

# JOHN A: BIRTH OF A COUNTRY

## Resource Guide

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# Teacher Notes

The film *John A: Birth of a Country* explores the founding of Canada as seen through the riveting and dramatic rivalry between John A. Macdonald and George Brown—which eventually resulted in an alliance and led to the Confederation of Canada.

This Resource Guide companion to the film has been written for use with students ranging from the intermediate to senior secondary level. Teachers can work through the Guide sequentially or focus on one or two individual sections. Each section has been designed to stand alone and does not require teachers to have used other sections of the Guide.

Confederation appears in the Grade 7 and Grade 8 curriculum of most provinces and territories in the country. It also appears in most guidelines of senior grade levels.

Teachers should prepare students for watching the film by teaching important terminology and information from the pre-Confederation period:

- such terms as Upper and Lower Canada, Canada West and Canada East, British North America, and representation by population
- showing students maps of the pre-Confederation period (widely available on the Internet).

Teachers should also distribute and discuss the Viewing Guide (page 6 of this Guide) with students before presenting the film so that they are familiar with the main characters and their roles in history.

## Viewing the Film

Students at both the intermediate and senior level will benefit from reviewing the Viewing Guide before watching the film. The Viewing Guide will help them keep track of the major characters and themes of the film. The Introduction (page 5) also provides useful background to place the film in historical context, and should be reviewed with your students before viewing the film.

Depending on the length of your class periods and the learning styles of your students, you may choose to show the 105-minute film in its entirety over a couple of class periods. But with intermediate students or senior students without a strong history background, you may choose to play a few chapters at a time, and then have a discussion summarizing the plot and events to that point.

The *John A: Birth of a Country* DVD is divided into chapters that can be accessed from the Scene Selection menu of the disc. For teachers and students using a digital file of the film, the “start time” will assist in locating the segments of the video.

## DVD Chapters and Chapter Time Codes

- 1. The Man in Black** **Start Time: 00:00**  
It's 1864 and the Assembly gathers in Quebec City. John A. Macdonald has wagered his political future on the decision of one man: his enemy, George Brown. Confronted by allies and opposition, Macdonald tensely awaits Brown's arrival in the Assembly.
- 2. The Rivals** **Start Time 04:07**  
On election day in Kingston, ON in 1856, John A. is confident he'll win. The next morning George Brown waits for the election results in the offices of the Globe newspaper; his Liberals lose. John A. and the Conservatives win another victory.
- 3. The Allies** **Start Time 12:31**  
Macdonald and George-Étienne Cartier plan to remove their leader, Allan MacNab. It's assumed that Cartier would be the natural replacement for MacNab, but John A. manages to gain the leadership for himself.
- 4. The Absolutely Indicative Issue** **Start Time 18:28**  
Macdonald and Cartier attempt to solve the question of where to locate the capital after a lecture from the Governor General who suggests Bytown. Bytown is not a location desired by anyone except perhaps Queen Victoria, but it appears to be political suicide to oppose the decision.
- 5. Backwoods Lumber Towns** **Start Time 32:07**  
George Brown arranges a symbolic demonstration against Macdonald and the new capital, and stumbles into power as the new premier when Macdonald and his Cabinet resign.
- 6. Trickery and Treachery** **Start Time 40:27**  
George Brown and his Liberal coalition form the government, but after a humiliating defeat at the hands of Macdonald only two days later, he decides to give up politics.
- 7. An Expanse of Rocks and Trees** **Start Time 42:16**  
The U.S., in the midst of civil war, talks of annexing Canada, and Great Britain offers little hope of support or defence. John A. proposes a Militia Bill in an attempt to raise troops. George Brown, who is travelling in Scotland, is not present when Macdonald suffers an unqualified defeat in the Assembly.
- 8. Opposing Fortunes** **Start Time 55:48**  
John A. loses his wife Isabella who has been an invalid through most of their fourteen-year marriage. George Brown meets and woos Anne Nelson, and returns to Toronto with his bride.
- 9. The Times Demand It** **Start Time 57:50**  
George Brown and Macdonald both return to the Assembly that "doesn't work", but Brown has a plan to fix it and offers "a fresh start between friends."
- 10. God Save Us from Petty Men** **Start Time 1:07:26**  
John A. is persuaded that major reforms must be accomplished if the government is actually to work, but balks at working with George Brown.
- 11. It's a Pipedream** **Start Time 1:10:30**  
Brown and Macdonald propose very different plans for government reform. Cartier and Macdonald try to convince Brown that Macdonald's plan for a grand confederacy could become a reality, but only with Brown's support.
- 12. One Great Country, One Grand Assembly** **Start Time 1:15:46**  
It's 1864 and the Assembly gathers in Quebec City. George Brown considers his options and the deal Macdonald has proposed. Macdonald and his allies wait for Brown to arrive and announce his decision to the Assembly.

