



**61 CARLTON STREET  
"DALNAVERT"**

**SIR HUGH JOHN MACDONALD HOUSE**

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

May 14th, 1980

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**Sir Hugh John Macdonald House**

Sir Hugh John Macdonald, the only surviving son of Canada's first prime minister, built this grand home on Carlton Street for his family in 1895. Born to Sir John A. and his first wife in 1850, he was raised by relatives in Toronto and Kingston after his mother died. He followed his father's lead, and entered law school in 1869 but the following year he enlisted with the First Ontario Rifles.<sup>1</sup> This was a group of volunteers who accompanied Her Majesty's troops under Lord Wolseley who marched to Red River to restore law and order in the new province. A less than auspicious introduction to prairie life, the troops arrived in pouring rain and stumbled down Main Street ankle-deep in mud. The troops returned within a few days.

Hugh John continued his studies and was made a partner in his father's law firm in 1872. He practised law for ten years, no doubt living in his father's shadow and growing to feel the need of asserting himself as other than "the old man's son." In 1882, Hugh John and his wife Gertie moved to Winnipeg, where they kept a house at 83 Kennedy Street. Hugh John formed a law partnership with Stewart Tupper, also the son of a "father of Confederation".<sup>2</sup> Winnipeg was booming and it was an ideal time for a young man to bring his ambitions to the west.

Now the father of two children, Hugh John joined the Winnipeg Rifles, the famous 90th Battalion, and went to Saskatchewan to fight the Métis insurgents in 1885. His letters home provide a personal insight into General Middleton's command and into the daily routine of a civilian-turned-soldier. He missed the comforts of home and was continuously concerned for the welfare of Mrs. Macdonald and his "chicks".<sup>3</sup>

The law practice was going well and in 1890, Hugh John was awarded the honour of Queen's Counsel. Finally relenting to pressure from both local and national sources, Hugh John permitted his name to stand as the Conservative candidate in South Winnipeg. On 29 April, 1891, Sir John and his son "strode the length of the House of Commons to cheers from both sides."<sup>4</sup> As both men took their oath, the gallery rustled with comments on their similar appearance. The elder statesman died

within a few months and Hugh John's taste for political life was all but extinguished.

Making known his intent to retire, the new Prime Minister privately offered Hugh the lieutenant-governorship of Manitoba, which he refused for financial reasons. He retired in 1894, and concentrated on his work and on drawing up plans for his new house. The family was then on Donald Street, just south of Portage and likely felt cramped as the commercial district spilled westward from Main Street. They moved into the new house in 1895.

Sir Charles Tupper, the old family friend and now Prime Minister, convinced Hugh John to re-enter federal politics in 1896, again to bolster the sagging image of the Conservative party in the West. Initially appointed to the cabinet, Macdonald then contested his seat in the general election of June 1896 and found himself on the opposition benches. He enjoyed his role in Ottawa much more this second time, but in January, 1897, he had to resign his seat because of questionable election practices of his over-zealous workers.<sup>5</sup> Within two months, he became the leader of the Conservative Party in Manitoba, again at the urging of ambitious party-members who sought to use his good name and personable magnetism.

The party had been scattered over the Manitoba School Question and Hugh John concentrated his talents into unifying and strengthening his party. In December 1899, he led the Conservative Party to victory and in 1900, Hugh John Macdonald succeeded Greenway as the premier of Manitoba.<sup>6</sup> His dedication to the party election platform, in particular the temperance legislation, set the new premier at loggerheads with powerful factions in his own party, although he remained very popular with the people of Manitoba. Hugh John was subsequently asked to contest a federal seat, after only eleven months as premier, and this seat was lost to Clifford Sifton, the powerful minister of the interior. Macdonald resigned from politics and the more ambitious and politically-minded Rodmund Roblin took over as premier.<sup>7</sup>

