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Beheading Canada's History: The Desecration of Sir John A. Macdonald's image in the Canadian National Memory

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Beheading Canada's History: The Desecration of Sir John A. Macdonald's image in the
Canadian National Memory

by

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A THESIS

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Abstract

The image of Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, has rapidly deteriorated. In the 1950s, Macdonald was regarded as one of Canada's greatest statesmen, where both historiographical and public esteem for him was at its peak. However, in the 1970s the desecration of his image began both in the public square and in contemporary debates about his stature in historiography. No figure in Canadian history has seen as drastic and unforgiving of a decline as Macdonald. Fuelled by growing trends of revisionism, presentism, and "wokeism," Macdonald's legacy is being destroyed as Canadian history is increasingly studied through the lens of morality, condemning imperfections and ignoring historical context. As a result, the grievances of contemporary Canada are placed on Macdonald as a way to help Canadians come to terms with the elements of Canada's foundation that do not fit into the narratives of "progressivism," "tolerance," and "multiculturalism." Macdonald's image has been inaccurately distorted, questioned, and actively diminished, rendering him guilty of committing many of the injustices in Canada's history. Today's Macdonald is often viewed as a racist, genocidal tyrant, reduced to a caricature of his shortcomings and diminished as a drunk. However, movements to reclaim the accurate image of Macdonald are being undertaken. This thesis explores the current debate surrounding Macdonald's legacy and examines how his image has changed throughout Canada's history. I ultimately argue that to properly understand Macdonald, the two images that dominate contemporary historiography, one of him as a heroic nation builder and the other of him as a genocidal tyrant, must be examined in historical context and in tandem with one another. While the new, distorted image of Macdonald is loudly and viciously proclaimed, it is not welcomed by many.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, K. Walker.

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Introduction

Since I was five years old, I have been in Canada. All my hopes and dreams and my remembrances are Canadian; not only are my principles and prejudices Canadian but what — as a Scotchman — I feel as much as anyone else; my interests are Canadian.¹
-Sir John A. Macdonald, St. Thomas, 1860

Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, was a drunk, old, intolerant, racist white man who committed genocide and did nothing good for Canada whatsoever. Canada would have been better off without him and certainly will be better off forgetting about him... or so we are being told. Macdonald is currently the target of an intense defamation campaign, where he is victim to an unforgiving cancel culture spearheaded by a "woke" mob. This group seeks to remove any and all accurate acknowledgement of Macdonald from the narrative of Canada and strip his image from the public sphere entirely, all in the name of "tolerance," of course. In 2018 the city of Victoria removed its Macdonald statue. The statue, built in 1982 was donated by the *Sir John A. Macdonald Historical Society*; a group formed by Canadians in the early 1960s to commemorate Macdonald's contribution to Canada. The statue was donated to Victoria as the city held important ties to Macdonald since he represented Victoria in the House of Commons from 1878 to 1882.² The statue's removal has been particularly controversial, with calls for it to be put back on public display continuing over four years since its removal.³ In 2020 Wilmot's Macdonald statue was removed, despite being part of a publicly funded project that sought to

¹ Richard Gwyn, *John A., The Man Who Made Us: The life and Times of John A. Macdonald volume one: 1815-1867* (Vintage Canada: Toronto, 2008), 298.

² Andrew A. Duffy, "Macdonald statue could be returned to historical society," *Times Colonist*, 16 September 2022. <https://www.timescolonist.ca>

³ Duffy, "Macdonald statue could be returned to historical society."

commemorate every Canadian Prime Minister on a “Prime Ministers Path.”⁴ The project has since been abandoned. In April 2021 the Regina memorial to Macdonald was removed. The statue, erected in 1967 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Canadian Confederation, was built following intense public lobbying over 75 years and funded largely through public donations.⁵ However, yet again, none of that mattered when the statue was removed in secret. In May 2021, the Charlottetown statue of Macdonald was removed. Charlottetown, famously known for the 1864 *Charlottetown Conference* instrumental in achieving Canadian Confederation, was a fitting spot for a statue commemorating Macdonald. The 2008 statue was built following a public request for a Macdonald monument.⁶ But, that same public did not matter when it came to tearing down the statue 13 years later. Charlottetown city council unanimously voted to remove the statue, with no public consultation. A mere few weeks prior, however, a public was consulted. The local Charlottetown First Nations community were met with and did not call for the statue’s removal, but rather provided recommendations on how to update the statue to better reflect their historic experiences.⁷ However that did not matter. Ultimately, the opinions of the very group that it is purported to be harmed by Macdonald statues was ignored in the name of virtue-signalling. In June 2021 Macdonald’s statue located in *City Park*, Kingston, was toppled. The 1895 statue was funded by Kingston’s *Board of Trade* within

⁴ Aaron Hutchins, “A statue of John A. Macdonald rests in purgatory,” *Maclean’s* (16 September 2020) <https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/a-statue-of-john-a-macdonald-rests-in-purgatory/>

⁵ Heidi Atter, “Sir John A. Macdonald statue removed from Regina’s Victoria Park,” in *CBC News* (13 April 2021) <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/john-a-macdonald-statue-1.5986074>

⁶ Dave Stewart, “Bronze sculpture artist says he’s been getting hate mail over Sir John A. statue in Charlottetown,” *Saltwire*, 29 June 2020. <https://www.saltwire.com>

⁷ Shane Ross and Carolyn Ryan, “Sir John A. Macdonald statue to be removed from Charlottetown corner,” *CBC News*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca>

one week of Macdonald's 1891 funeral, following intense public desire.⁸ Kingston was perhaps the most appropriate location for a memorial to Macdonald as it was his hometown, the constituency he represented in the House of Commons for upwards of two decades, and subsequently the place where he was laid to rest.⁹ The statue's removal faced peaceful protest, however that was not enough to stop its one-sided, tyrannical teardown. As of 2023, there is only one Macdonald statue left standing in Ottawa.¹⁰ Each and every one of these statues were enthusiastically desired by Canadians, and often funded publicly by Canadians, yet they have been torn down with virtually no public consultation.

Now seen as the antithesis of modern Canadian identity, Macdonald enthusiastically supported an emerging Canadian identity during the nineteenth century and was indeed a leading champion of this identity. Macdonald actively articulated his identity through a growing sense of Canadian nationhood and devoted much of his life to building a strong and identifiable nation. Contemporarily, however, Canadians rarely publicly express patriotic statements as national pride tends to be excluded in definitions of identity. Current Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's views of Canada as a post-national country devoid of identity and any meaningful symbols has helped set the tone of shame. Since 2017 he has apologized seven times (with talks of future apologies ongoing) including apologizing for Residential Schools, discrimination towards the LGBTQ2S+ community, and Chief Poundmaker's "unjust conviction" following the 1885 Riel

⁸ "Sir John A. Macdonald: Monument," *Kingston Civic Collection*

<https://www.kingstonsciviccollection.ca/explore-collection/browse/sir-john-macdonald>

⁹ "Sir John A. Macdonald." In the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*: 2

http://www.biographi.ca/en/theme_macdonald.html?p=1

¹⁰ While there are technically two Macdonald statues left, Macdonald's statue in Toronto has been boarded up with wood and covered with a burlap sack for nearly three years now.

Rebellion.¹¹ Beyond issuing empty apologies, Trudeau has actively sought to remove symbols and references to Canada's past that are not in line with his Liberal party. The most recent attack redesigned the Canadian passport and removed recognizable Canadian symbols including the Fathers of Confederation, the Vimy Memorial, Terry Fox, and the Last Spike, and replaced them with generic drawings to highlight "Canada's diverse people."¹² Additionally, under Trudeau, former prime ministers have been stripped from the five, ten, and soon hundred-dollar banknote, the Red Ensign has been branded a "hate symbol," the 2021 vandalism and burning of churches saw no Liberal condemnation, the flag was not allowed to be raised and subsequently lowered to honour Canada's fallen soldiers and veterans on Remembrance Day in 2021, and any public commemorations to historical figures deemed "controversial" enough have been stripped from the public entirely.¹³ Trudeau has made it clear: Canada's history is shameful, Canadians must not take pride in their history, and Canada's symbols must be redone to fit a Liberal Canada.

Patriotism is seen to contradict the nature of Canada, reflecting an excess ego as Canadians contemptuously dismiss patriotism as being typically American and against Canadian humility; a humility that attempts to force a villain narrative onto "settler Canadians" through stressing the nation's "poor" historical record stained by land-disposition, racial ideologies, and colonial policies. Those who respect Canada's history are silenced. Free speech, free thought, and academic integrity are increasingly difficult, as those who refuse to feel guilty for Canada's past are painted with charges of "racism" and "intolerance." Rather than acknowledging the complex history of Canada, Canada's historical narrative is being actively rewritten by a politically

¹¹ "A timeline of official apologies from the federal government," *National Post*, 23 May 2019. <https://nationalpost.com>

¹² Carson Jerema, "Carson Jerema: Justin Trudeau's cultural revolution," *National Post*, 11 May 2023. <https://nationalpost.com>

¹³ Carson Jerema, "Carson Jerema: Justin Trudeau's cultural revolution."

correct, liberal, “woke” minority to present a sanitized and ahistorical account that aligns better with the “values” of contemporary Canada. Such values cannot possibly be in line with acknowledging that Canada’s foundation was largely built by old, white, Conservative men. As a result, the significance of historic actors is diminished through studying legacies with the lens of morality, intent on condemning imperfections. This revisionist history has set its sights on Macdonald and will not cease until his image is destroyed.

