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Tough nation-builders fought powerful empire

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Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine and Robert Baldwin

By John Ralston Saul

Penguin, 253 pages, \$26

THE names LaFontaine and Baldwin do not spring to mind when a person is wondering about Canada's beginnings.

Sir John A. Macdonald perhaps. But he is a Johnny-come-lately, however prominent his role in Confederation of the 1860s and beyond.

Prominent author John Ralston Saul argues that Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine was literally the first Canadian prime minister, who 20 years earlier, along with his political partner, Robert Baldwin, created the political foundation upon which subsequent leaders built. Saul is convincing, partly because of the evidence he brings to the story, partly because his style is so fluid.

Saul has written previously about LaFontaine and Baldwin, most notably, perhaps, in his 1997 book, *Reflections of a Siamese Twin*. This latest effort is part of Penguin's *Extraordinary Canadians* series, of which Saul is editor.

Saul shows how tough, physically as well as mentally, these men had to be in building an "atypical nation-state." Even to get elected the young lawyers had to surround themselves with supporters willing to fight their way to the ballot box.

Consistent with his reputation for challenging the "standard ways" of presenting Canadian history, Saul argues that we approach "our history" backwards. For example, because we have enjoyed democratic forms of government for generations, we assume that its development was inevitable, somehow emerging from our British heritage.

As Saul explains in superb factual detail, the creation of our democratic foundation --of "Responsible Government" -- involved an extended and often bitter struggle.

The British government and its elitist colonial supporters -- the Family Compacts -- in Canada resisted democratic government for years. In fact, a series of governors was shipped over from England with instructions to frustrate the reform efforts of LaFontaine and Baldwin.

This was still true in the aftermath of the rebellions in 1837-38, the report of Lord Durham, and the Act of Union (1840-41), which joined Lower Canada (Quebec) and Upper Canada (Ontario).

The Union Government, led by the prime minister, LaFontaine, and his closest ally, Baldwin, had to endure a riot in 1849.

That was the year a reasonable governor (Elgin) agreed to sign legislation -- particularly the Rebellion Losses Bill -- presented by the elected majority. LaFontaine's house, meanwhile, was attacked and Government House, then in Montreal, was burned down.

Perhaps the most compelling part of Saul's narrative is his description of the friendship that bonded the two men. It does seem amazing that, in those days, a francophone Catholic and an anglophone Protestant, could find themselves so philosophically compatible, even though they were both bilingual.

During the period of a decade, these men in their 30s became like brothers. Each supported the other as they built the reform movements, based on egalitarianism and in spite of efforts to frustrate co-operation between Francophone and Anglophone.

As Saul presents them, LaFontaine and Baldwin appear as very real people. One can imagine each writing to the other -- people did in those days -- or reading the latest letter. It seems that they corresponded almost daily when they were not together in meetings or visiting.

In spite of their political success, they both endured many problems, ill health being one. Baldwin's wife, Eliza, died at age 25 (they married when she was 17, he 23). The LaFontaines were long unable to have the family they desired. He was troubled for years by inflammatory rheumatism. Both men died in their mid-50s.

In establishing a democratic union, the two reformers had overcome extraordinary odds. In fact, as Saul concludes, LaFontaine and Baldwin had successfully challenged the most powerful empire since Rome and proved "the value of moderation when faced with persistent crisis and violence."

Ron Kirbyson is a Winnipeg writer and teacher.