

Sir John A's visit to Victoria an occasion to remember

By Dave Obee December 7, 2008



Montreal sculptor John Dann, in the striped sweater, helped steady a tribute to Sir John A. Macdonald. It was

installed at the entrance to Victoria's City Hall in 1982.

Photograph by : John McKay, Times Colonist

The opening of the Canadian Pacific Railway was big news in Victoria, with a contingent from our city heading over to Port Moody, the western terminus of the line, to greet the first train in July 1886.

There was even bigger news a few weeks later when the new trans-continental rail service brought to Port Moody, and then Victoria, the most notable tourist of the day.

Sir John A. Macdonald, the true Father of Confederation, Canada's first prime minister and a former MP for Victoria, enjoyed three weeks here with his wife Susan in the summer of 1886. They spent their time meeting local dignitaries, seeing the sights and humouring people who wanted to make a case about this or that.

The Macdonalds arrived in Victoria on the steamer Princess Louise at 10 p.m. Saturday, July 24, just a few hours after their train had arrived at Port Moody. The Daily Colonist reported that an "immense throng of people" had gathered at the docks to see "Canada's greatest statesman, of who so much has been heard and said."

As the steamer arrived, the local band played See the Conquering Hero Comes, and then a party of local officials stepped aboard to offer a hearty welcome to the Macdonalds.

After the greetings, the assembled crowd gave three cheers. Then the Macdonalds got into a carriage for a quick tour along Wharf Street to Yates, then to Government, down to Fort, and over to Douglas to the Driard Hotel, which offered the finest accommodation available in the city at the time.

Another crowd -- estimated by the Colonist to be about 2,500 people -- had gathered there for a chance to see the dignitaries. They offered cheer after cheer as Sir John and Lady Macdonald alighted from the carriage and entered the hotel.

The following day the Macdonalds attended divine service at Christ Church Cathedral, then took a carriage ride through Beacon Hill Park.

They couldn't miss the way Victoria had been spruced up on their behalf. The most notable spot was reportedly the store owned by M.E. Harrison at the corner of Pandora and Douglas streets. Harrison had a painted canvas reading "Welcome Sir John! Canada's great statesman!" on the front of the building, along with one that said "United we stand."

On Tuesday the Macdonalds took strolls -- separately, but accompanied by locals -- around the town.

"The face and figure, so familiar but unseen by almost all Victorians, were recognized by nearly everybody, and the premier was the cynosure of all eyes," the Colonist said.

"Those who have known him in the past failed to see any difference in the jauntiness of his step, and the Grand Old Man would seem to have discovered that elixir of life which has been the dream of so many

philosophers.

"At the age of 72 he still retains much of the freshness and vigour of his early manhood amid all the cares and responsibilities incident to his exalted position."

On Thursday, July 29, the good people of Victoria crowded into the theatre to hear an address by the prime minister -- the first time that a Canadian prime minister had faced the public in British Columbia.

"Fully one-third of the audience was composed of ladies, and hundreds who arrived late on the scene were turned away disappointed, there being not even standing room," the Colonist said.

In his speech, Macdonald referred to Victoria as the "Pacific terminus of the Canadian Pacific Railway," ignoring for the moment the moat between Victoria and Port Moody.

He went on to thank the citizens for their support in the election eight years earlier, when he was elected as our MP along with Amor De Cosmos, the founder of the British Colonist.

"The constituency that I had represented for years rejected me," Macdonald said, referring to Kingston in Ontario. "I shall never forget the kindness and confidence bestowed upon me by your city.

"I had never visited you, I had never seen British Columbia, and knew not its wants, yet you elected me, and I had the honour to act -- sitting in Parliament as your representative for four years."

Macdonald spent a few minutes extolling the virtues of the railway and how it would help make Victoria a more important port, then lambasted the Opposition in Ottawa for a spell before getting back to Victoria and the railway.

"In looking at the immediate effect of the railway on this part of British Columbia, I cannot but think that Victoria must be greatly the gainer. The grandeur and sublimity of the scenery is unsurpassed in the world, the climate is justly celebrated and not far from here mineral waters are found."

The prime minister promised that he and his wife would return to Victoria if possible, and stressed that he had to return to Ottawa quickly to resume his duties there lest his wife choose to remain in Victoria forever.

They weren't quite ready to leave, however.

The following Sunday the Macdonalds attended divine service at St. James' Church. After another tour of the area on Monday they dined at a banquet at Government House.

Their days here were packed. Sir John opened the horticultural exhibition and attended the regatta. Lady Macdonald laid the cornerstone for the new Sunday school adjoining the Methodist Church at Pandora and Broad streets. There were plenty of social engagements and garden parties.

On Tuesday, Aug. 10, Macdonald received members of the Workingmen's party, who asked for a total exclusion of Chinese from the province.

He told them he could not support that notion, and assured them that the government's recent restrictions -- the head tax, to be precise -- would ensure that the number of Chinese here would not increase.

On Aug. 13, the Macdonalds left the city. They boarded a northbound Esquimalt and Nanaimo train, stopping about 30 kilometres from Victoria to drive the railway's last spike.

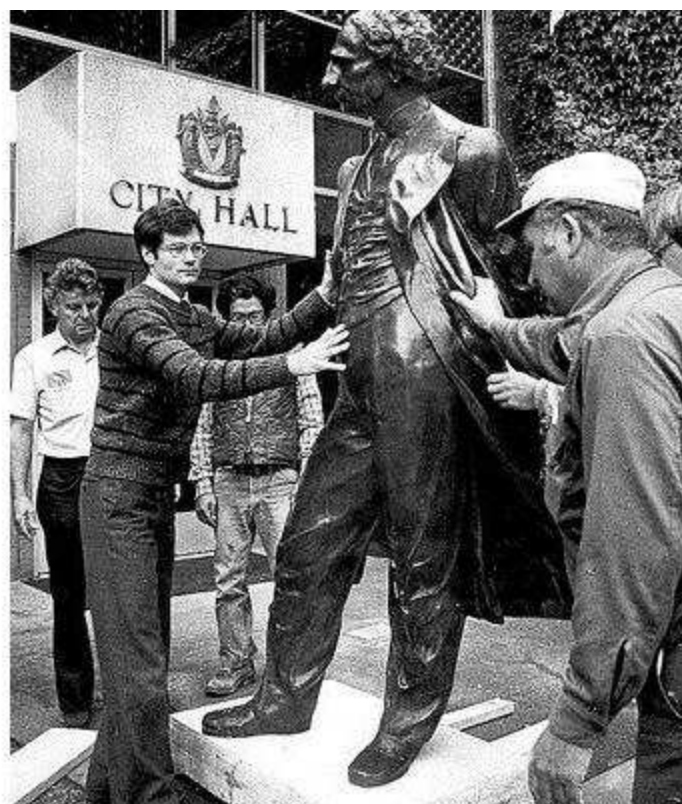
It was, the Victoria Daily Times reported, a handsome nickel-plated iron spike. The party reached Nanaimo at

12:30 p.m. The town put on its best front for the prime minister, and he was officially welcomed by Mayor Mark Bate.

After a quick tour of the Dunsmuir colliery at Wellington, the Macdonalds headed to the wharf to board the steamer Alexander, bound for New Westminster. They arrived there at 12:30 a.m. Saturday, Aug. 14.

Their visit there lasted just two days before they returned to Port Moody to catch the eastbound train that took them out of British Columbia.±

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