## Curriculum Connections

Subjects/Courses	Areas of Study
History and Social Science	Pre-Confederation Confederation Westward expansion Structure of government Leadership Canadian-American relations English-French relations Relationship between Canada and Britain
Politics and Civics	Structure of government Leadership Canadian-American relations English-French relations Relationship between Canada and Britain
Character Education	Leadership qualities Compromise

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# Introduction

The film *John A: Birth of a Country* chronicles the precarious period in Canadian history that preceded Confederation. Confederation—the birth of Canada—depended to a great extent on the relationship between two rivals: Sir John A. Macdonald and George Brown. The word “rivals” is not actually a good description of the relationship between the two men because they were more than mere competitors—they had an intense dislike of each other.

Yet despite their personal feelings for one another, they both believed passionately that the only way that the British colonies in North America could protect themselves against invasion from the United States of America was to unite into one confederated country.

July 1, 1867, officially marked the “birth” of Canada. Before this date, Canada was called British North America.

Many people feel that Confederation is one of the most significant events in Canadian history, and that John A. Macdonald and George Brown are two of the most historically significant people in Canadian history. But how do we determine historical significance? Who decides what is significant or not? And what if we disagree? This is just one of the issues that will be explored in this Guide.

The Guide also explores the causes and consequences of Confederation—including those consequences that still exist today—and also considers how similar or dissimilar society, transportation, and politics were in the pre-Confederation period. In addition, the Guide explores how to take a historical perspective when studying events from the past.

Like all significant events, Confederation cannot be understood without a deep understanding of the issues that preceded the alliance. A careful investigation of this period demonstrates that the people who were involved in these events were dynamic and felt very passionately about the issues that were important to their lives. The same could be said of people today. And the decisions John A. Macdonald and other politicians made in the 1860s continued to have consequences for years to come—in this case, for almost 150 years.

## To Consider

1. What does it mean for a country to be “born?”
2. Do you think that common people would have felt the same about Confederation as those who were wealthier? Why or why not?
3. Do you feel that it is important for Canadian students to understand the Confederation period? Why or why not?

### Definition

Rival – a person who is competing for the same object or goal as another, or who tries to equal or outdo another; a competitor

# Viewing Guide

## Definition

The Great Coalition – united the Clear Grits under George Brown, the Parti Bleu under George-Étienne Cartier, and the Liberal-Conservatives under John A. Macdonald as a way to bring about Confederation

The main characters in the film and some identifying information are listed in the chart below. You may need to refer to this chart while watching the film and when responding to some of the questions in this Guide.

Character	Position/Role
John A. Macdonald	Lawyer and career politician, member of the Liberal-Conservative party, Father of Confederation. First prime minister of Canada. Intensely disliked George Brown.
George-Étienne Cartier	Powerful French-Canadian politician, leader of the Parti Bleu, Father of Confederation. Close friend and confidant of John A. Macdonald.
George Brown	Journalist and publisher, career politician, member of the Clear Grit party. Loathed John A. but agreed to John A.'s compromise to ensure the success of Confederation.
Anne Nelson	Wife of George Brown. Helped change his attitude towards French Canadians, which ultimately lead to his desire for Confederation.
Antoine-Aimé Dorion	Lawyer and French-Canadian politician, member of the Parti Rouge. Briefly co-premier of the Province of Canada with George Brown, and then again with John Sandfield Macdonald. Refused to support the Great Coalition government and opposed Confederation.
Isabella Clark	John A. Macdonald's first wife, became chronically ill during the second year of the couple's marriage.