Admittedly glad to be out of politics, Hugh John returned to his law practice and to involvement in Winnipeg society. Late in 1911, he was appointed police magistrate to the city's court. His court

was known for its fairness, its optimism and its humane respect of the individual: the son of Sir John A. was finally in his element, and he blossomed in the public's eyes. On June 2, 1913, he was knighted and given the title Sir Hugh John Macdonald.<sup>8</sup> Having watched the legislative buildings rise on Broadway from his home on Carlton Street, he was a natural choice as one of three commissioners on the royal commission to study the government scandal of 1915. He found his own successor, Premier Roblin, and two of his ministers, guilty of conspiring to defraud the province of nearly a million dollars in the renegotiating of construction contracts for the legislative buildings. The scandal precipitated an election, a foregone conclusion for the Liberals, and ushered in the beginnings of a new era of non-partisan government.<sup>9</sup> Sir Hugh John's career clearly had impact on the federal and provincial level, and as police magistrate and head of a leading family, his influence on the City of Winnipeg was also considerable.

There were only two Macdonald children: Daisy, who was seventeen when the Carlton Street house was built in 1895 and John (known as "Jack") a diabetic, who died in 1905. Lady Macdonald was a charming and ambitious chatelaine who enjoyed people and used the home to entertain on a lavish scale. A local paper commented that she had "an international reputation for her exquisite dressing and the artistic arrangement of her beautiful home Dalnavert."<sup>10</sup> The name Dalnavert came from the home of Sir John A's mother in Inverness, Scotland and was also used for the Macdonald home in Toronto.

Hugh John was also active in the community, aside from his family's endeavours, through participation in the sport of cricket, lacrosse, rowing and football.<sup>11</sup> References to his personal popularity and his easy-going good temper were many. During the general strike in Winnipeg in 1919, Macdonald sided against the strikers, who he viewed as led by Bolshevik elements and it was at his suggestion on the police commission that 3,000 special policemen be hired. These "specials", mainly returned soldiers who were readily motivated against a perceived "red peril", were formative in the strike confrontation. After the strike, Hugh John pressed the prime minister to begin wholesale deportation of the "alien races".<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the incident best showing Hugh John's impact on Winnipeg was an event given in his

honour, a public celebration of his 75th birthday in March, 1925. He continued on as Police Magistrate until his death in 1929. Lady Macdonald sold the home and moved into the fashionable Roslyn Apartments, where she lived until her death in 1940.

When it was constructed in 1895, Dalnavert on Carlton was in Winnipeg's foremost residential district, the old Hudson's Bay Reserve. In an effort to maintain high prices, the land was sold with lots left between development, which led to the situation of the photograph in Appendix A where a cow can be seen grazing beside the Macdonald house. The houses were big and expensive and the atmosphere subdued and elegant. When Dalnavert was erected, there were only five houses on the block.<sup>13</sup> The encroachment of the Portage Avenue commercial district coupled with a rapid population growth caused a gradual deterioration of the old Reserve by the World War I period. Developers bought up the empty lots and subdivided them. Indeed,

many of the reserve's handsome structures were themselves divided and their rooms rented. A survey of one area of Ward II [the HBC Reserve] revealed that of 416 homes inspected, 122 were improperly occupied as tenements by from two to eight families.<sup>14</sup>

The area south of Broadway was the last to go, but by the time Dalnavert was sold in 1929, there were already two large apartment blocks on that block of Carlton and some of the old mansions had been split into two or three suites. After 1929, Dalnavert became a rooming house, owned by Royal Trust. In 1940, it became a boarding house for fashionable women and by 1957, there were 17 suites in it.<sup>15</sup> In 1970, it was purchased by Lakeview Developments, who planned to raze the building and erect a fifteen-storey apartment on the site. It was at this point that the Manitoba Historical Society raised \$150,000 and purchased the structure for the purpose of restoring it to its former elegance.

