Vocabulary

*Before reading, translate these words.*

Premier

Prime minister

Colony

Rival

Term (in office)

Tenure

Oversee / oversaw

Beheaded

Treason

Scrutinize

Coming to terms with

Indigenous

Reconciliation

Assimilate

Inhumane

biography

John A. MacDonald was Canada’s first Prime Minister. He is best known for helping to create Canada and for being the first leader of the country. He was born in Scotland in January, 1815. He moved to Canada in 1820 to the city of Kingston. He grew up and received his education in Canada. That’s right, at that time, it was already called Canada. However, it was not a country. The province of Canada was established in 1840 and united Upper and Lower Canada (parts of Ontario and Quebec). Much of what is now Canada was not part of the province.

MacDonald was interested in politics and was elected to the colony’s government in 1844. By 1857, MacDonald became the premier of Canada. There was a lot of division between the Western part of Canada and the Eastern part. The west was mostly English-speaking and the east was mostly French-speaking. MacDonald worked with his political rival to unite their political parties to establish Canada as a country. Canada became a country in 1867 on July 1st. The province of Canada was divided into Ontario and Quebec. Also, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia also joined the new country. In Canada, we celebrate Canada Day, Canada’s birthday.

When Canada became a country, John A MacDonald became its first leader. He had two terms in office. He served as prime minister for 19 years. He has the second longest tenure of any Canadian prime minister.

In addition to forming a successful national government, MacDonald had several other noteworthy accomplishments. During his tenure, Manitoba, the Northwest Territories, British Columbia, and Prince Edward Island all joined Canada. This made Canada very large. Travelling around Canada was difficult because of its size and lack of public transportation.

To address the transportation issue, MacDonald oversaw the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). The railway connected the eastern side of Canada to the west. It was important in the expansion of Canada as towns and communities were build along it. Unfortunately, the CPR also led to him resigning in 1873. There was a scandal involving MacDonald and CPR. But, five years later, he was re-elected as prime minister and served there until his death in 1891.

During his time in office, there was a rebellion in Manitoba. He ordered that the leader of the rebellion, Louis Riel, be beheaded for treason. Now, Louis Riel is also considered one of Canada’s greatest people. Riel represented the Metis, a group of indigenous people. He wanted to secure the rights of his people and formed a rebellion to protect his people. This rebellion went against Canada, so MacDonald considered it treason. Louis Riel was hanged on November 16th, 1885.

Some of MacDonald’s actions have been scrutinized lately. Nationally, Canadians are coming to terms with how indigenous people were treated. In 2021, a new holiday was created called, “The National Day of Truth and Reconciliation.” It is a time to think about the residential school system and the oppression of indigenous people. John A. MacDonald helped develop the residential schools. The schools were meant to be a place for indigenous children to get an education, learn English, and be assimilated into Canada. However, they are mostly remembered for their cruel and inhumane treatment of children.

MacDonald also introduced the Chinese Head Tax. This tax forced Chinese people to pay a tax to enter Canada. A lot of Chinese laborers worked on the CPR and the Canadian government did not want them to immigrate to Canada. Even though MacDonald has been scrutinized and criticized for his involvement with these things, he is still remembered as a great leader by the Canadian people.

1. What is he famous for?
2. Where was he born?
3. Where did he live in Canada?
4. Describe the Province of Canada. Why / How was it divided?
5. When did Canada become a country?
6. When is Canada Day?
7. How long was he the prime minister of Canada?
8. What does CPR stand for?
9. What scandal ended his first reign as prime minister?
10. Who did he behead? Why?
11. What did Louis Riel want?
12. Why do people criticize MacDonald?
13. Describe the residential school system.
14. What is the Chinese Head Tax?
15. Do you think what John A. MacDonald did was ok?
16. Leaders often have to make difficult decisions for their country. Do you agree with the things that MacDonald did?
17. Do you think MacDonald was a good prime minister?