The legacy of Macdonald dominates the minds of Canadians more than any other Prime Minister. “Nation-builder,” “visionary,” “father of Canada,” “racist,” “drunk,” “architect of Genocide;” Such terms are frequently used to describe Macdonald but rarely used together. Every popular conception of Macdonald in the memory of Canadians reflects the biases and tensions of a particular society, at a particular point in time. As a result, Macdonald and his image are created, invoked, maintained, or changed for self-serving purposes. Historian Ged Martin notes that Canadian academia has moved away from the writing of political history over the past half-century.¹⁴ Martin argues that Canadian biographies are often regarded as “windows rather than oil paintings” and when a biography is published “it is common parlance among historians that its subject has been ‘done.’”¹⁵ Macdonald, however, is unusual as he is the subject of numerous biographical accounts. He has the second highest number of scholarly books published on him compared to any other Prime Minister in Canada, totaling upwards of thirty.¹⁶ Due to the extensive historiographical writings on Macdonald, his popular image over time can

¹⁴ Ged Martin, “Understanding Macdonald: Reviewing a Biographical Project,” in *Macdonald at 200: New Reflections and Legacies*, edited by Patrice Dutil and Roger Hall (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2014), 413.

¹⁵ Martin, “Understanding Macdonald,” 413.

¹⁶ Gary Schlee, *Unknown and Unforgettable: A Guide to Canada's Prime Ministers* (Toronto: Shorelawn Publishing, 2018), 22.

be traced throughout these books. Martin notes that as the image of the statesman faded in the popular memory of Canada, the caricature of Macdonald grew larger, causing Canadians to question the very nature of Canada's foundation.¹⁷ The danger in the popular image of Macdonald now is that two conflicting irreconcilable dualities are presented, with one statesmanlike as the wise progenitor of the nation, and the other as folkloric, amoral, and driven by alcohol.¹⁸

The popular image of Macdonald has declined immensely from the 1950s to the present. Macdonald's image has gone from one of Canada's greatest statesmen in the 1950s, where both historiographical and public esteem for him was at its pinnacle, to a debasement and desecration both in the public square and in contemporary debates about his stature in historiography. No figure in Canadian history has seen as drastic and rapid of a decline as Macdonald. That is, a declining image that downplays, and at times outright ignores, his political accomplishments. Macdonald has been referred to under many names including "the Unstoppable Prime Minister," "the visionary," "the wizard of the north," and the "Prince of Canada."¹⁹ Serving Canadians as Prime Minister for six different parliamentary sessions, he has been regarded as one of the top three Prime Ministers in Canada's history.²⁰ He played a pivotal role in the formation, consolidation, and expansion of the Canadian state. However, this political mastery unique to Macdonald has been forgotten about. Why is this happening?

Macdonald's image has always been contested and has constantly evolved. Beginning in the 1950s Macdonald was actively elevated to heroic, "chieftain" status. He became intertwined

¹⁷ Martin, "Understanding Macdonald," 424.

¹⁸ Martin, "Understanding Macdonald," 428.

¹⁹ Schlee, *Unknown and Unforgettable*, 1; Michael Bliss, *Right Honourable Men: The Descent of Canadian Politics from Macdonald to Chretien* (New York: HarperCollins E-Books, 2012), 12.

²⁰ Bliss, *Right Honourable Men*, 12.

with the nature of the Canadian nation and was presented through the lens of celebratory nationalism, an image primarily put forth by historian Donald Creighton in his two-volume Macdonald biography, *John A. Macdonald: The Young Politician* and *The Old Chieftain*. Coinciding with the 1967 Centennial celebrations, Macdonald was recentered as the most important leader in Canada's history, destined to create Canada. However, beginning in the late-1970s through to the present day, the grievances of contemporary Canada began to be personified in Macdonald to help Canadians come to terms with the elements of Canada's foundation that do not fit into the narratives of "progressivism," "tolerance," and "multiculturalism." Macdonald's image is now inaccurately distorted, questioned, and actively diminished, through rendering him guilty of committing many of the injustices in Canada's history. Macdonald is attacked for his Indigenous policies, charged with corruption, presented as drunk and unhinged, and reduced by the characterization of "genocidal." He is no longer contextualized as a product of his time as twenty-first century ideas are transplanted and imposed onto him. The challenge is merging the various images of Macdonald with the historic record.

Coming as no surprise, Canadians are increasingly more conscious of the nation's multicultural and diverse character. As a result, Macdonald's policies concerning minorities are being rigorously and critically re-examined. Recent debates surrounding Macdonald's image and legacy have shifted focus away from his political accomplishments and towards his political shortcomings, particularly regarding his treatment of Canada's Indigenous populations and policies with respect to Chinese immigration, both of which have given significant rise to charges of "racism."²¹ However, such a focus, while deserving of conversation, is now consumed

²¹ James William Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains*, (University of Regina: Regina, 2013); Timothy Stanley, "Why I killed Canadian history: Conditions for an anti-racist history in Canada," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 33 (2000).

by presentism, social justice trends, and “woke” narratives that seek to condemn the past, strip away any ounce of patriotism from Canadians, guilt Canadians for events they played no part in, and silence any voices who do not enthusiastically jump aboard the cancel culture train.

Canada’s history is now at stake. History can be reinterpreted, however, it cannot be rewritten to fit into an inaccurate, distorted, and self-serving present goal expressed by a very loud minority. To vilify Macdonald is to vilify Canada’s past and anyone who does not agree with his outright cancellation.

Many Canadians, including myself, have been deeply moved and disturbed by what is happening to our history. Removing Macdonald’s statues is bigger than simply tearing him down. It is tearing down generations of Canadians who desired commemoration for posterity, ignoring their thoughts, views, and emotions. It is grossly misappropriating the historical record and applying present-day judgement to it. It is silencing genuine debate and anyone who seeks to have history remain public. It is disrespecting the legacy of historical actors that played fundamental roles in creating the Canada we know today. Finally, it is a social crisis, both in Canada and the western world, that will have dire impacts on future understandings of history. As a result, undertaking this research is necessary. I care far too much about Canada to let its history be destroyed. In 2021 when I finished my undergraduate honours thesis on Macdonald, there were still six Macdonald statues standing. However, by the end of 2022, all by one were torn down. The fact that this process has been so rapid, so unforgiving, and includes little to no public consultation is incredibly alarming. Thus, it is this current social crisis and treatment of history in the public sphere, rather than historiography, that is the basis of my thesis. Examining Macdonald’s image cannot be done solely through relying on historiography as this issue has seeped into the public, primarily through fierce debates surrounding commemorations of his

image. Thus, popular culture including news articles, film, television, monuments, and images, are deeply intertwined with trends in historiography. This unconventional approach is necessary as this issue transcends historical scholarship and truly impacts every Canadian, not just the discipline of history.

Writing contemporary history is highly politicized and controversial as it directly deals with present-day opinions, debates, sensitivities, and issues. I am well aware of the challenges that come with writing contemporary history and of the charges that may be lofted towards me due to the arguments I put forth in this thesis. However, a fear of being cancelled by a woke minority will not stop my pursuit of historical truth and my confrontation of contentious social issues. Academia must accept and allow room for open debate no matter how uncomfortable it may be. Current discussions of Macdonald are dominated with the use of highly contentious and evocative language. Debates over whether Macdonald's actions constituted "genocide" plague discussions surrounding his identity and often drown out other discussions of Macdonald that are crucial to have. The Macdonald debate is highly weaponized and can lead to genuine scholarship being dismissed. Accusations and arguments surrounding whether Macdonald can be charged with horrid crimes against humanity will be discussed in this thesis, as it cannot be ignored when discussing his image post-1990s. If that leads a select few to dismiss my arguments, then there is nothing I can do to stop that. The intention of this thesis is to discern between fact and created myth, examine historiography and popular culture, and explore the current debate surrounding Macdonald's legacy. Such an approach should not be painted with charges of political bias; however, those who disagree with me will likely write off my work as being too "Conservative." I would much rather be guilty of presenting a well-rounded narrative, than contribute to the selective and inaccurate revisionist approach. Increasingly, fact is ignored as emotion reigns

supreme. However, fact, not feeling, must lead Canadians to their own conclusions on Macdonald, his legacy, his actions, and his place in Canada today. Seeking to detach Macdonald from emotional reactionism simply cannot be viewed as controversial or ideological. Fact may not be easy to confront, but I will not ignore nor downplay it simply because it does not align with modern day feelings, sensitivities, ideologies, and social movements.

Presenting Macdonald as Canada's leading racist and purging Canada's problematic past through removing his statues is poor history and actively distorts the historical record. It views the past through the lens of morality and employs revisionist history. Studying the changing image of a public figure such as Macdonald exposes tensions between national memory, myth, collective remembrance, and identity, alongside issues with the commemorative and monument tradition in Canada. These concepts are not only highly theoretical, but their definitions are highly contested. As such, a brief discussion of both historiographical and theoretical understandings of public memory and monuments is important. Macdonald's image and its commemoration are affected by the broader debate of "presentism." Presentism reinterprets and rewrites history "whereby a person's past deeds or utterances are squeezed through a present-day lens which... simplifies and distorts the historical record... [and] is therefore an enemy of rounded history."²² Presentism is central to contemporary Canadian thought when examining histories deemed controversial. It has manifested into public debates concerning the function and content of public commemorations as Canadians turn a critical eye to their history. History and memory are deeply connected, and historiography intersects with popular culture, as shown through public commemoration. Public histories are quickly becoming a product of memory and recollection. The public memory of historic events is controlled by current generations and

²² Jeffrey Simpson, "The Perils of Presentism," *Queens Quarterly* 125 (2018): 253.

influenced by “heritage gaze,” which creates a series of efforts to atone for historical events that contemporary societies deem as unjust.²³ It is this heritage gaze that has furthered the changing image of Macdonald, as a nation that increasingly prides itself on an image of tolerance struggles to tolerate its past.

While highly contentious, commemorating history is incredibly important as it keeps alive the values of a generation of people who sought to memorialize their history in bronze and marble for posterity. Removing these monuments takes the voices away from generations of Canadians and undermines what Macdonald represented to them. Public narratives serve multiple functions as they organize the past into a coherent story to make sense of the future. “History is as much about forging a livable consensus as it is about remembering”²⁴ and is consciously and selectively invoked to serve the needs of the present. In Canada, there is a contemporary general disdain towards elevating historical figures for the purposes of commemoration, and an inability to celebrate both identity and history. Historians including Cecelia Morgan and Alan Gordon have studied the relationship between memory, commemoration, and historiography. Between 1891 and 1930 erecting monuments and plaques accelerated as Canadians, imperial federationists, and advocates of full Canadian sovereignty alike, sought to create a defined nationality that brought together a country that differed on religious, racial, and cultural lines.²⁵ An individual figure, however, is easier to attack than an entire social structure, so, if a historical actor is publicly elevated, they gain a susceptibility to criticism. As Morgan argues, such anxieties concerning national history reflect a historical

²³ John Reid, “The Three Lives of Edward Cornwallis,” *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* 16 (2013): 36.

