that the break led to ‘more buildings and indeed to an ever-growing tide of gifts to McGill’ (p.159). The tide was a substantial one. Macdonald donated considerable sums of money particularly towards the development of the applied sciences at McGill,
financing important research such as Ernest Rutherford’s discovery of the theory of radioactive disintegration. Also, in the early twentieth century Macdonald and renowned educator James Robertson advanced the development of practical education in Canada by spearheading the establishment of numerous consolidated schools throughout the country. In these endeavors Macdonald preferred to remain in the background, considering himself merely the paymaster. He also remained disinterested in advancing his social status: he considered his knighthood innocent fun, refrained from the characteristically bourgeois pursuit of collecting art, and showed little interest in celebrating his Highland ancestry.

Fong crafts a biographical portrait that lays considerable emphasis upon Macdonald’s belief in the importance of critical inquiry and its importance to human progress. Macdonald, Fong concludes, wanted future generations ‘to accept nothing on faith, but to think, to prove, and to do for themselves’ (p. 276). Though rooting Macdonald within an Enlightenment tradition seems broadly correct, it does not place Macdonald firmly enough within the changing social and intellectual climate of his time, which was making the Enlightenment tradition Macdonald embraced increasingly ambiguous and problematic. Fong’s focus upon Macdonald’s Highland ancestry also seems methodologically suspect: though it is an interesting exercise in itself to trace Macdonald’s family tree back to the Clan Ranald, as Fong does in Chapter 1, it does not reveal anything substantive about Macdonald himself, who was disinterested in his family’s Highland origins (removed as is a little repetitive). Indeed, too often Macdonald recedes into the background of the chapters. This, no doubt, is indicative of the paucity of sources on MacDonald, but Fong, unlike the authors of Macdonald’s entry in the Dictionary of Canadian Biography, was given access to Macdonald's letter-book. All things considered, William Fong has produced a well-researched study of Sir William C. Macdonald’s life that focuses particular attention on his influence upon McGill University. Though
its commemorative slant will appeal to general readers rather than specialists, those interested in the history of education and business in Canada will likely find this book to be of interest.

Don Nerbas
University of New Brunswick