Dalnavert was designed by Charles Wheeler, an architect of considerable renown in the prairies. Wheeler was British-born and who had training in the arts of carpentry, brick laying and stonemasonry before his architectural studies,<sup>16</sup> all of which gave him an ease of handling different

materials that was reflected in his work. He moved to Winnipeg in 1882 and has designed two hundred and seventy buildings in Manitoba and the former North-West Territories. He is best-known in Winnipeg for his tiny Gothic cathedral, Holy Trinity on Donald, but he also designed the Sanford warehouse (now part of the Spaghetti Factory), Galt's warehouse, and the D. Lennon house, also a Victorian mansion. A purist with classical training, Wheeler had this to say of his Winnipeg contemporaries' works in the 1880s:

The creations of the Greeks, the Romans of Augustus' day, the monks and master masons of the middle ages, the Italian Renaissance, were repeated piecemeal, with the addition of modern piecemeal ornamentation on many of the buildings, imitations even of the early Christian basilica surmounted edifices entirely unsuited in style to its use.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, this obvious disdain did not prevent Wheeler from lifting elements of other architectural orders for his eclectic and Victorian rendition of the Macdonald House. Round-headed windows, shed-roof dormers, a corbelled cornice and a profusion of cutout woodwork blend on the three-storey red brick mansion. The sum total has been described as one of the finest examples of Victorian domestic architecture remaining in North America.<sup>18</sup>

The cost of Dalnavert's construction was \$10,000 and the contractor was S.B. Ritchie. It was equipped with the most modern features including full plumbing, central heating, walk-in closets and electricity. The Electric Street Railway opened a powerhouse on Assiniboine at Main Street (now the site of Bonnycastle Park) and shareholders and provincial legislators were the first to receive electric power in their homes. Hugh John, elected to Parliament in 1896, was the 16th house to have electricity.<sup>19</sup> In 1899, the house was rewired to comply with new safety standards and it is known that some alterations were made in 1901 and 1907.

The Historical Society decided to restore the house to its 1895 period. There were no plans located and the changes had been many. John Chivers was hired as the restoration architect, assisted by several specialists in the field of restoration and reconstruction. In order to determine the original

layout, extensive stripping was necessary and research drawings and photographs used to confirm the layers. This involved the removal of all wall coverings, partitions, paint, modern fixtures, plaster etc. The stairs had been moved three times making it difficult to determine their original location.

The foundation had to be underpinned with twenty inch round concrete piles sunk forty feet. These were each fitted with a concrete cap poured on top to make a continuous foundation around the outside walls of the building. A new sewer line and many plumbing pipes were added. The original coil pipe radiators, now somewhat rare, had burst when the heat was turned off in 1970 before its proposed demolition, so these were replaced by cast iron rads purchased from a salvage company.

The veranda posts were replaced and the paint was painstakingly removed to return the sharp edges of the railings, lattice and brackets. The entire north side of the veranda, a half-circle with separate access to the parlour, had to be completely reconstructed with the aid of wear marks on the brick and old photographs.

The entire south wall had virtually to be rebuilt because sagging had caused many of the outer and inner bricks to shift.<sup>20</sup> The four brick chimneys were substantially rebuilt.

Stone detailing on the house had been executed in sandstone which proved to be too soft and porous over the years and was seriously deteriorated. Limestone was used to replace the sandstone throughout and all the window heads and sills and the coursing had to be replaced.

In the interior, the woodwork was carefully stripped and each layer recorded and then re-stained in a dark natural finish. The wallpaper was steamed off, with as many as twelve layers coming to light. The original speaking tube connecting the bathroom and the kitchen was located as well as the exact location of the first light fixtures.<sup>21</sup>

A beautiful stained glass window in an Art Nouveau style graces the upper hallway. During the restoration, thieves broke into the house and removed the window. The Historical Society

advertised for its return while promising not to lay charges. A late-night adventurer returned the window unharmed and speeded up the installation of a burglar alarm system.<sup>22</sup>

The restoration took three years and cost \$520,000. The Dalnavert Museum was opened during Winnipeg's Centennial year, 1974. The Manitoba Historical Society received grants from all levels of government, raised money through several events and solicited corporate and personal donations to pay for the costly endeavour. The furnishings are that of a Victorian family of considerable wealth, and were collected under the auspices of the Junior League. This task was assisted somewhat by the retrieval of several items of the original family which were auctioned off in Winnipeg after Lady Macdonald's death in 1940.