²⁴ Reid, “The Three Lives of Edward Cornwallis,” 13.

²⁵ Alan Gordon, *Making Public Pasts: The contested Terrain of Montreal’s Public Memories, 1891-1930* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 170.

anxiety within Canadians as there is little centralized understanding of their own history.²⁶ These anxieties are personified into the social necessity that histories be recognized whether through monuments, plaques, historic sites, or museums.²⁷ By recognizing the dominant histories of contemporary society, Canadians gain an understanding and grip on their history. With the passage of time comes the formation of critical opinions and new interpretations of history. However, these new interpretations must not take a selective view of history that seeks to destroy any monument that does not reaffirm modern desires and values.

Recognizing that the historical consciousness that monuments foster was actively created and desired by a willing Canadian public cannot be ignored when studying commemorative efforts. As Gordon notes, commemorative efforts reflect tensions between social groups to shape the historical consciousness of their generation, and monuments reflect “the quest for an authentic Canadian past.”²⁸ Monuments, then, are manifestations of public memory and preserve memory as they become a tangible representation of history. However, through enshrining public memory, monuments and the people chosen as subjects for commemoration reveal much about the societies that selected them²⁹ which is crucial to consider. During the late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century, monuments were not imposed onto an unwilling public by some hegemonic, dictatorial ruling elite. Rather, in a lot of cases, and certainly evident in Macdonald’s statues, monuments were funded through grassroots, local campaigns. Beginning in the 1880s Canadians worked hard to construct monuments to figures they deemed worthy including politicians, military leaders, and religious figures. Monuments were a way to express concepts of

²⁶ Cecilia Morgan, *Commemorating Canada: History, Heritage, and Memory, 1850s-1990s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 35.

²⁷ Morgan, *Commemorating Canada*, 36.

²⁸ Gordon, *Making Public Pasts*, xiv.

²⁹ Gordon, *Making Public Pasts*, xv

Canada, remind viewers of such a vision of Canada, and function as important sites of remembrance.³⁰ Unveiling ceremonies and anniversary celebrations helped them persist in the minds of Canadians and kept the memory of the commemorated alive. Numerous memory initiatives were undertaken by Canadians voluntarily, with government-sponsored initiatives typically only occurring after a great deal of public pressure.³¹ While at times, heritage elites did merge heritage initiatives with class consciousness, the everyday Canadian was very willing to embrace elements of nationalist ideology, including the idea of “hero-making”, and there was very strong popular agreement with public monuments, evidenced by consistent high attendance rates at public monument unveilings.³² Monuments were embraced and appreciated by a willing public. “Public memory is created only when public history and the shared memories of groups of individuals intersect and confirm one another. Public memory is not imposed on populations but is negotiated into their own complexes of shared values and beliefs.”³³

This relationship between the individual, monuments, and national identity is extremely important. The Canadian approach to national identity constitutes a “geography of identity” premised on the assumption that “identification with a distinctive place is essential for the cultivation of an awareness of national identity.”³⁴ As a result, the common material world of Canada is loaded with symbolism and sites aiming to produce social continuity, establish historical reference points for society, and contribute to collective memory. Symbolism is codified through the commemorative process. Collective memory and social cohesion are

³⁰ Morgan, *Commemorating Canada*, 63.

³¹ Morgan, *Commemorating Canada*, 126.

³² Gordon, *Making Public Pasts*, 172.

³³ Gordon, *Making Public Pasts*, 173.

³⁴ Brian S. Osborne, “Landscapes, Memory, Monuments, and Commemoration: putting Identity in its Place,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies/Etudes ethniques au Canada* 3 (2001): 39.

nurtured through myths, memories, monuments, and commemorations which constitute this “geography of identity.”³⁵ The didactic function of monuments is important to both the creation and the preservation of Canadian memory. Monuments are common materializations of collective memory as memory is an “elaborate network of social mores, values, and ideals that mark out the demonstration of our imaginations according to the attitudes of the social group which we relate.”³⁶ Monuments thus are physical manifestations of identity that simultaneously codify and reinforce memory while acting as multifaceted and effective ways to portray perceived histories. The active creation of a monument by a particular society in a particular moment in history serves the immediate needs of the present and gradually transcends the status of merely a statue with age.

In Canadian society, tradition has increasingly become important to defining Canadian understandings of self, and Canadian identity can largely be characterised by the rewriting of historical tradition. Eric Hobsbawm’s *Invention of Tradition* dominates theoretical discussions of tradition. Hobsbawm argues that “traditions,” despite appearing old, are recent in origin and are “actually invented, constructed and formally instituted.”³⁷ Such invented traditions are a “set of practices.... Which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past... [and] attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.”³⁸ Hobsbawm argues that existing traditional practices can be modified and institutionalized for new national purposes.³⁹ The trajectory of Macdonald’s image fits into

³⁵ Osborne, “Landscapes, Memory, Monuments, and Commemoration,” 50.

³⁶ Piotr M. Szpunar, “Monuments, Mundanity and Memory: Altering ‘place’ and ‘space’ at the National War Memorial (Canada),” *Memory Studies* 3 (2010): 380.

³⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

³⁸ Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*, 1.

³⁹ Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*, 6.

such invented traditions, as every phase of his image has built upon the last, to serve the needs of the present fuelled by defining what Canada's "suitable past" should be. The villainous Macdonald now is an invented image used to ignore the reality that one of the chief architects of the Canadian nation was a Conservative white man. Today's "Macdonald" does not fit with the new invented tradition of Canada as a tolerant, multi-cultural society and therefore contradicts the very "tradition" of Canada, despite being the person who built traditional Canada. If Macdonald contradicts the new invented image of Canada, previous iterations of Macdonald, represented largely through statues, cannot remain public as they are seen to undermine the liberal and "tolerant" Canada.

To identify a norm, convention, or history as "tradition" is to assert and establish a link and to embed a specific present time in an equally specific past.⁴⁰ Questions of tradition become a struggle between balancing their contemporary creation with their historic legitimacy and public memory, and tradition may be invoked to grant authority to the historic record and to sustain it.⁴¹ Memory thus impacts understandings of tradition. While the present impacts the past in the process of inventing traditions, in the development of national memories the past impacts the present. Memory thus becomes a subjective experience of a social group, and inherently is self-serving. Memory marks the advent of historical consciousness and manifests itself into "official histories" whereby the "national group" generally agrees on the shared memory.⁴²

⁴⁰ Gordon Schochet, "Tradition as Politics and the Politics of Tradition," *Questions of Tradition*, edited by Mark Salber Phillips and Gordon Schochet (Toronto: university of Toronto Press, 2004), 296.

⁴¹ *Questions of Tradition*, edited by Mark Salber Phillips and Gordon Schochet (Toronto: university of Toronto Press, 2004), x.

⁴² Phillips, "What is Tradition when it is not 'Invented'?" 8.

Macdonald's image initially fit the tenants of an official history predicated on nationalism but is increasingly harder to mold to the ever-diversifying Canadian public.

Symbols, myths, and official names are important to social memory as they transform into individualistic monuments, memorials, and commemorations. However, with commemoration comes easy critique. Thrusting fundamental issues of Canada into a singular person is easier than questioning the nation's entire foundation. It is far easier to criticize one person for creating many of Canada's problems than it is to acknowledge that much of the country's history was founded on controversial policies. In Canada, the outcry is loud: remove Macdonald from the public eye completely. Statues, paper currency, institutions named after Macdonald; anything that even remotely resembles him or utters his namesake must be abolished. Macdonald's image is now actively attacked in the public on all fronts, including the *Canadian Historical Association's* coveted "Sir John A. Macdonald Prize," rebranded as the "Best Scholarly Book in Canadian history" in 2018,⁴³ and even in Scotland where the once "Son of Scotland, Father of Canada" has been disowned and erased from all government websites.⁴⁴

Today's Macdonald is often viewed as a racist, genocidal tyrant, reduced to a caricature of his shortcomings and diminished as a drunk, despite being the same Macdonald who put the interests of a conceptualized nation above his own and devoted his entire life to creating the Canadian nation. Macdonald played a central role in the conceptualization, configuration, and constitutional arrangement of Canada, and must be remembered as such. Critically studying Macdonald's image is not to elevate and bolster a contentious figure to mythic status, ignoring

⁴³ The Canadian Press, "Historical association rebrands award named for John A. Macdonald," *National Post*, 30 May 2018 <https://nationalpost.com>

⁴⁴ Nahlah Ayed, "Sir John A. Macdonald's legacy to be recast in his native Scotland amid raging debates over historical figures," *CBC News*, 26 August 2018 <https://www.cbc.ca>

flaws and shortcomings. But it also is not to apply ahistoric moral judgements and diminish his legacy to an inaccurate, simplistic, and overly critical shell of a man. Rather, it is to re-centre the accurate image of Macdonald amidst a campaign of defamation, letting history speak for itself. It is to ensure that future generations of Canadians understand and acknowledge their incredibly complicated history. Finally, it is to honour the well-deserved legacy of an unconventional, eccentric, highly skilled statesman, who despite political and personal shortcomings put the future of Canada above all else and devoted his life to creating a strong nation. Macdonald is more than just his controversy and his career must be examined in full, not through a selective history that serves personal interests. He must not be held to unobtainable standards that no politician can ever meet. Sir John A. Macdonald was by no means perfect, but neither were the decades of politicians who followed him, and neither is contemporary Canadian society.