## Viewing Notes

There are a number of themes that are explored in the film *John A: Birth of a Country*. Make point form notes under the following themes while you watch the film. These notes will be of assistance during class discussions and will help you to respond to other questions in this Guide.

Themes:

- English-French Relations
- Canadian-American Relations
- Westward expansion
- Role of women

# Considering Historical Significance

## Minds-on Activity

1. Take a few minutes to think about and record the three most significant historical events that have happened in your lifetime. Work on your list by yourself, and explain why you selected each event in an organizer like the one below.

Historically Significant Events in my Lifetime
Event #1: 2011 Stanley Cup riots in Vancouver.
Reason: Hockey is “our” national game and the riots spoiled that. It also showed the world that we are not as nice as everyone thinks we are.
Event #2:
Reason:
Event #3:
Reason:

2. When you are ready, compare your organizer with a classmate or with others in a small group. Make notes in response to the following:
  - a) How many significant events did you have in common?
  - b) How do you account for differences?
3. Spend some time discussing the events, and select three events you both (or all) feel were the most significant. Be prepared to share your final selection with your teacher and classmates.

As you likely discovered in the Minds-on Activity, it isn't easy to determine which events are historically significant. One of the reasons for this is that many important events occur around the world every day. There is simply too much history to remember all of it.

As well, each of us has different ideas about what is important to remember. For example, if you are a sports fan, your list might include the 2011 Stanley Cup riots in Vancouver. But if you are an environmentalist, your list might include the election of Elizabeth May, leader of the Green Party, in the 2011 federal election.

Or perhaps your list was more personal or focussed on local events rather than national or international. In other words, your list might capture events of personal significance rather than historical significance. If that is the case, your list will likely look very different from your classmates'.

But whose list would be “right”? Is there a “right” and “wrong” when it comes to significance? Well maybe not right and wrong, but when it comes to a country's history, we probably need to decide what events are significant enough to include in history textbooks and teach in history classes. To help

us make determinations of historical significance, it's useful if we consider events according to a set of criteria. In the case of historical significance, useful criteria include the following:

1. Did the event or person result in change? (This includes *how* people were affected by the event or person, how *many* people's lives were affected, and how *long* the changes lasted.)
2. How does this event or person help us understand the past?
3. How does this event or person shed light on issues or problems that concern us?

According to these criteria, World War II is historically significant. Millions of people's lives were affected by the war, and the impact of the war is still being felt today. We can learn about man's inhumanity to man by studying war, and what we learn through these studies helps us to understand anti-Semitism and other forms of hatred that still exist today.

## To Consider

1. With a partner or in a small group, determine whether each of the following events and people are historically significant. Make sure you apply the significance criteria listed in the above feature, and be prepared to justify your decisions.
  - a) Confederation
  - b) John A. Macdonald
  - c) Anne Nelson
  - d) The selection of Bytown (Ottawa) as the capital of Canada
2. You have to write an entry on Confederation for a new history textbook. Write a persuasive paragraph that summarizes the reasons you feel Confederation is historically significant, or not.

# Profile of a Prime Minister

## Minds-on Activity

Take a minute to think about what makes a good leader. Consider some of the leaders from your own life (e.g., a camp counsellor, church leader, coach, or a boss). What qualities did these leaders have?

1. In your notebook, record a list of the qualities that make a good leader.
2. Then record the qualities that you think make a good prime minister or political leader. Are they the same qualities that make a good leader, or are there some extra qualities that you'd like to see in a prime minister?
3. Based on the film, record the qualities that you believe describe John A. Macdonald. According to your list, does he meet your criteria of a good leader and prime minister? Why or why not?

