



**Christopher Pennington, *The Destiny of Canada: Macdonald, Laurier, and the Election of 1891* (Toronto: Allen Lane Canada, 2011). 336 pp. ISBN 978-0-670-06621-6. Hardcover. \$34.00.**

Few of Canada's general elections from the nineteenth century are recalled today. There is one, however, that is greatly remembered because of what was supposedly at stake: the Dominion of Canada's political destiny. In 1891, the "Old Chieftain," Sir John A. Macdonald, called a snap election in the midst of a cold Canadian winter, catching his opponent, Wilfrid Laurier, the relatively new and inexperienced Liberal leader and his Party somewhat by surprise. The issue at hand, at least at first, was Canada's economic future. For several years Canadians had been discussing and debating their changing financial situation – Canada had been mired in a prolonged economic recession since the 1870s, despite Macdonald's boast that the National Policy would cure what ailed the young nation. The Liberals, on the other hand, ran on a platform of unrestricted reciprocity (free trade) with the United States. Yet the election shifted to a discussion of Canada's political future when the Conservative Party labelled the Liberals "traitors" and their policy "treasonous" as they believed that closer relations with the United States would lead to the eventual annexation of the Dominion to the American Republic. In fact, it was Macdonald's famous cry, "A British subject I was born, a British subject I will die," that made this election so memorable.

While this famed election has been analyzed in a variety of historical works, until now there has been no full-length monograph studying its significance. Christopher Pennington, a sessional instructor in the Department of History at the University of Toronto, has thankfully addressed this missing piece in the historical literature with, *The Destiny of Canada: Macdonald, Laurier, and the 1891 Election*. Pennington is apt to have taken on this task of writing a monograph on this famous election, as he is an expert on Canadian-American

relations. His doctoral dissertation, of which much of this book is based upon, focused on the continentalist movement in Canada and the United States at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Pennington brings a thorough knowledge of the topic and certainly does it justice.

This book is part of “The History of Canada Series,” which attempts to show how “At crucial moments during Canada's story, challenges had to be faced and choices made. Certain roads were taken and others were not,” and thus the series examines some of the major events and crucial turning points in Canadian history that culminated in making Canada the nation that it is.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is a series that presents specific challenges to the evolution of the Canadian state where, despite tough odds, decisions were made by important historical figures that enabled Canada to become the nation it is today.

Because Pennington's book is part of this series of “crucial turning points,”<sup>3</sup> it presents an overly dramatic thesis: “There was nothing ‘run of the mill’ about the election of 1891. The ‘great issue’ at stake was nothing less than the future of the relationship between Canada and the United States, and by extension, the future of Canada,” (xi). The reader is therefore presented with the idea that had it not been for John A. Macdonald's political cunning, the Liberals would have won the election, entered into a free trade agreement with the United States, and jeopardized Canada's sovereignty in the process. While this is indeed a rather shocking and interesting thesis, it is somewhat of a hyperbole. Pennington, however, does an excellent job in showing how both political parties flirted with the idea of closer trade relations with the United States and that the Americans were, overall, not entirely enthused with the idea. Despite this, the reader is led to believe that the annexation of Canada to the United States would have resulted had Macdonald not won the election.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Pennington, *The Continentalist Movement in the Politics of Canada and the United States, 1887-1894* (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> “The History of Canada Series,” *About*, 2 May 2013  
<<http://thehistoryofcanada.ca/about.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

The book is divided into two parts and ten chapters. The first part, which includes the first five chapters, sets the stage for the monumental election by thoroughly examining the political, economic, religious, linguistic, and cultural struggles facing Canadians at the time, which enabled the growth of a political union movement. Pennington keeps the reader engaged throughout by providing interesting anecdotes about the major historical figures – particularly John A. Macdonald and his well-known enjoyment of spirits. He also provides the necessary historical background to understand just what faced the Canadian electorate when it went to the polls on March 5, 1891. Specifically, Pennington addresses the linguistic strife that plagued Canada in large part due to the Jesuits Estates Act and the Manitoba Schools controversy, which certainly impacted how Canadians voted.

The book's second part extensively covers the election itself, beginning with an analysis of the campaign and the strategies used by both the Conservatives and Liberals. Although some Liberals are occasionally presented as closet annexationists with the Conservatives as the true "Canadian" party, Pennington is able to walk the fine line and present both sides as championing a different vision of Canadian nationalism; although this is, unfortunately, not made entirely clear until the epilogue. For example, Pennington concludes that "The counting continued long into the night in many constituencies, but the result was in. Sir John A. Macdonald and the Conservative Party had won the election. The 'loyalty cry' had saved the day," (250). Once again, the reader has no choice but to believe that the Conservatives had indeed staved off annexation and saved the young Dominion from certain political doom.

This assessment of the election and its results, as mentioned previously, is a little dramatic as the nation's political future was not really at stake, except for in the minds of the voters who were scared into voting for the Conservatives by the old bugbear of annexation. This is where Pennington's epilogue is necessary and quite informative. He astutely shows how Macdonald and the Conservatives presented one form of Canadian nationalism – the National Policy, English-French duality, anti-Americanism,

and attachment to the British Empire – while Laurier and the Liberals preferred another form of nationalist expression – continentalism. Where the Conservatives feared closer continental relations, the Liberals and continentalists believed that Canada could indeed co-exist with its giant Republican neighbour without fear of losing its sovereignty.

In the end, the reader is presented with an excellent account of probably the most famous Canadian general election of the nineteenth century. Since this series is supposed to present a conflict Pennington has done a good job doing so. However, it would have been worth pointing out that in reality the Liberals were not intent on terminating Canada's sovereignty by entering into political union with the United States, despite the Conservatives' successful campaigning. Notwithstanding this dramatic hyperbole, the book is very well written and presented for a wide audience. It is thoroughly researched, using an array of primary and secondary sources that fully explore the multi-faceted aspects of the period and the election. Every Canadian will also enjoy a moment of heightened patriotism as their nation toyed with the idea of political union with the United States, though it did not become a reality.

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