Chapter One:

A Canadian Identity Crisis in need of a Great “Chieftain”

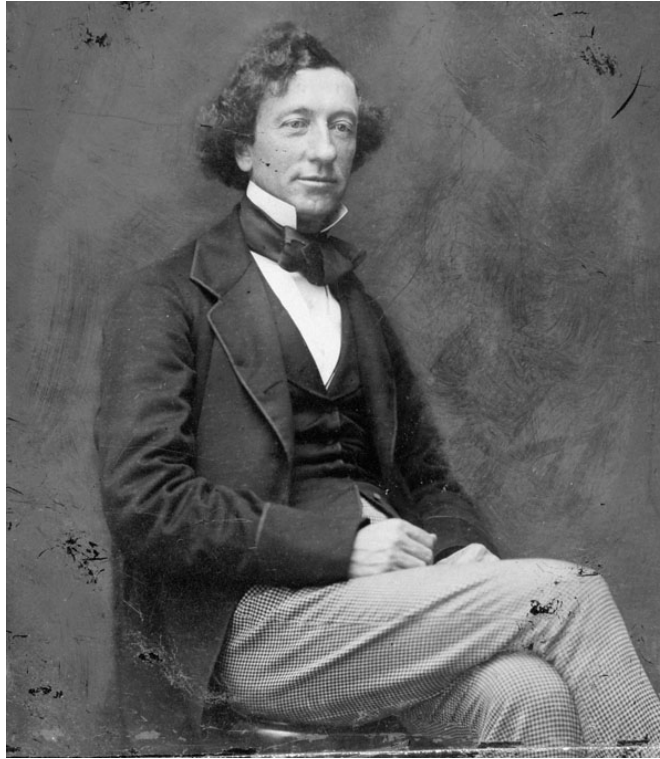


Figure 1: A young Macdonald dressed remarkably different than that of a typical nineteenth century politician | ca. 1860-1865. Library and Archives Canada/C-009267

The 1870s-1940s: Macdonald the Partisan Politician

From the 1870s-1940s Macdonald's image was invoked for partisan purposes. For much of his career he was often presented as a youthful, witty, highly-skilled, eccentric politician who did not conform to the legislative practices of his day. An image of a young Macdonald with a slight smile, donning his eclectic sense of fashion – checkered pants, bow tie, dishevelled hair, and clean-shaven – was typically his initial popular image. This image, however, glazed over his political shortcomings in the name of partisan politics and only acknowledged his proclivity to drink and personal issues when it served the opposition. This era marked the start of the active incorporation of Macdonald's image in both the historiography of Canada and in the Canadian

public imagination where both lived memory and personal ideology impacted image-making. His 1891 death sparked a social crisis whereby politicians, historians, and Canadians alike sought to find ways to commemorate his legacy and enshrine his image in Canadian memory.

Throughout this initial period partisan politics manifested themselves into the rhetoric of nationalism. While Macdonald's image was crafted as a skilled politician, he was heavily critiqued by opponents. In 1844 at the shockingly young age of 29, he was elected to the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada, marking the start of his near half-century reign in Canadian politics. Over the course of 47 years of federal political administration, Macdonald held six-majority governments, the most in Canada's history, serving as Prime Minister for just shy of 19 years, making him the second longest-serving prime minister in Canada, and high above the average of roughly six and a half years.¹ He was Canada's longest-serving minister of Indian Affairs, maintained political support despite numerous scandals and charges of corruption, and created much of the policies of the new nation of Canada including modernizing the federal Conservative Party, building a united national government, completing the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), centralizing political power within the federal government, and, with heavy criticism, quelling rebellion in 1885. A public career that lengthy and eventful allowed room for fierce political critique and dissent surrounding his image. However, the image of Macdonald as a skilled politician and nationalistic statesman won the day.

In the decades following Confederation the number of historical works published grew substantially. With them, grew the attitude of a "new nationality." The primary goal of the new generation of Canadian historians was to craft the narrative of the collective Canadian struggle to

¹ The Library of Parliament Canada, "Prime Ministers of Canada" *database* (2021), distributed by the Parliament of Canada through *Parlinfo* at the *Library of Parliament of Canada* https://lop.parl.ca/sites/ParlInfo/default/en_CA/People/primeMinisters

raise the once fragmented colonies to united provinces, as historians viewed conflict as a cause of improvement and no longer attempted to diminish or minimize it.² Canadian historians sought to demonstrate how the struggles of the nation could bring about progress, thus presenting history as a continuum, as they worked to end the racial and linguistic divisions of the past to create a new, unified identity and national consensus.³ Public memory was the focus of historians during the Confederation period as it could be used to form the official narrative of the nation.⁴ Confederation fostered nationalism, and historians, such as Henry James Morgan, began presenting accounts that chronicled the qualities of statesmanship that made certain individuals, and by extension the Canadian nation, great. In his portrayal of Macdonald, Morgan referred to him as belonging “to a school of practical politicians who in all their acts and conduct, are aiming at success rather than the triumph of their personal opinions of principles.”⁵ Macdonald was immediately framed as a skilled politician who held the collective good above his own. This marked a period of setting Macdonald apart from his contemporaries based on his skill, merit, and achievement as he became a way for historians to stress the significance of Confederation.

Centering Macdonald as a skilled politician was furthered by the trend to make history read like a popular novel, with many works published including John Fennings Taylor’s and William Notman’s three-volume 1868 *Portraits of British Americans*, and John Charles Dent’s

² Brook M. Taylor, *Promoters, Patriots, and Partisans: Historiography in Nineteenth-century English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 152.

³ Taylor, *Promoters, Patriots, and Partisans*, 153.

⁴ *Settling and Unsettling Memories: Essays in Canadian Public History*, edited by Nicole Neatby and Peter Hodgins (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 5.

⁵ Henry James Morgan, *Sketches of Celebrated Canadians, and Persons Connected with Canada, from the Earliest Period in the History of the Province Down to the Present Time* (Quebec 1862), 611-12.

1880 *Canadian Portrait Gallery*.⁶ These works were written in the optimism that Canada was on the threshold of national greatness and intended to celebrate the union of British North America. Canadian historical events and achievements were directly tied to individual actors in efforts to commemorate “events of national importance.”⁷

Cementing the nationalistic Macdonald portrayed by Notman, Dent, and Morgan, Joseph Edmund Collins’ 1883, *The Life and Times of Right Honourable Sir John A. Macdonald, Premier of the Dominion of Canada*, was the first full biography written about Macdonald. Collins presents Macdonald as a central figure to Confederation and a skilled politician who was talented at reading public opinion and acting only when “the time was ripe.”⁸ To Collins, Macdonald was “the most energetic spirit in the federation movement” and played an important role in the Confederation negotiations, as the federation of the provinces was “Macdonald’s fondest dream.”⁹ He further argues that without “Macdonald, we might not at this day have a Confederation.”¹⁰ Only 16 years after Confederation, the rhetoric began that Macdonald was the most important force behind the building of Canada. This idea became incorporated heavily into Macdonald’s ascending image throughout the first half of the twentieth century. He was presented as having a gift, and it was “natural” that other politicians “should be jealous of the ascendancy of Macdonald.”¹¹ This theme of divine timing, almost as though it was destiny,

⁶ William Notman and John Fennings Taylor, *Portraits of British Americans*, Volume 1 (Montreal: W. Notman, 1865-1868), v-vi; John Charles Dent, *The Canadian Portrait Gallery* volume 1 (Toronto: John B. Magurn, 1880), 11.

⁷ Notman, *Portraits of British Americans*, i-ii.

⁸ J.E. Collins, *The Life and Times of Right Honourable Sir John A. Macdonald, Premier of the Dominion of Canada* (Toronto: Rose Publishing Company, 1883), 204.

⁹ Collins, *The Life and Times of Right Honourable Sir John A. Macdonald*, 285.

¹⁰ Collins, *The Life and Times of Right Honourable Sir John A. Macdonald*, 316.

¹¹ Collins, *The Life and Times of Right Honourable Sir John A. Macdonald*, 304.

dominates Macdonald's image as he was presented as inseparable from the Canadian nation in both its constitutional creation and the very fibre of its unity.

Collins' biography marks the beginning of a period of intense commemorative efforts by historians that sought to ensure that Macdonald was remembered in the public eye. To Collins,

the influence of Sir John Macdonald's career upon the political life of the country and upon public opinion, has been greater and better, and of a nature that will prove more enduring than that of any other Canadian statesman, whether dead or living...More than any other Canadian statesman, [he] taught us the duty of loyalty to ourselves.¹²

Collins concludes by arguing that Macdonald taught Canadians the adjective "national," which makes Macdonald inseparable from the narrative of Canada.¹³ Ultimately Collins reflects the wide-held belief that Macdonald was "the interpreter of Canadian interests," with his path "marked by the graves of dead politicians."¹⁴ Collins set the stage for a generation of biographical writing on Macdonald that stressed the themes of nationalism, destiny, patriotism, and skilled politics, while downplaying scandals and charges against his character; a writing style that was pushed even further in the 1950s.

The early 1900s saw a greater emphasis on the duty of the historian to pass moral judgments as historians were "the guardians of truth, truth not merely to specific fact, but truth as expressing constructive standards of conduct."¹⁵ Historians maintained sight of the future, but the power to control it laid in portraying the past, a key development in approaches in historiography that would be strengthened throughout the twentieth century. This marked a shift in historiography as history began to be written with the goal of shaping Canadian memory.

¹² Collins, *The Life and Times of Right Honourable Sir John A. Macdonald*, 500.

¹³ Collins, *The Life and Times of Right Honourable Sir John A. Macdonald*, 501.

¹⁴ Collins, *The Life and Times of Right Honourable Sir John A. Macdonald*, 376.

¹⁵ Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English Canadian Historical Writing: 1900-1970* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976), 15.

