

T. Stephen Henderson. *Angus L. Macdonald: A Provincial Liberal*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007. pp. 368.

Sandwiched around a wartime stint in Ottawa as Mackenzie King's minister of national defence for naval services, Angus L. Macdonald was the premier of Nova Scotia for sixteen years (1933-1940 and 1945-1954)—a tenure which ended only with his unexpected death at the age of sixty-three. Most previous writings on Macdonald have bordered on hagiography. Thus, he has been variously characterized as “the most beloved Premier the Province ever had,”¹ as blessed with “intellect, integrity, social conscience, charm, masterly political skill, and oratorical ability,”² as “the most eminent contemporary philosopher of politics,”³ as the “personification of ‘Nova Scotianers,’”⁴ and as a “towering presence,” whose opponents, “almost to the end, seemed as pygmies.”⁵ Writing in 1960, T. A. Crerar predicted that, while there had been many gifted Nova Scotians, “none [would] be remembered with greater esteem and warmer affection than Angus L.”⁶ By contrast, T. Stephen Henderson has diligently combed through a variety of archival sources to provide a balanced and scholarly portrait of Macdonald that is destined to become the definitive work on the subject.

The picture of Nova Scotia's thirteenth premier that emerges from this study is of a cautious, hard-working, Catholic, well-educated, thoughtful Scotophile. Most importantly, Macdonald was also a classical liberal, who believed not only that provincial autonomy was essential to federalism's proper functioning, but also that neither the national nor the provincial state should intervene directly in the economy. While such views were fairly mainstream in the early years of Macdonald's premiership, the post-war emergence of a paradigmatic Keynesian activism meant that the later Macdonald came to be an increasingly marginal figure in national policy debates.

How, then, is one to account for Macdonald's extraordinarily lofty reputation? True, the Nova Scotia Liberals were an electoral juggernaut under his leadership, winning all five contests; a sixth

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might well have been in the offing but for Macdonald's sudden demise. Even then, it is worth noting that Macdonald was defeated in his first try for public office in the 1930 federal election, and that he was the fortunate beneficiary not only of an unexpected leadership draft at the 1930 provincial convention but also of a corrupt and incompetent Conservative administration just waiting to be toppled. As premier, Macdonald was not particularly innovative, although he did balance the provincial books after World War II with the aid of windfall grants from Ottawa. As well, Macdonald did much to modernize Nova Scotia's infrastructure—paving roads, building schools, and the like. In particular, the Canso Causeway and the bridge across Halifax Harbour that bears his name now stand as enduring monuments to Angus L. Macdonald's tenure as premier.

Yet, as T. Stephen Henderson adeptly points out, Macdonald's failures should not be glossed over. After all, he invested much political capital both in securing more equitable freight rates for Nova Scotia and in re-structuring the federation along the lines envisaged by the Rowell-Sirois Commission. Both initiatives came to nothing. Nor did Macdonald's economic conservatism serve his province particularly well; in Henderson's words, "Macdonald's rejection of substantial state intervention almost surely contributed to Nova Scotia's relative decline after 1945." (213) Henderson also documents Macdonald's inability to develop good relations with much of the press corps (owing, in part, to his over-sensitivity to criticism). What could have been the apogee of Macdonald's career—his five years in the war cabinet in Ottawa—turned out to be something of a damp squib. While he deserves some credit for preventing a possible cabinet rupture over conscription, Royal Canadian Navy ships and crews under-performed on his watch, and he was rather too dependent on staff for policy and administrative advice. Macdonald also seemed unable to understand Quebec's distinctive concerns and aspirations, and he was equally oblivious to the need for the Liberal Party to move leftward as the Second World War wound down. Macdonald had entered Mackenzie King's cabinet "as one of the most respected Liberal politicians in the country, widely expected to

contend for the prime minister's chair some day." (213) He left five years later, "drained and disillusioned," (149) with few realistic prospects for success on the national scene.

Given the foregoing, it is difficult to account entirely for the exalted regard in which Macdonald is frequently held (although there are many examples from other jurisdictions of the reputational advantage to be derived from dying in harness). Thankfully, T. Stephen Henderson has avoided "the biographer's disease," and Macdonald's significant failings are not buried under his equally significant accomplishments. Those interested in twentieth-century Nova Scotia politics are well served by this volume.

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Notes

- ¹ E. D. Haliburton, *My Years with Stanfield* (Windsor: Lancelot Press, 1972), 28.
- ² John Hawkins, *Recollections of the Regan Years* (Hantsport: Lancelot Press, 1990), 9.
- ³ Bruce Hutchinson, *The Incredible Canadian* (Toronto: Longmans, Green and Company, 1952), 437.
- ⁴ J. Murray Beck, *Politics of Nova Scotia*, vol. 2, 1896-1998 (Tantallon: Four East Publications, 1988), 380.
- ⁵ John Hawkins, *The Life and Times of Angus L.* (Windsor: Lancelot Press, 1969), 8.
- ⁶ T. A. Crerar, "A biographical Note," in *Speeches of Angus L. Macdonald* (Toronto: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1960), xxi.