## Macdonald's Early Years

John Alexander Macdonald was born in Scotland on January 11, 1815. His family emigrated to Kingston, Ontario when he was a boy. The Macdonald family was not wealthy, and John's father, Hugh, had one business failure after another. John attended local schools until the age of 15. This was a common age for leaving school at the time, as only the wealthiest families could afford to send their children to university.

John's parents decided he should practise law, so when he was just 15, John took a steamboat to Toronto where he passed an exam set by the Law Society of Upper Canada. (At the time there were no law schools in British North America. Those who wanted to become lawyers had to first pass an exam which included math, Latin, and history, and then they were apprenticed to an established lawyer.) In 1834 John's supervising lawyer, George Mackenzie, died. Even though John A. was not yet of age or properly qualified, he began practising law. In 1836 Macdonald was called to the Bar, and from 1837 to 1843 his reputation as a capable lawyer grew.

## Marriage and Relationships

Although Macdonald had a highly successful career and accomplished a great deal in his lifetime, his personal life was a very unhappy one. In 1843 Macdonald married Isabella Clark, his first cousin, whom he met while travelling in England. The marriage is considered to have been an unhappy one, not least because Isabella fell ill and became an invalid during the second year of their marriage. Isabella also had a reputation for being manipulative and controlling and having a negative outlook on life.

In 1845 Macdonald took Isabella to Georgia in the United States in the hopes that the climate would improve her health. It did not, and after six months Macdonald returned to Canada alone. In Georgia in 1847 Isabella gave

**Check it out!**

Visit the Sir John A. Day web site to watch videos about the pre- and post-Confederation periods, and about Sir John A. himself. There is also a birthday party contest and interactive timeline at the site, <http://sirjohnaday.com>.

birth to the couple's first son, John Alexander Macdonald, Jr. But Isabella remained ill and relatives had to care for the child. By this point Isabella had become addicted to opium.

In June of 1848 Isabella returned with John Jr. and joined Macdonald in Kingston. When John Jr. died suddenly in August, Macdonald was devastated. In 1850 Isabella gave birth to a second son, Hugh John. The marriage remained troubled, and it was around this time that John A. began to drink heavily. In 1857 Isabella died and Hugh was taken into the care of his aunt.

In February 1867 Macdonald married his second wife, Agnes Bernard, the sister of his private secretary, Hewitt Bernard. In 1869 Agnes gave birth to a daughter named Mary. Mary was born with both physical and mental disabilities, another source of deep sorrow for John A.

Macdonald had a reputation as a “ladies’ man.” There are many reports that he flirted publicly with well-known women—even in front of his wives—and that he had a number of affairs throughout his life.

**Political Career**

Macdonald was elected to public office for the first time in 1843 in Kingston. He had a natural flare for debate, and his sometimes fiery personality often gained him a great deal of attention. His first term sparked a fire for public life, and he spent almost the entire rest of his life—almost 50 years—in one public position or another. He served as Canada's first prime minister for a total of 19 years.

It is hard to objectively assess Macdonald's legacy because he played such a significant role in Canada's history. In addition to his many accomplishments, he was also involved in a number of decisions and events that tarnished Canada's reputation. Richard Gwyn, author of *The Man Who Made Us: The Life and Times of Sir John A. Macdonald, Vol 1: 1815–1867* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2007), sums up Macdonald's legacy in this way:

“[H]is accomplishments were staggering: Confederation above all, but almost as important, if not more so, extending the country across the continent by a railway that was, objectively, a fiscal and economic insanity . . . On the ledger's other side, he was responsible for the CPR scandal, the execution of Louis Riel, and for the head tax on Chinese workers. He's thus not easy to scan. His private life was mostly barren. Yet few other Canadian leaders—Pierre Trudeau, John Diefenbaker for a time, Wilfrid Laurier—had the same capacity to inspire love” (p. 3).