The restored house features the following: A back shed off the kitchen, used for storing cordwood in the winter and a summer kitchen in the warm weather. The kitchen includes a larder and a butler's pantry. Here the bell box with coded messages for the servants is located. The butler's pantry was used for storing the glassware, china and silver. It features a padded door to contain noises from the kitchen.

The dining room is finished in a beautiful golden oak with a wood-paneled ceiling. The hallway shows an Art Nouveau motif in the stairway carving and the vestibule has a stained glass transom also in this transitional style. The solarium is two steps down from the hall and has a double glazed ceiling and walls to maximize natural light, as well as a tiled floor which slants into a centre drain. Beside this greenhouse area was a tiny sitting room.

Hugh John's study has a window onto the front street, as well as a fireplace and its own radiator. The parlour supports every feature of Victorian decor, vis. french doors, a fireplace with columns on either side, ceiling coving, picture molding, a chandelier medallion and gilt-edged ornament niches. Silk-screened wallpaper based on the original design completes the exuberant detail.

The second storey contains a hall with the large stained glass window. The master bedroom has a



fireplace and is lit by twin round-headed windows. A small bathroom and a dressing room lead off to the rear. There are also three other bedrooms, a family bathroom and a sewing room which was originally a third bathroom.

The servant's quarters are to the rear of the house and connected to the kitchen by back stairs.

The attic now contains display cases, an office and meeting rooms. In the basement is the original furnace, storage space and more meeting rooms and laundry facilities of the old house.

Dalnavert's gardens have been replanted with flowers and bushes in the Victorian tradition and there is a small vegetable garden by the south wall near the kitchen.

The Macdonald house was an admirable choice for restoration. Its architectural style is beautiful and distinctive; Sir Hugh John Macdonald was certainly a figure of national and local significance and the house is a reminder of the older upper class housing in downtown Winnipeg in the 1890s.

## FOOTNOTES-

1. George P. Macleod, Q.C. "Sir Hugh John Macdonald" Papers Read Before the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, Series III Number 14, 1959, p. 34.
2. Roy St. George Stubbs Lawyers and Laymen of Western Canada, The Ryerson Press, Toronto, 1939, p. 53.
3. Macleod, op. cit., 35-48.
4. Henry James Guest "The Old Man's Son Sir Hugh John Macdonald", Papers Read Before the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, Series III, Number 29, 1973, p. 54.
5. Stubbs, op. cit., p. 55. Some party members had paid for cabs to convey voters to the poles. The matter went to the courts and a decision was handed down 15 January, 1897.
6. Guest, op. cit., p. 57-8. The Conservatives won 23 of 40 seats in the legislature. Morton notes that it is somewhat of a tradition in Manitoba for the provincial government to be in opposition to the federal government.
7. W.L. Morton Manitoba: A History University of Toronto Press, 1957, p. 281.
8. Guest, op. cit., p. 60.
9. Morton, op. cit., p. 346.
10. The Winnipeg Telegram quoted in Edith Patterson "It Happened Here" Free Press, 16 January 1971.
11. The Newspaper Reference Book of Canada, the Press Publishing Co. Ltd., 1903, p. 130.
12. Guest, op. cit., p. 62.
13. Henderson's Directory for Winnipeg, 1895.
14. Alan F.J. Artibise Winnipeg A Social History of Urban Growth 1874-1914 McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 1975, p. 155.
15. Dalnavert Tour Guide, 1975.
16. "A Group of Winnipeg Architects" The Canadian Architect and Builder Vol. X January, 1897, p. 3.
17. C.H. Wheeler "The Evolution of Architecture in Northwest Canada" The Canadian Architect and Builder, vol. X January 1897, p. 8.

