

Why I give Sir John an A



In a style-over-substance era, **CHARLOTTE GRAY** finds it's tough without sound bites to promote our first Prime Minister as the Greatest Canadian

Last spring, I was a guest on CBC Radio. Callers were invited to phone in and describe the qualities that some mythical "great Canadian" should embody. Most people preferred to get straight into suggesting their candidates for the title — candidates that ranged from "my mum" and "General Roméo Dâl-laire" to "the unknown soldier" and "my chiropractor." At the end of the hour, Alan Neal, the host, asked me, "So Charlotte, as someone who writes about Canadian history and politics, who would you suggest?"

I didn't hesitate for a second. "Sir John A. Macdonald, our first Prime Minister," I replied. "He created modern Canada."

The die was cast, my ship was launched, and before I knew it I was championing Sir John A. on CBC-TV's *The Greatest Canadian* series this fall.

I assumed that my candidate was a shoo-in. Without Sir John A., there might not even be a Canada for anybody else to star in. Okay, so he's been dead a long time, and had a reputation as a boozier. But he had what polls suggest that we all want in our leaders today: vision and charisma. He saw a motley collection of impoverished colonies, and transformed them into a self-governing Dominion. He glued the newborn country together with a transcontinental railway, and steered Canada safely through the choppy seas of its relationship with the United States. Voters loved him because he was impassioned, modest and funny. Think Nelson Mandela crossed with Bill Clinton.

What I hadn't anticipated were two aspects of the contemporary Canadian psyche. The first is the view that our history only exists as far back as living memory. The second is that curse of North American culture: the assumption that "greatness" and "celebrity" are synonymous.

The brevity of our historical memory was evident when we heard the top-10 candidates for the

Greatest Canadian title. Seven of the individuals have made their mark in the past 50 years, and three of them are still alive. The only two names from the 19th century — a century that teems with extraordinary individuals who shaped our country and our world — were my guy and Alexander Graham Bell. And at the start of the contest, before anybody had seen the marvelous achievement of these two bearded old gents, Macdonald and Bell were firmly at the bottom of the list. Where were Sir Wilfrid Laurier or Sir Sandford Fleming, Tecumseh or Pauline Johnson? Lost in the fog of ignorance that enshrouds our past.

I glimpsed that ignorance while making the CBC documentary this summer. "Who is this Macdonald you're talking about?" asked the helicopter co-pilot when we were filming in the Rockies. "Is he anybody to do with the restaurant?"

We're always so busy talking about Canada as "a young country" that we're stuck in a permanent postwar adolescence. We've erased our own splendid history of the past two centuries, let alone the precolonial eras of rich first-nations culture. It sometimes feels as though, for today's Canadians, the only thing that happened in this country before their or perhaps their parents' lifetime was the dinosaurs.

Look at the hockey player on the list — Wayne Gretzky. Now Gretzky is a great player as well as a likable fellow. But true hockey aficionados have a longer memory than just the 1988 Oilers' hockey season, and bring up names like Lionel Conacher, named Canada's greatest athlete for the first half of the 20th century. Or Maurice (Rocket) Richard, a great player who, uber-hockey-buff Roy MacGregor points out, "played such a pivotal, if reluctant, role in the Quiet Revolution. . . ."

Conacher and Richard are just so, so yesterday for today's fans.

And then there's the whole issue of celebrity. Forget the outrage at



Sir John A. Macdonald, the country's first Prime Minister: 'He created modern Canada.'

the absence of women on the top-10 list, and the presence, among the six women in the 50 Greatest Canadians list, of the thong-and-song divas Celine, Avril and Shania.

The more fundamental problem is the implication that, if an endeavour is not caught on camera, it evaporates. "How can you make a program about Sir John A. Macdonald?" a television reporter asked me, when I explained what we were doing. "There is no stock footage."

As I watched the documentaries about Sir John A.'s rivals for the title, I could see the power of well-produced visuals. Terry Fox hopping along the Trans-Canada Highway, with the dawn breaking behind those golden curls, is the archetypal hero. Pierre Trudeau, melodramatically magnificent as a cameraman kneels at his feet, epitomizes charisma as choreographed by a Canadian Leni Riefenstahl. Even Tommy Douglas, in

jumpy old black and white film as he faces down a media scrum at the Los Angeles airport, neatly embodies the characteristic that we Canadians take such pride in: modesty.

These images not only furnish our memories with more impact than any history text: They transform the individuals into a larger-than-life reality. No matter the risk of style over substance. People such as Trudeau, David Suzuki and Don Cherry know how to play to the cameras, and become legends in their own lifetimes.

In his day, Sir John A. used all the tricks available to him to capture the popular hunger for heroes. He was good at that stuff — the power of oratory, the dazzle of outrageous outfits. "You'll never die, Sir John A." yelled an admirer in 1892, as the old man (only months from his death) whipped up the crowd into a fever of support during his last election campaign. But rhetoric and neckties don't last. All that is

left is that dyspeptic patriarch peering out of the \$10 bill — hardly a turn-on for the Chick Lit crowd.

Will Canadians opt for vision rather than celebrity when they vote for our Greatest? Hard to predict. I know that members of Sir John A.'s natural fan base — history buffs, political strategists, newspaper columnists, readers — prefer to sniff at the whiff of *Canadian Idol* that clings to this contest, and may not rush to vote (Can they seriously let Cherry win . . . ?). I also know that, if the same competition is held in 30 years' time, half the names on today's list will have vanished. But not my guy's. You'll never die, Sir John A.

The two-part finale of CBC-TV's The Greatest Canadian airs on Sunday and Monday at 8 p.m.

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