## Follow-up

1. Based on the information you have just read about Macdonald, revisit your response to question 3 of the Minds-on Activity at the beginning of this feature.
  - a) What additional information might you add to your response?
  - b) Has your overall position on Macdonald's leadership qualities changed?
  - c) What additional information might you need to know to determine whether or not Macdonald was a great leader?
2. Re-read the quote on the previous page about Macdonald written by biographer Richard Gwyn.
  - a) Based on the quote, do you think Gwyn is a fan of Macdonald's or not? Explain your answer.
  - b) Find at least two other quotes that offer an opinion of Macdonald. Record the quotes and the source information for each: who said/wrote it, that person's affiliation, the date, and where the quote was published.
  - c) Join with other students to form a group and compare the quotes. What information do the quotes have in common? What overall impression do they create?
  - d) If you have access to a computer, use the quotes to create a Wordle (a "word cloud"). Share your Wordle with the rest of the class.

# Analyzing Cause and Consequence

In one pivotal scene in the film, in Chapter 4: The Absolutely Indicative Issue, George-Étienne Cartier turns to Macdonald and asks him why he is supporting the recommendation that Bytown (Ottawa) become the capital of Canada. Macdonald replies that “this is the moment when the impossible becomes possible.” In many ways this statement can apply directly to Confederation. There were many reasons why Confederation was almost impossible to achieve. Yet despite those obstacles, it happened.

For the impossible to become possible, a number of factors—or causes—must come into play. Some of these causes are acute or sudden (short-term) and some of the causes have existed for some time (long-term). Similarly, once an event occurs, a number of consequences are generated. Some of these consequences are predictable (intended) and some are a surprise (unintended).

To better understand the nature of cause and consequence we can consider what happens when someone plays pool. The white cue ball rolls along the green felt of a pool table, grazes the black 8-ball off centre, and the black ball drops into the side pocket. Aha! The white ball *caused* the black one to drop into the pocket.

But did it? Without the flat surface and the motion of the chalked cue, the event would not have happened. And behind the table and the cue are the people playing the game. In fact, people are the most central element of all: the players with their different strategies and levels of skill, the pool equipment manufacturers, and the inventors of the game itself. So there were actually *a number* of causes that lead to the black ball dropping into the pocket of the pool table.

## Your Turn

Consider the grade you earned for math on your last report card. Create a mind map in your notebook with one square in the centre surrounded by a number of other squares. Draw arrows pointing from the surrounding squares to the centre square. Write “My grade in math” in the centre square. Then write the causes that contributed to your grade in the other boxes. The causes of your math grade might include: “amount of time I studied” or “how hard I tried.”

When you have completed your mind map, highlight the causes that are short-term in one colour, and the causes that are long-term in another. A short-term cause might be “Bad night sleep before big test” while a long-term cause might be “Not studying for tests.”

Compare your work with a partner or in a small group. In what ways are your mind maps similar or dissimilar? What might account for those differences?

## Causes of Confederation

Just like the sinking of a ball on a pool table, historical events are the result of multiple causes too. In *Sir John A: Birth of a Country* you learned that there were a number of causes that contributed to Confederation. Some of these included:

- fears of a military invasion from the United States
- the Governor General's admission that the British would not defend Canada if she were invaded
- the political system had been deadlocked for 20 years and nothing was being accomplished
- the need to renew the Hudson's Bay Company leases across the country
- the desire for Canada to gain control over the Red River territories and expand the country west to the Pacific Ocean
- the leadership of John A. Macdonald, George Brown, and George-Étienne Cartier

But is any one of these causes more important than the others? Could we take away one of the causes and not alter the end result? In other words, if it weren't for the leadership of Macdonald, Brown, and Cartier, would Confederation still have occurred? Analyzing the relative weight—or importance—of causes helps us to understand their significance. If you believe that Confederation would not have occurred without John A., then you would likely be inclined to conclude that he is a historically significant Canadian.

## Intended and Unintended Consequences

Major events also generate a great number of consequences. Some of these consequences are expected, or intended, and some are unexpected, or unintended. But let's consider a personal example for a minute. If you do really well on a math test, for instance, the intended consequence might be that you earn a better grade in your course. Another intended consequence might be that your parents are very pleased. Some unintended consequences—that you may not have expected—include the fact that you might feel better about yourself, you might begin to work harder in math class, and your math teacher might begin to treat you differently.