Footnotes (cont'd)

18. Kathleen Campbell and Kathleen Richardson "Dalnavert" Canadian Antiques Collector July - August, 1975, p. 28.
19. Dalnavert Tour Guide, op. cit.
20. Like a true Scot, Macdonald had used a cheaper local yellow brick for the inside and kept the handsome red brick for the exterior.
21. This description of the restoration is entirely from John A. Chivers "Progress Report on the Historical Restoration of the Hugh John Macdonald House 61 Carlton Street, Winnipeg" June 1972. On file at Dalnavert Museum.
22. Free Press, 12 May, 1973.

**61 CARLTON STREET – “DALNAVERT”  
SIR HUGH JOHN MACDONALD HOUSE**



Plate 1 – Carlton Street, 1900, Macdonald House on the left. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 2 – Sir Hugh John Macdonald, 1921. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N3474.)

**61 CARLTON STREET – “DALNAVERT”  
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Plate 3 – 61 Carlton Street, 1963. (Courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index, 1018-30526.)



Plate 4 – 61 Carlton Street, no date. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

**61 CARLTON STREET – “DALNAVERT”  
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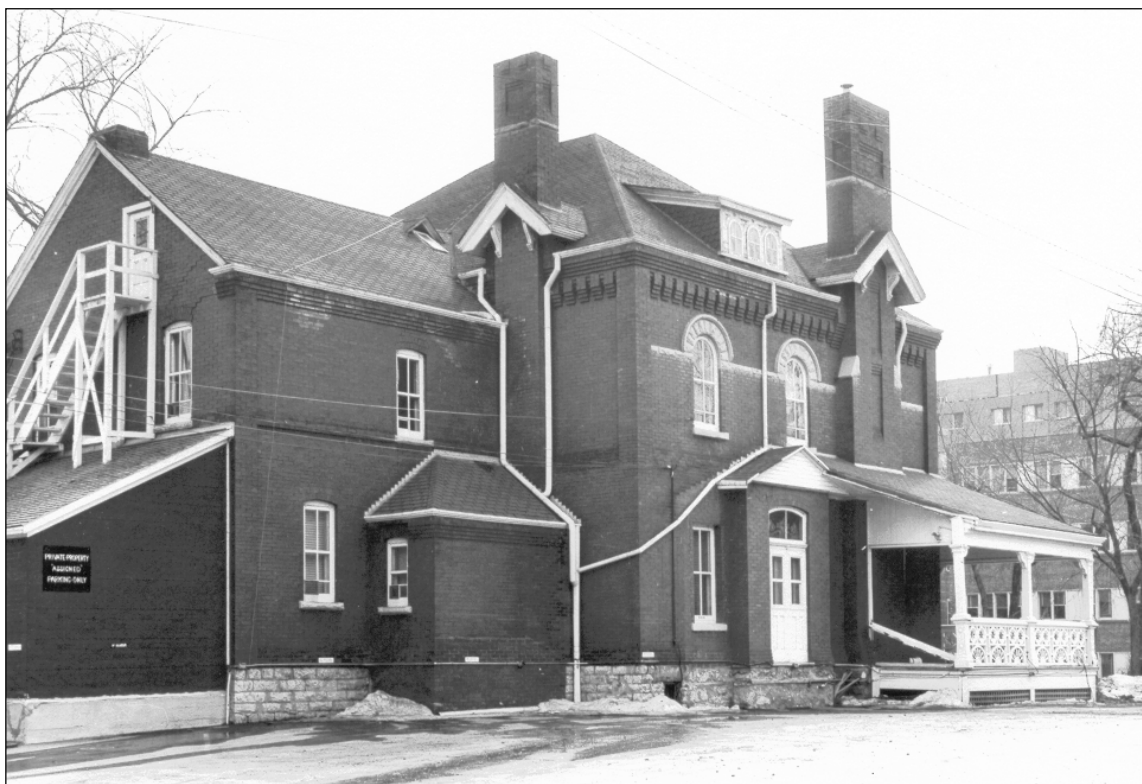


Plate 5 – 61 Carlton Street, north side, no date. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)