Joseph Pope's 1915 *The Day of Sir John A. Macdonald: A Chronicle of the First Prime Minister of the Dominion* revolutionized biographical accounts of Macdonald, as Pope had a very close relationship with the man who seldom let people into his private life, due to his work as Macdonald's private secretary beginning in 1878.¹⁶ Pope's biography on Macdonald was grounded in research methodology utilizing primary sources, an approach that was innovative for its time and was also consistent with the emerging professionalization of history during the early twentieth century.¹⁷ Macdonald's wife, Lady Agnes Macdonald, gave his papers and letters unreservedly to Pope, requesting that he exercised his best judgement in using their contents.¹⁸ At this point, Pope had the most extensive access to records concerning Macdonald. However, Pope notes that in writing his memoir, his "first duty [was] to the memory of my late chief" which meant that, as in the case of Collins, any defamatory or controversial elements of Macdonald's life would be examined less critically and through the tint of partisanship.

Much like Collins, Pope stresses how important Macdonald was to Confederation. However, to Pope, Macdonald was not the sole actor responsible for Confederation and Confederation was not inevitable. Rather, it was the result of the hard work and skilled politics of the Fathers of Confederation, with Macdonald at the helm. He expresses admiration for Macdonald's skilled politics as "no single event in Sir John Macdonald's career affords a more admirable illustration of his strategic ability, delicate finesse, and subtle power over men than his negotiations" throughout the Confederation debates.¹⁹ More interesting, however, is that strung

¹⁶ P.B. Waite, "Pope, Sir Joseph," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* 15 (Toronto: University of Toronto/Universite Laval, 2003) http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/pope_joseph_15E.html

¹⁷ See Donald Wright, *The Professionalization of History in English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

¹⁸ Waite, "Pope, Sir Joseph."

¹⁹ Joseph Pope, *The Day of Sir John A. Macdonald: A Chronicle of the First Prime Minister of the Dominion* (Toronto: Glasgow, Brook & Company, 1915), 79.

throughout the memoir Pope displays currents of Macdonald as a progressive politician. A seldom studied, or perhaps intentionally omitted area of Macdonald's politics, are his progressive dealings with French Canadians. Pope argues that throughout every step of Macdonald's career when the opportunity presented itself for displaying sympathy with the French Canadians in their struggles to maintain their rights, he "invariably espoused their cause" which was not a popular cause to support.²⁰ Macdonald disagreed with the absorption and assimilation of French Canadians proposed by Lord Durham's 1839 *Durham Report*. While he still advocated for the creation of a unified Canadian identity, to Macdonald this would not be imposed onto the French, but rather created in tandem with the French. This progressive view concerning French Canadians held by Macdonald is not contemporarily associated with him as it does not fit the two contending images of Macdonald that are popular in Canadian mythology. Such a progressive brand of conservatism in the nineteenth century marked a shift away from the old Victorian Toryism of the established church and religion. Despite Macdonald advocating for French rights during a time when very few Canadian politicians did, his liberal conservatism and progressive policies are omitted from his contemporary image.

As with any partisan politician and characteristic of any democratic political structure, opposition to Macdonald and the Conservative party was intensely personified in the formal opposition of the Liberals. Harsh critique of Macdonald's image is not new. Such a thorough examination of the official opposition would be redundant as opposition is a by-product of the parliamentary system. But it must be mentioned that such partisan opposition did play a role in the creation of Macdonald's image, as crafting his image in a negative light was a way to criticize Conservative policy. In efforts to sell Canadian voters on the idea of a more prosperous

²⁰ Pope, *The Day of Sir John A. Macdonald*, 33.

future under a Liberal government, Macdonald was portrayed by the Liberals as a deeply partisan politician who created ineffective and self-serving policies. Presenting Macdonald as a corrupt leader who used the machinery of Canada's government system to keep his party in office, the rhetoric maintained that a future under Macdonald would bring Canada down a dangerous economic path as he would introduce policies that delayed Canada's development.²¹

Unofficially tied to the Liberal party was cartoonist, editor, and publisher of the weekly satirical newspaper, *Grip*, John Wilson Bengough. Bengough used his editorial skills and weekly newspaper as a vehicle for political commentary. Using satire under the belief "that the legitimate forces of humour and caricature can and ought to serve the state in its highest interests" the newspaper quickly displayed an agenda in support of the Liberal party following its 1873 creation, despite maintaining a mandate of neutrality.²² As a result, Macdonald, or at least a skeletal, big-nosed, corrupt alcoholic, dominates the cartoons of Bengough. While Bengough maintains that Macdonald's image was treated with utmost "justice," Macdonald himself, likely displaying his famous sense of humour, supposedly stated that "*Grip* has been conducted mostly fairly and impartially" and in the favour of political neutrality."²³ So, with Macdonald's apparent support, and Bengough maintaining that attacks were justified under the definitions of morality,

²¹ Yves Y. Pelletier, "Politics, Posturing, and Process in Shaping Macdonald's Public Memory (1891-1911)" in *Macdonald at 200: New Reflections and Legacies*, edited by Patrice Dutil and Roger Hall (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2014), 375.

²² Ramsay Cook, "Bengough, John Wilson," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, accessed 15 February 2021, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio.php?id_nbr=7896

²³ The claim of this statement can only be found in the 13 June 1891 edition of *Grip*, with reference to such interview occurring in "Ottawa a few years ago." While it was likely a display Macdonald's famous sense of humour and sarcasm, *Grip* took the praise and ran with it. With the "only interview" with Macdonald occurring prior to 1891, it is likely the interview occurred before the charged coverage of many of Macdonald's political scandals. See J.W. Bengough, "Comments on the Cartoons," *Grip*, June 13, 1891: 375.

https://www.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.8_06509_941/3?r=0&s=1

Bengough's scathing coverage of Macdonald's political career persisted and intensified until Macdonald's 1891 death. Bengough needed a vehicle to express partisan discontent, and Macdonald became the living personification of all the ills of Conservative policy.

Satirically criticizing Macdonald at any opportunity, Bengough sustained *Grip*'s popularity and readership through Macdonald's political controversies. At the newspaper's peak in the mid-1880s, it claimed a paid circulation to 50,000 readers, much of the readership a result of its depiction of Macdonald.²⁴ Controversies dominate Bengough's Macdonald as his cartoons routinely attack Macdonald's 1879 National Policy, the Pacific Scandal, and efforts to secure a national railway. As a result, Bengough's Macdonald is a manipulative, politically corrupt, self-absorbed, profit-driven politician. Over the course of nearly 20 years of public criticism, Bengough made few recognitions of Macdonald's ability to create a national ground of compromise among the country's competing claims of race, religion, and region.²⁵ Macdonald was rather distorted through an extreme image, against the nationalistic sentiment of the works of such writers as Collins and Pope. Bengough successfully created an image of Macdonald to serve his personal gains, whereby he could critique Conservative policy and increase the readership of his newspaper. Bengough's version of Macdonald is incredibly important as his Macdonald has persisted today in Canadian memory. It serves as a popular image of Macdonald contemporarily, as Bengough's cartoons are well-known, frequently reprinted and circulated, and often taught in schools.

While Macdonald was a highly divisive politician, he managed to maintain an overwhelming image of respect, even among his critics. Following Macdonald's death, while the

²⁴ Cook, "Bengough, John Wilson."

²⁵ Carmen Cumming, *Sketches from a Young Country: The Images of Grip Magazine* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 23.

Conservatives sought to memorialize his image for posterity, the Liberal party took an active silence on Macdonald. A political strategy aimed at reducing the public awareness of Macdonald, and in turn, the Conservative party, from 1896-1911 the Liberal party only invoked Macdonald's image in a negative light or when his image could be used to advance party objectives.²⁶ Liberal leader Wilfrid Laurier frequently critiqued the politics Macdonald used to build the Canadian nation, including his economic and National Policy. Ironical, as Laurier inherited and adapted Macdonald's National Policy after 1896 despite criticizing them. He argued that such policies hindered the development of Canada, and that he, not Macdonald, could build a modern Canada.²⁷ However, despite a heavily critical image of Macdonald painted by the Liberals, Laurier understood that Macdonald's role as a nation-builder could not be minimized and acknowledged in his 1891 eulogy to Macdonald that

It is in every respect a great national loss, for he who is no more was, in many respects, Canada's most illustrious son and in every sense, Canada's foremost citizen and statesman. In fact, the place of Sir John Macdonald in this country was so large and so absorbing that it is almost impossible to conceive that the political life of this country, the fate of this country can continue without him.... Sir John Macdonald now belongs to the ages, and it can be said with certainty that the career which has just been closed is one of the most remarkable careers of this century.... As to his statesmanship, it is written in the history of Canada. It may be said without any exaggeration whatsoever that the life of Sir John Macdonald from the date he entered parliament, is the history of Canada.²⁸

Given at Macdonald's state funeral, which included a funeral train and a lengthy procession of over 20,000 attendees, the eulogy indicates that the image of Macdonald the statesman transcended the partisan rhetoric that characterized much of his image during his time alive. By the time of his death, Macdonald had successfully been tied to the very fibre of the Canadian

²⁶ Pelletier, "Politics, Posturing, and Process in Shaping Macdonald's Public Memory": 364.

²⁷ Pelletier, "Politics, Posturing, and Process in Shaping Macdonald's Public Memory," 365.

²⁸ Wilfrid Laurier, "Speech to the House of Commons," Ottawa, 8 June 1891, accessed 5 October 2022, <http://Macdonaldproject.com>

nation. Even his greatest opponents acknowledged the inseparable nature of his policy to the formation and history of Canada, and that he was the very embodiment of Canadian identity.

Following Macdonald's death immense public desire for his commemoration emerged. While small-scale commemorations of Macdonald occurred during his lifetime, including establishing the "Municipality of Macdonald" just outside of Winnipeg in 1881, naming a Selkirk Mountain peak "Mount Macdonald" in 1887, and naming a Kingston area park after him in 1890, the Canadian public desired more. At the 1 November 1893 unveiling ceremony of the first posthumous statue erected to Macdonald in Hamilton, Macdonald's successor, Sir John Thompson, stressed Macdonald's navigation of "rivalries of race" and suggested that Canadians adopt a nationalistic approach to Canada as Macdonald had his entire life.²⁹ The public presentation of Macdonald's image began and maintained that "history [will] show that he was the brightest star that ever shone in the visible constellation of this country, which he loved so much."³⁰ The unveiling ceremony amassed large fanfare with "Hail to the Chief" played by the 13th Battalion band, an elaborate electric button unveiling of the statue, and over 20,000 attendees.³¹ While commemorating Macdonald continued largely on political lines, the national myth of Macdonald was intentionally created to serve as inspiration for future generations. The public desire to commemorate Macdonald through monumentation had succeeded as five statues were erected within four years of his death,³² all of which amassed large unveiling ceremonies

²⁹ Pelletier, "Politics, Posturing, and Process in Shaping Macdonald's Public Memory," 362.