## Follow-up

Working with a partner, generate a list of intended and unintended consequences of Confederation. For example, one intended consequence was the establishment of a new political system in the country. One unintended consequence was the cultivation of a culture of compromise in Canada.

# Identifying Continuity and Change

When we study a historical event, we are sometimes struck by the differences between the lives of people at the time. In some ways, the past can seem like a foreign country. And while it is true that many things change from one period to the next, many things also remain the same. Identifying and analyzing points of continuity and change can help us think more deeply about historical events.

## Your Task

Working by yourself or with a partner, create an organizer like the one below in your notebook. For each of the categories, record as many details as you can from the film in the “Confederation Period” column. Then complete the column labelled “Today.” When your chart is complete, respond to the Follow-Up questions at the bottom of the page.

Category	Confederation Period	Today
Transportation		
Clothing		
Roles of men and women		
English-French relations		
Canadian-American relations		
Relationship between Canada and Britain		

1. Within each category, decide if there has been more continuity or more change across the time periods in columns 2 and 3.
2. For each of the categories, do you believe that progress has occurred between “then” and “now”? Or do you believe that there has been a decline? Explain your answer with at least one example.
3. Change does not always occur at the same rate and pace. In which category do you think change occurred the most quickly? In which, the most slowly?
4. Try to predict the future. Which category or categories do you think will experience the greatest change in the next 150 years?

# Historical Perspective-Taking

Taking a historical perspective means imagining yourself in the situations of people who lived in the past. It doesn't mean that you have to be sympathetic to those people, but it does require you to understand that different "things" made up their everyday lives. They wore different clothes, had different technologies, ate different food, and lived with different religious, cultural, and social values and expectations. As well they existed under a different political system and with a different relationship with the outside world than you experience today.

Taking a historical perspective isn't always an easy thing to do. When we learn about events and people from the past, we tend to look at them through our own experience and point of view. So when we think about marriage, for example, we tend to think about those relationships in light of our own beliefs about love and marriage. You learned a bit about Macdonald's marriage to Isabella Clark in the film, and you learned more about Macdonald's personal relationships in the Profile of a Prime Minister activity in this Guide. Seen in a contemporary light, Macdonald's relationships with his wives may strike us as tragic and cold. But in Macdonald's time people married for different reasons than they do today.

In the past many people chose to marry based on the family background and position of their partner. Marriage was an arrangement between families and sometimes served to improve one's status. Men and women often married for money or property if they could. While love matches surely did occur, this would not have been the main consideration in marriage in the early to mid-1800s. And if a couple did not end up "in love" after they started their married life, the marriage would not have been seen as a failure.

## Need for Evidence

When we study the past it is never enough to imagine what it must have been like at another time. Our determinations about the past must be grounded in evidence—textual, visual, oral, or artifactual. Sometimes this can be a challenge if evidence doesn't exist or if it is in a form that we cannot understand. But despite these challenges we cannot make assumptions about the past without working from evidence. This is what historical perspective-taking is all about.

## Your Turn

Conduct research into one of the following topics (or another that you develop with your teacher):

1. Love and marriage in the 1800s
2. John A. Macdonald's personal life

Search for evidence about marriage and love in the early to mid-1800s in one of the many online digitized collections available to you. You can search for journal entries, marriage or anniversary announcements in newspapers, or "advice" columns. It may help to search for the name of someone who was prominent at the time such as John A. Macdonald's wives Isabella Clark and Agnes Bernard, or George Brown's wife, Anne Nelson.

Here are some excellent starting points for your search:

- Library and Archives Canada, [www.collectionscanada.gc.ca](http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca)
- Ontario Archives, [www.archives.gov.on.ca](http://www.archives.gov.on.ca)

You can also search for information in secondary source materials like textbooks or biographies. These sources often contain background information and excerpts from primary sources.