



## Sir John Thompson

### A Glimpse of Greatness: Our Fourth PM Died Too Young

He might have been one of our greatest leaders, if he hadn't been taken from us so early.

Sir John Thompson, our fourth Prime Minister, served for two years between 1892-94. Sandwiched between the two Canadian greats, Sir John A. Macdonald and Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Thompson is now a fascinating footnote in our history, mainly because of how he died, rather than what he contributed while he lived.

Thompson was a brilliant young lawyer, born and raised in Nova Scotia. Thompson loved the study of law and became renowned for his fairness, acute intelligence, and sense of justice. But the fair-minded Thompson set himself up for the intolerance of the time he lived in when he met his future wife, Annie. As his biographer, P.B. Waite notes, he did the unthinkable at the time and converted from his Methodist roots to Catholicism in order to marry her. By becoming Catholic, Thompson risked endangering his reputation, his career and ambitions. He was called to the bar of Nova Scotia at the age of 19. A year

later, he had established his own law practice. At 32 he was Attorney General. And at 36 he was Premier of Nova Scotia.

In fact, he led a contented, predictable life in Nova Scotia -- until Sir John A. Macdonald paid him a visit. Macdonald realized he needed a worthy successor to the Conservative crown -- and he saw in this young maritime legend a chance to pass the torch one day.

Although Macdonald pressured Thompson to run, the young Maritimer didn't want to give up his life in Nova Scotia. That is, until Macdonald dangled the ultimate carrot in front of him... the chance to be Minister of Justice for the young country. Thompson agreed.

For nine years Thompson shaped Canada's fledgling justice system and



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## John A. Macdonald and Ancient Greek

John A. Macdonald and Hector Langevin (the former solicitor general) once attended a meeting at Montreal's McGill University, during which Lord Dufferin, the governor general, delivered an address -- entirely in Greek.

The following day, a newspaper reported that Dufferin had spoken "the purest ancient Greek without mispronouncing a word."

"How would the reporter know that?" Langevin asked.

"I told him," Macdonald declared.

"But you don't know any Greek!" Langevin laughed.

"That's true," Macdonald replied, "but I do know a little about politics."

-- Source: Clifton Fadiman, ed.,  
*Bartlett's Anecdotes*

### Prime Minister's Quote

Sir John Thompson

*"...the Conservative party believes that the influence of women in the politics of the country is always for good. I think, therefore, that there is a probability of the franchise being extended to the women on the same property qualifications as men."*

-- John Thompson, September 1893, on women's suffrage

made legal history. He introduced the very first Criminal Code; the first laws for juvenile delinquents; the country's first gun controls. His reputation for hard work, honesty and brilliance grew. His defence of the law always balanced mercy with justice and he had a fondness and respect for children that was apparent in the laws that he wrote.

Many considered Thompson to be a natural successor when Macdonald died in 1891, but Thompson declined. He believed his Catholicism would be unacceptable to the party. So John Abbott served as Prime Minister from the Senate and Thompson represented the government in the House of Commons. Thompson finished writing his Criminal Code and kept himself busy. When old John Abbott's health failed only a year or so after assuming the duties of Prime Minister, some newspapers spoke out in favour of giving the keys to the office to young

John Thompson, regardless of his religious affiliation. The government took a chance on this and in 1892 Thompson became Canada's first Catholic leader. (In contrast, the Americans didn't choose a Catholic leader until John F. Kennedy in 1960!)

Thompson made his mark quickly. He did his best to preserve Catholic rights in Manitoba. He negotiated a trade treaty with France while strengthening British ties. He created Labour Day, as a day of rest for working people at a time when these were few. As his biographer, P.B. Waite noted, he asked Canadians to stop judging one another, whether because of race, religion, politics or geography. He believed women should take a stronger role in society, and wanted their full participation in democratic life. A quarter-century before it happened, John Thompson spoke of his intent to give women the right to vote, which would have allowed Canada to lead the world in accepting women's rights.

Despite the fact that he was only in his late forties, Thompson soon began to have health problems. It started with swollen legs and the need to rest more frequently. The clean-shaven man had begun to put on weight during the previous years although doctors said he was fine to travel. Queen Victoria was expecting him in England so he could become a member of her Privy Council. Before he went to England, he travelled to Rome with his daughter, who was studying in Europe, and they scaled the 400 feet to the dome of St. Peter's Cathedral. When he got down he was badly winded, and the feeling never went away. Still, back in London, he got dressed for his regal meeting with the Queen at Windsor Castle, where he was sworn into her Privy Council.

As they sat down to dinner together, Thompson collapsed. He said he felt foolish, "to faint like this." He convinced them to carry on with dinner, with the Queen's personal doctor now sitting beside him. A moment later he turned to the doctor to say there was pain in his heart. He fell forward into the doctor's arms. John Thompson was dead of a heart attack at age 49.

The Queen had loved Thompson dearly. At her command, his body lay in state in the marble hall of Windsor Castle. A British battleship was brought from Gibraltar especially for him, painted black, and then took him home. At St. Mary's Cathedral back home, 7000 people tried for the 700 seats to say goodbye. As P. B. Waite says, "John Thompson's legacy was his integrity and his hard work...a man distinguished by decency, intelligence, knowledge...a man so passionately Canadian he cannot be so easily written off. He was one of the finest men the country produced."



**Happy Birthday, Prime Minister...**

**March**

John Abbott -- March 10th

Kim Campbell -- March 12th

Brian Mulroney -- March 20th

**Canada's Prime Ministers as *Teens*?**

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