³⁰ Pelletier, "Politics, Posturing, and Process in Shaping Macdonald's Public Memory," 362.

³¹ Hamilton Public Library, "Sir John A. Macdonald Statue," in *Local History & Archives*, accessed 26 February 2021, <https://lha.hpl.ca/articles/sir-john-macdonald-statue>

³² The initial five statues of Macdonald were located in Ottawa in the 1880s (exact date unknown), Hamilton in 1893, Toronto (1894), Montreal in 1895, and Kingston in 1895. For a comprehensive list on public monuments to Macdonald, see: Tom Yun, "Where Sir John A. Macdonald stands in Canada: an interactive map." *Maclean's* (19 August 2018).

and fanfare. Thus, the public support at the time of his death cannot be denied; that is, a widespread support that insisted he be remembered in bronze and granite.

The popular image of Macdonald during this period was shaped by partisan politics focused on advancing personal objectives. Public opinion remained in his favour, as he was continually re-elected, portrayed positively throughout historiographical works, and received numerous memorials erected in the decades immediately following his death. Together, such public commemorations and portrayals reflect that the image of Macdonald as a skilled and charismatic politician central to Confederation was generally accepted. While two slightly different Macdonald's emerged, the two differed only on party lines. The Conservatives maintained the view that Macdonald was highly competent, charismatic, witty, devoted to the best interests of Canada, and willing to go to any lengths to unite Canada. The Liberals maintained that while Macdonald worked for the interests of the Canadian state, he increasingly tied his own interests to the national project, was corrupt, took advantage of the Canadian political system, and would not let anything halt his ambition. Both images were not far off from one another. It is fair to say that Macdonald tied his personal interests with the development of the state and was simultaneously a highly skilled and highly corrupt politician who would not let anything get in his way. These portrayals taken together allowed Macdonald to emerge as a great statesman and fearsome politician, which set the stage for the resurrection of his image in the 1950s.

<https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/where-sir-john-a-macdonald-stands-in-canada-an-interactive-map/>

Canada's Hero emerges: the 1950s and Donald Creighton's Macdonald



Figure 2: *Sir John A. Macdonald* painted by Henri Sandam, ca. 1889 | Library and Archives Canada/Bibliothèque et Archives Canada/MIKAN 3000488

For much of the first half of the twentieth century, Macdonald's image largely faded away from the public consciousness of Canadians. But, beginning in the 1930s, Macdonald's image was slowly reintegrated into Canadian memory. His image had faltered and declined significantly following the election of the Liberals under Laurier in 1896. But, with a growing desire to navigate and define Canadian identity following decades of efforts to secure full national sovereignty, leading Canadian statesmen and historians alike sought to elevate Macdonald to national hero status. Embedded with a romantic view of history, one that served the growing nationalistic sentiment in Canada,¹ Macdonald became the embodiment of nationalism and of the Canadian state. Depicted as a respectable, distinguished, charismatic, heroic knight,² and the very

¹ Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History*, 32.

² Macdonald was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1867 for his role in Confederation.

identity of what it meant to be Canadian, Macdonald was rapidly repositioned as the sole most important actor in securing Confederation. Macdonald was inseparable from the Canadian state, tied by destiny to the nation. This period represents an active elevation of Macdonald's image in Canadian memory and iconography. The elevation served as a nationalistic rally point around a distinctly unique historical experience while reintegrating and reinvigorating Macdonald to serve the growing sense of patriotism in Canada, as it was in an intense period of interrogating its identity. Rather than an image predicated on partisan politics, it was predicated almost entirely on nationalism, whereby any Canadian who supported the Canadian state supported Macdonald as Canada's great citizen and destined ruler.

While historiography in Canada turned more critical of national projects, it maintained its nationalistic foundation. One of the most prominent themes in Canadian historical literature is the steady growth of colony to nation, which dominated historiography following the First World War.³ Nationalistic sentiment persisted, only now it was framed in the narrative of self-government due to the Canadian contribution to the Allied war effort, a shift away from nationalism confined by imperial sentiment. There are few better examples of a unifying narrative in Canadian historiography than autonomy.⁴ Nation-building rhetoric permeated all forms of life following the First World War, not just historical writing, and nationalistic sentiment was crucial for Canadian society.⁵ In the immediate aftermath of the war, nationalist

³ Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History*, 33.

⁴ Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History*, 52.

⁵ Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History*, 52.

elites grew in numbers and a unified consciousness was solidified.⁶ Canadians held a greater pride in their history than ever before, one that inspired a sense of

common kinship ... in the mighty heritage which has been bequeathed by the virtues and heroic labours of those who have gone before us the flag and national anthem are but ritual signs of this inner consciousness which is as soul to the body politic... the gift of many generations and the genius which lives and breathes through all institutions a growing memorial and living sentiment, making for patriotic fellowship and ideal citizenship, the fruition of the national spirit,” capable of stirring a people to “high endeavours” through the memory of “noble deeds” done in the past.⁷

The desire for a national culture was strong. History was key to the intellectual life of a Canada that sought to discover authentically Canadian modes of expression. Such expressions relied on reconciling a knowledge of the past with Canadian national memory and nationality, and echoed the historiographical practices that emerged in the 1860s.

While Macdonald had largely faded from the public memory of Canada, in 1941 an ally that nobody could have predicted emerged. After the Liberals spent decades actively ignoring Macdonald’s legacy, the unorthodox spiritualist Liberal Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, brought the ghost of Macdonald back to life. The outbreak of the Second World War and a mystic vision of Macdonald inspired King to hold a major commemoration to Macdonald on the 50th anniversary of his death, on 6 June 1941.⁸ While a strange decision as it crossed partisan lines, there had been no national celebration of Macdonald since his 1891 funeral. However, a highly divided Canada which was being tested by the looming question of conscription needed a heroic unifier. The event was haphazardly thrown together in a matter of

⁶ Robert Cupido, “Appropriating the Past: Pageants, Politics, and the Diamond Jubilee of Confederation,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association/ Revue de la Société historique de Canada* 9 (1998): 155-186.

⁷ “The Historic Sense” in the *Montreal Gazette*, 21 May 1927, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/421275873>

⁸ Yves Y. Pelletier, “Soberly Celebrating Sir John,” *Canada’s History* (2015) <https://www.canadashistory.ca/explore/prime-ministers/soberly-celebrating-sir-john>

three weeks, and broadcast live over radio on 7 June, one day after the anniversary of Macdonald's death to ensure a prime listening audience.⁹ King's diary made clear that his speech "came to express exactly what I wanted: first, of unity in historic races, and then of unity in the nations of the Commonwealth, and unity in fighting for the preservation of peace."¹⁰

Stressing unity, Confederation, and the national dream of Macdonald, the narrative of the ceremony became clear; Macdonald could be used as a national rally point to stoke patriotism around the growing autonomy of the Canadian nation, and such historic romanticism could be used to serve the present wartime cause. Romanticizing Canada's history, King stressed that

a wise nation preserves its records... and fosters national pride and love of country by perpetual references to the sacrifices and glories of the past... it is in the spirit... of these words that we of another generation, old and young from near and far, of different racial origins and of different religious and political faith welcome this opportunity to commemorate the life and work of the first Prime Minister of Canada.... I sometimes think that the Canada of today, has long surpassed the Canada of Sir John Macdonald's dreams. I doubt not that he saw our country, ever, as a loyal daughter at her mother's side. To die with Britain, was the last which he ever have wished.¹¹

King and the entire ceremony ignored any controversial elements of Macdonald's legacy, with French Liberal member Ernest Lapointe thanking Macdonald for his preservation of the French language in Canada, with "French Canadians... delighted to join their fellow Canadians to pay tribute to [his] memory."¹² A new, heroic Macdonald emerged that could serve and unite a fractured Canada, just as he had done in 1867. The event succeeded in recasting Macdonald and received widely positive reception as it reintroduced him back into the public gaze of

⁹ Pelletier, "Soberly Celebrating Sir John."

¹⁰ William Lyon Mackenzie King, "Laurier House and Kingston, Ontario, Saturday June 7, 1941," in the *Diaries of William Lyon Mackenzie King database*, Library and Archives Canada item number 22794 (1941), <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/>

¹¹ Canadian Broadcast Corporation, "Ceremony marks 50th anniversary death of Sir John A. Macdonald," speech given by William Lyon Mackenzie King, Broadcast by CBC Radio News, 7 June 1941, located in *CBC Digital Archives* (16:35-24:51) <https://www.cbc.ca/archives>

¹² Pelletier, "Soberly Celebrating Sir John."

Canadians.¹³ The public looked upon him with reverence and respect, as Canadians had found a hero who seemed to transcend all of the issues of a nation at war.

While a nation swept up by war had much more pressing concerns than commemorating a dead politician, by the early-1950s the nationalistic framing of Macdonald as Canada's hero, resurrected by King, emerged in Canadian historiography. After little work was written on Macdonald for the 40 years following his death, historian Donald Creighton pushed this image of Macdonald further through his monumental two volume biography, *The Young Politician* (1952) and *The Old Chieftain* (1955). These quickly became best sellers in Canada, gained critical acclaim, and dominated the writings of Macdonald for decades. Creighton used biographic writing to present Macdonald as the manifestation of a Canadian destiny, as Canada's "Great Chieftain," and as Canada's champion who rose above countless enemies who sought to thwart plans for Confederation. Seeking to create biographies that would stand as a kind of national monument,¹⁴ the significance of Creighton's work is momentous as after its publication, no one revisited Macdonald in any sustained way for fifty years,¹⁵ which meant that Creighton's Macdonald had achieved a strong hold on the public imagination of Macdonald's image.

