
*Private Demons* is a book that is sure to be read with genuine pleasure even by those with little prior interest in Canadian history. And the certain effect the book will have of stimulating such interest is its chief merit. At just three hundred generously spaced pages, the book is a quick and lively read. Phenix’s style is breezy and colloquial; the focus is on juicy gossip and domestic dramas rather than in-depth political analysis. Phenix declares her intention “not to reinvent the wheel when it comes to John A.’s life,”(viii) by which she presumably means that she will eschew any meaningful re-examination of Macdonald’s political significance. Yet an examination of Macdonald’s character, his personal life, his “private demons,” only becomes meaningful in historical context—insofar as these things influenced the unfolding of larger events. And it is in the paucity of wider analysis that the book falls short.

The book’s most serious shortcoming is that Phenix is simply unreliable in her account of key historical details, even in such basics as names and dates. Some readers familiar with Canadian history will know that Governor “Metcalf” should be “Metcalfe,” but it may be harder to puzzle out that “Governor General Francis Monck’s sister-in-law” is meant to be Governor General Lord Monck’s sister-in-law, Frances. Phenix very often fails to clearly explain historical background, or simply does not take the time to establish basic facts. She implies that slavery in Jamaica had been abolished by 1808. She describes Macdonald locating a Philadelphia acquaintance during a trip in the 1840s by means of the telephone directory. She lists Nova Scotia among the provinces that abstained from joining Confederation in 1867. Reporting on Macdonald’s purchase of a law practice from his partner, Phenix adds, “no doubt the cheque bounced.”(101) This is not a matter for speculation: it either did or did not. The treatment of
events leading to Confederation—the Great Coalition and the 1864 Charlottetown and Quebec Conferences—is so jumbled as to be unintelligible. Phenix has Macdonald working feverishly to draft the *British North America Act* in the summer of 1864, before the conferences have even taken place.\(^{(165)}\) Likewise, she situates a trip to England “to ‘work out the details’ of the new Constitution, including the country’s new name” in November 1867, months after the bill had already passed.\(^{(173)}\) Oddly, the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Pacific Scandal is appointed before the Liberals have even revealed the scandal in the House of Commons.\(^{(221)}\) These are just examples; there are many such errors.

Some of the book’s problems may be laid at the doorstep of McClelland & Stewart; there are a number of respects in which they have done an injustice to the author and the subject. The photographs, many of them of excellent quality, are very small and poorly reproduced. Very weak copyediting failed to detect countless instances of jumbled syntax, improper pronoun use in which antecedents are unclear, and several out-and-out blunders (“it’s” as a possessive, and obvious errors in usage, such as “rabble-rousing” used to denote excessive drinking). Since footnotes are now out of fashion in anything but academic history, readers are unable to determine when Phenix is simply speculating without evidence, and when she is on solid ground. Unfortunately, the frequency of obvious mistakes means that her credibility can never be taken for granted.

Phenix shows an odd tendency to miss the point of key events and to ascribe great significance to non-events. Because Macdonald’s younger brother was killed by an abusive childminder, because Macdonald himself escaped punishment for youthful pranks, because Macdonald did not catch cholera, Phenix concludes that “so far John A.’s life had been characterized by a series of fortunate near misses. He had missed being assaulted by the servant Kennedy as a child…”\(^{(33)}\) She might just as sensibly have added that he missed drowning, being struck by lightning, or being kicked by a horse. Similarly, she attempts to manufacture drama by noting that Macdonald’s chronically ill wife Isabella on one occasion “almost
drowsed off” with her baby beside her, speculating that “had she actually dozed off, she might easily have rolled over and suffocated the boy, or accidentally knocked him off the bed...”(93) The events that actually did occur are sufficiently compelling to make spinning such tales unnecessary.

The events recounted afford many opportunities to demonstrate Macdonald’s mastery of the political game, but Phenix seldom does this in any detail, missing the chance to fully illustrate how his character exerted an influence on Canada’s history. Phenix allows that the 1871 Treaty of Washington was a disappointment to Macdonald, insofar as Canada did not win a reciprocal trade deal with the Americans. Rather than reveal his behind-the-scenes machinations to secure financial compensation from Britain and to stave off parliamentary defeat over what was sure to be an unpopular treaty, Phenix simply notes that he “tried to put a shiny gloss” on the treaty “without success.”(215)

Phenix ridicules Macdonald’s service in the militia during the 1837-1838 Rebellions in Upper Canada, describing the title of the “Loyal Scotch Volunteer Independent Light Infantry Company” as “almost as absurd” as that of the comical Société de la Vache Rouge Macdonald had earlier formed with friends and family. “Instead of bearing a musket, he could always brandish his mother’s cardboard sword,” she adds dismissively.(43) Because he refused to accept an officer’s commission, Phenix oddly concludes that Macdonald was a “pacifist.” “His non-performance in the theatre of battle during the rebel invasions of 1837, and his refusal to accept a post any higher than military private, further diminished any reputation as being more of a fighter than a lover.” While the syntax in itself makes it difficult to know exactly what Phenix means to say here, it should be pointed out that even the most ardent Upper Canadian fighter would have had to be pretty nimble to reach the “field of battle” in 1837 before the military contest fizzled out. In a similar vein, when Macdonald’s son Hugh’s battalion was sent to Red River in 1870, Phenix dramatically, if inaccurately, describes them as “marching into the maelstrom” and adds, without apparent evidence, that had Macdonald not been ill, “he
almost certainly would have physically restrained his son from going.”

Phenix’s treatment of Macdonald’s ailing first wife, Isabella, is so uncharitable as to border on bizarre. Phenix’s references to Isabella Macdonald’s admittedly mysterious afflictions are heavily laced with irony and even archness—she places in quotations any allusion to her “illness” or “attacks.” Isabella “certainly was inflicting intense loneliness on her husband,” Phenix charges. Macdonald’s wife is even blamed for his legendary drinking, which began before they met: “Eventually” he drank excessively “in order to forget the trial his marriage had become.” Presumably, this reason was as good as any. Phenix cites a mid-1850s French psychiatrist who “diagnosed a new condition affecting women of thirty years of age and older that was sweeping through Europe”—pain “without any apparent physical cause”—which he attributed to their lack of control over their “emotional environments.” Phenix seems to speculate that this groundbreaking diagnosis held the key to Isabella Macdonald’s constant illness—we can only assume that women have so seized control of their emotional environments as to vanquish this once rampant disease. As it happens, we learn a paragraph later that she was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Evidently even malingerers cough up blood. Isabella Macdonald’s “illness” killed her at age forty-eight.

Despite the lack of reliability in detail and the odd non sequitur, the book does fundamentally succeed in capturing some of the keys to Macdonald’s character. His mastery of social connection and his talent for friendship do much to explain his political longevity and his ability to draw supporters close. Phenix might have taken more opportunity to show this dynamic at work—not to simply reveal Macdonald’s character and private life, but to show why all this matters, how these shaped Canada’s political history. Unfortunately, to do that successfully one needs a far deeper understanding of that history.

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