Creighton saw the St. Lawrence-Great Lakes water chain as the key to understanding Canadian history, a view he expressed in his 1937 book *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence* and continued to push further in his Macdonald biography.¹⁶ His work stressed nation-

¹³ Pelletier, "Soberly Celebrating Sir John."

¹⁴ Donald Wright, *Donald Creighton: A Life in History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 171.

¹⁵ Donald Wright, "His Macdonald, My Creighton, Biography and the Writing of History," *Canadian Historical Review* 98 (2017): 348.

¹⁶ Patrice Dutil and Roger Hall, "A Macdonald for Our Times" in *Macdonald at 200: New Reflections and Legacies*, edited by Patrice Dutil and Roger Hall (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2014), 17.

building and relied on the motif of the St. Lawrence to present the creation of Canada as destined by its geographic terrain. In essence, Macdonald became the personification of the St. Lawrence and of Canada's grand destiny. Creighton's Macdonald is crafted as a larger-than-life figure, grand and eccentric, commanding Canada's political life in the nineteenth century and bending conservatism to fit the needs of the country.¹⁷ Creighton speaks through Macdonald and asserts memories, dialogue, mannerisms, and events, that cannot be authenticated. Creighton's version of Macdonald is the most celebratory and elevating public work ever done to commemorate Macdonald's memory and succeeded in reviving Macdonald in Canadian memory.

The social significance of Creighton's biographies was their ability to further ingrain the heroic stature of Macdonald. The 1950s marked the beginning of intense discussions of Canadian identity. Immigration policies were changing, Canada was asserting itself onto the international stage on a level previously unseen, and a broader, civic definition of Canadian society was emerging whereby citizens of various linguistic, cultural, and ethnic origins were included.¹⁸ Creighton's biographies served as a way to inspire the Canadian connection to the ideals of the empire. For Creighton, Macdonald could be used to strengthen Canada's tie to Britain, make Canadians proud of their history, and reintroduce the importance of Confederation into the collective mind of Canada. To do so, from the opening lines of Volume One to the concluding sentences of Volume Two, Creighton relies on the motif of the St. Lawrence. The idea that waterways dominated the expansionism of the Canadian state, as though by destiny the charting of water mapped out and connected the continent from East to West, was crucial in Canadian academia throughout the twentieth century, becoming known as the "Laurentian Thesis."

¹⁷ Martin, "Understanding Macdonald," 428.

¹⁸ Jose E. Igartua, *The Other Quiet Revolution: National Identities in English Canada, 1945-71* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006), 2.

The Laurentian thesis examined the historical development of Canadian expansionism as charted by the St. Lawrence, with the first goal of Confederation being the unity of British North America, followed by the extension west across the prairies, and concluding to the Pacific Ocean.¹⁹ Creighton perpetuated the idea that the commercial empire of the St. Lawrence had opened up the continent to explorers, adventurers, and traders, just as how the Canadian government, and largely Macdonald, opened the continent to immigrants for settlement.²⁰ The St. Lawrence, and in turn Macdonald, were crafted by Creighton as the very origins of Canada. Using both Macdonald and the St. Lawrence as a rallying-point for Canada's history reflected Creighton's anti-Americanism, and the emerging anti-Americanism of the 1950s. Creighton viewed America as an aggressively imperialist power determined to Americanize the Canadian economy.²¹ The threat of Americanization was so evident to Creighton that he remarked that Canadian had gone "from colony to nation to colony" of the United States.²² During the mid-twentieth century, English-Canadian historiography sought to present "the idea that Canada represented a declaration of independence from the United States, an attempt to build a second community outside the American republic, and one marked off from it, indeed, by the longer persistence of the imperial tie."²³ Historiography, then, could function as a romantic appeal to the emotional and cultural ties that drew English-speaking Canadians together. Through framing Macdonald as woven into the very destiny of Canada, and the St. Lawrence as carving Canada's geography, historians could secure Canada's image as a distinct North American nation, one

¹⁹ Donald Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: The Young Politician and The Old Chieftain*, introduction by P.B. Waite (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 1998).

²⁰ Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: The Young Politician and The Old Chieftain*.

²¹ Phillip Buckner, "How Canadian Historians Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Americans!" *Acadiensis* 25 (1996): 117.

²² Wright, *Donald Creighton: A Life in History*, 174.

²³ Buckner, "How Canadian Historians Stopped Worrying!" 117.

with a different outlook, history, and destiny than that of America.

Creighton created huge characters out of Canadian politicians. Seemingly taking revenge for Macdonald, a man who was known not to hold grudges or be spiteful, he makes Macdonald's enemies *his* enemies. He is unrelenting in his portrayal of politicians who opposed Macdonald. Their physical identifiers are described vividly, with Oliver Mowat as a "plump, bespectacled, rather self-important little man."²⁴ His treatment of George Brown, Reform Party leader and nemesis of Macdonald is far worse. He presents Brown as "an awkward, red-haired, extremely tall, extremely serious Scotsman" who was "a difficult colleague: reserved, sensitive, moody, and impulsive," a "journalistic nuisance" to whom "compromise and accommodation were alien and difficult."²⁵ Through such personal descriptions Creighton makes a clear divergence from the biographies of Canada's past and from conventions of biographical writing, as he presents Macdonald as *the* single most important actor in his time while diminishing the importance of everyone else, and hurling deeply personal insults towards anyone who opposed Macdonald.

Creighton stresses Macdonald's political skill every chance he gets. He dismisses Macdonald's scandals as merely political convention and errors of judgement.²⁶ Throughout Creighton's work he briefly discusses Macdonald's tendency to drink. He mentions that during the Pacific Scandal Macdonald had been drinking a good deal "in a fashion which had become habitual with him in moments of acute tension, he went back to the bottle for escape" in the most desperate times in his career.²⁷ In the heroic image of Macdonald, he is presented as someone who would drink to deal with the extreme circumstances and struggles, not as an alcoholic.

²⁴ Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: The Old Chieftain*, 310.

²⁵ Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: The Young Politician*, 411, 191, 158.

²⁶ Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: The Young Politician*, 173.

²⁷ Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: The Young Politician*, 164.

However, Creighton glazes over just how severe Macdonald's struggle with alcoholism was. Creighton's biographies forgave all of Macdonald's mistakes, errors in judgement, and personal shortcomings under the narrative that all of Macdonald's actions were directed at the higher purpose of achieving Canada's Laurentian destiny. Such a "destiny" needed a hero, and that hero became a Macdonald who above all else, was devoted to the good of the Dominion of Canada.²⁸ Creighton's work attempted to raise the profile of history in Canadian life, during a time when Canada was moving away from its historic and imperial connection, to convince Canadians that their history was grand, glorious, and worth celebrating.

To write his biography, Creighton undertook the painstaking task of sifting through the 500 volumes of Macdonald's own papers, a job that had not been done since Pope. However, Macdonald saw archives as a political weapon and sought to leave nothing personal behind in them.²⁹ This meant that Macdonald's papers were largely a business and political archive, with Pope even commenting that there was "very little in anything... Macdonald left behind him which might not be proclaimed upon the housetops."³⁰ Thus, if a historian was drawing primarily upon Macdonald's papers to write a biography, the biography would look how Macdonald intended it to. Creighton, however, navigated this problem through writing his biography as though it was a work of fiction; a grand story whereby he himself knew the very thoughts, emotions, and settings that were happening around and within Macdonald, the very moment they happened. Where sources were inadequate, a storyteller in Creighton emerged.

Creighton saw biography as "a distinct and special brand of historical writing... closely

²⁸ Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: The Young Politician*, 176.

²⁹ Ged Martin, "Macdonald and his Biographers," In the *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, xvi, <http://www.gedmartin.net>

³⁰ Martin, "Macdonald and his Biographers."

related to a novel” where history needed to be represented through “a central, main character, a set of subordinate characters, and a series of particular situations.”³¹ To Creighton, the goal of a good biography should be uncovering feelings and aspirations, not simply regurgitating fact. As Donald Wright argues, Creighton

said that he wanted to write history as if it had happened the day before yesterday. Through the use of details, sometimes placed at the beginning of a paragraph and sometimes buried at the end of a long sentence, he wanted to immerse his readers in Macdonald’s world, to see what Macdonald saw, to hear what he heard, to feel what he felt, and to think what he thought.³²

To do so, his biography avoided getting swept up in historiography, lengthy uses of primary sources, and quotations from other historians. Avoiding these ensured that his work read as a novel rather than a conventional work of historiography. While a strength of Creighton’s work is the strong, confident, clear, and identifiable voice, Creighton’s choice to write biography as though it were a novel caused some glaring flaws in his presentation.

Creighton re-launched Macdonald as a Tory-nationalist icon, one that he could place his own political views within and boost the image of the Conservative party of the 1950s.

With this goal in mind, coupled with his belief that good biography must read as a novel, Creighton continuously puts thoughts into Macdonald’s head, invents emotional scenes, and fabricates dialogue. Through drawing on the novel as much as it did history, Creighton omits numerous incredibly significant historical feats accomplished by Macdonald. He makes no mention of the creation of the North West Mounted Police (NWMP) across either volume, a group created by Macdonald who were extraordinarily influential in furthering nation-building

³¹ Wright, “His Macdonald, My Creighton,” 340.

³² Wright, “His Macdonald, My Creighton,” 342.

initiatives.³³ Beyond the omission of significant events, Creighton refused to question his own gaze and perspective, and as a result “he never understood that Macdonald ceased to be Macdonald and had become instead his Macdonald, a creation of his imagination.”³⁴ Writing biography is not about solving the problems of the subject, but rather telling the story of the subject. This places a huge responsibility on the part of the biographer to strive for accuracy.

Beyond the omission of the NWMP, Creighton’s portrayal of Louis Riel and the Metis faced criticism, criticisms that persist today. His editor, John Gray, carefully advised him on numerous occasions to consider editing out his own views. Throughout the *Old Chieftain*, Creighton refers to Riel as a “half-breed megalomaniac,” an “arrogant dictator,” an “evil genius,” and “a self-interested American Adventurer” who lead an “impressionable” and “unpredictable” Metis people.³⁵ To Creighton, acknowledging the struggles of Metis peoples meant acknowledging their presence on the prairies, a prairie that he believed belonged solely to the St. Lawrence. Gray rightfully criticized Creighton for displaying a “complete lack of sympathy”³⁶ towards the plights of the Metis, a sympathy that Macdonald himself held, and for intentionally omitting this from his biography. Additionally, his portrayal of Riel’s execution is quite harsh as he refers to the event as Riel’s “extinction.”³⁷ Gray urged Creighton to change this wording, however Creighton resisted due to his personal beliefs that Riel was not a historical hero worth understanding. Creighton’s insistence on portraying Riel and the Metis in this light was not warmly received by the public. In the 1950s there were some voices who dissented from

³³ Richard Gwyn, “Rediscovering Macdonald,” in *Macdonald at 200: New Reflections and Legacies*, edited by Patrice Dutil and Roger Hall (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2014), 440.

³⁴ Wright, “His Macdonald, My Creighton,” 349.

³⁵ Wright, *Donald Creighton*, 199.

³⁶ Wright, *Donald Creighton*, 199.

³⁷ Wright, *Donald Creighton*, 199.

Creighton's idealistic view of Macdonald and 11 prominent reviewers and historians took issue with his treatment of Indigenous issues.³⁸ Such a flaw is glaringly obvious in Creighton's work and persists today, however it did not severely undermine the success of his work.

Perhaps the biggest flaw in Creighton's presentation of Macdonald is that he glazes over areas of failure in Macdonald's career. Creighton notes that Macdonald's "problems had an unfortunate habit of finding appropriate personifications," embodied in those around him.³⁹ Creighton's Macdonald had no shortcomings, but rather was a victim of unrelenting opposition. In Creighton's attempt to present Macdonald as the evitable ruler of Canada, he does not account for Macdonald's perseverance and ability to rise above many problems in his life. This greatly diminishes the political aptitude of Macdonald and ignores major portions of his life. To Creighton, everything Macdonald did was aimed at a higher purpose which causes Macdonald to cease to be a politician. Through ignoring his transgressions and turning him into a symbol of the meaning of Canada, Macdonald loses his humanistic qualities. No longer appearing as a man, but rather turning into an untouchable hero, Macdonald's accomplishments are diminished. "[I]t is hard to believe in Creighton's Macdonald. His Macdonald became Homo Laurentianus, a new species really, or Laurentian Man, a superhero in the tradition of Super Man, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap great lakes in a single bound."⁴⁰ However, regardless of the biographies' flaws, the standard was set by Creighton: Macdonald was Canada's mythic hero destined at birth to forge together a strong and united nation, and anyone who opposed that image was opposing Canada itself.

Creighton's Macdonald held such a tight grip on Canadian society and history that few

³⁸ Wright, *Donald Creighton*, 199.

³⁹ Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: The Old Chieftain*, 316.

⁴⁰ Wright, "His Macdonald, My Creighton," 347.

works were produced immediately following. However, there were some minor works produced immediately after throughout the 1960s and into the early 1970s, many of which made references to Creighton. In 1961 the *National Film Board* released a 27-minute film telling the story of Macdonald's rise of power during the road to Confederation, stressing the political hardship and opposition he faced as he played out his "greatest role."⁴¹ However, the film was short, boring, and focused on too brief a period of Macdonald's life, so it did not capture Canadian imagination as well as the work of Creighton did. By the mid-1960s tensions surrounding the national identity of Canada emerged, an identity that confronted the "Britishness" of Canada.⁴² Canadians desired a defined national identity, one that would transcend race and rejoice over universal "Canadian" values. Macdonald fit such efforts as his image could represent a masterful balance between the "two founding races" of Canada, transcending racial divides under the name of unity.⁴³ Calls for a defined Canadian identity intersected with Canada's 1967 Centennial and sparked a number of patriotic commemorative projects around the nation. Such projects sought to express a Canadian nationality around easily recognized figures and symbols through commemorative projects. Macdonald's image and name was incorporated into many of these. In 1965 the *Macdonald-Cartier Bridge* was completed, and *Kings Highway 401* was named the *Macdonald-Cartier Freeway*. The Bridge, connecting the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, was unveiled at a well-attended public ceremony which involved the installation of a plaque between the two provinces. The ceremony included the Premiers of both Quebec and Ontario, Jean

⁴¹ Gordon Burwash (director), *John A. Macdonald: The Impossible Idea*, The National Film Board (1961), <https://www.nfb.ca>

⁴² P.C. Christian, "courting "Our Ethnic Friends": Canadianism, Britishness, and New Canadians, 1950-1970," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 38 (2006): 27.

⁴³ Igartua, *The Other Quiet Revolution: National Identities in English Canada*, 100.

Lesage and John Robarts, and the Prime Minister, Lester Pearson.⁴⁴ In 1967 *Sir John A. Macdonald School* was built in Calgary (the only school with his namesake in Western Canada) and the *John A. Macdonald Memorial* in Regina was erected. In 1969 the French public school *École secondaire Macdonald-Cartier* was built in Ontario.⁴⁵ Finally, in 1971 Macdonald received one of the highest public commemorations a Canadian could receive as he appeared on the 10-dollar bill (subsequently stripped from it in 2018). By 1971 public opinion was clear: Macdonald was Canada's hero and was worthy of widespread public commemoration.

Historiographical works on Macdonald slowly began to creep into publication, with Canadian historian P.B. Waite publishing several works including his 1967 article "Sir John A. Macdonald: The Man,"⁴⁶ his 1975 book *Macdonald: His Life and World*,⁴⁷ and his subsequent 1976 book *John A. Macdonald*.⁴⁸ All three works provide a relatively standard presentation of Macdonald as a skilled politician who was charming, fiercely loyal, friendly, and deserving of an elevated incorporation into Canadian memory. However, unlike Creighton, Waite examined the political prowess of Macdonald and presented him as a strong-grained realist, the glue of the Conservative party, and a man who fiercely used partisan politics to his advantage.⁴⁹ In the same vein Donald Swainson published *Sir John A. Macdonald: The Man and the Politician* in 1971 which concluded that Macdonald "not only helped to create Canada, but contributed immeasurably to her character."⁵⁰ Echoing similar sentiments while deeply humanizing

⁴⁴ "Macdonald-Cartier Bridge connecting Ottawa and Gatineau opened 50 years ago today", *CBC News*, 15 October 2015. <https://cbc.ca>

⁴⁵ Yun, "Where Sir John A. Macdonald stands in Canada: an interactive map."

⁴⁶ P.B. Waite, "Sir John A. Macdonald: The Man," in the *Dalhousie Review* 47 (1967): 147.

⁴⁷ P.B. Waite, *Macdonald, His Life and World* (Whitby: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1975).

⁴⁸ *John A. Macdonald*. P.B. Waite. Ontario: Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited, 1976.

⁴⁹ Waite, "Sir John A. Macdonald: The Man," 144-156.

⁵⁰ Donald Swainson, *Sir John A. Macdonald: The Man and the Politician* (Kingston: Quarry Press, 1971), 10.

Macdonald, Lena Newman's 1974 *The John A. Macdonald Album* merged pictures with analysis to explore all areas of Macdonald's life including the clothing he wore, the jokes he made, and his tendency to be a "ladies man."⁵¹ The presentation of Newman's work was very unique, however, as she humanized Macdonald in an intense way that prior historiography (and certainly Creighton) had not done. While easy reads, none of these works captured the hearts and minds of Canadians like that of Creighton and paled in comparison in their ability to expand the image of Macdonald. As Canadians were navigating their identity, they needed a hero and had found just that in Creighton's Macdonald. Perhaps, for the first time in Canada's history, Canadians could rally around one common figure as they saw the values of 1967 Canada reflected in Creighton's Macdonald; that is, an unapologetic and celebratory Canadian that embodied Canada's growing sense of multi-culturalism and nationalism.

In the late 1960s historical writing began to shift as many historians turned away from nationalist themes, subjects, and grand narratives. While actively memorializing Macdonald was short-lived, ending by the mid-1970s, it represents a crucial period in Macdonald's image whereby there was the least amount of public dissent or criticism surrounding him. His image was at its peak, with very little questioning of its accuracy and authority. Canadians rallied around patriotic sentiment, and to be an enemy of Macdonald was to be an enemy of both Canada's history and the Canadian nation. This period whereby Macdonald was celebrated the most is the period that his image was questioned the least. Likely a factor for many reasons, perhaps owing to wartime participation and debates over emerging human rights preoccupying the minds of many Canadians, or to Creighton's lament that Canadians did not know their history, Macdonald was reincorporated into Canadian national memory, a reintegration that

⁵¹ Lena Newman, *The John A. Macdonald Album* (Quebec: Tundra Books, 1974), 51.

served the nation and stoked patriotism. The old Chieftain of Canada was on his pedestal, seemingly untouchable in the hearts and minds of Canadians. However, such a grandiose, heroic Macdonald could not be sustained. By the late-1970s notable criticism emerged whereby Macdonald's heroic image was increasingly questioned due to his drinking habits, political corruption, and his policies towards Indigenous peoples. And by the 2000s, a grand defamation campaign began which seeks to tear down Macdonald's image under accusations of outdated colonial historiography, murder, racism, and genocide.

Chapter Two:

Canada's Hero or Canada's Colonizer?



Figure 3: Macdonald playing with a model train car, as depicted by Christopher Plummer in the CBC 1979 biographical film, *Riel*. Just out of frame is a full glass of liquor | Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Gradually following the intense elevation of Macdonald to mythic, heroic status, his image has faced massive criticism and calls for the outright removal of him in the Canadian consciousness. Beginning in the 1970s, a crazed, neurotic, power-hungry, drunk who let ambition get in the way of his better judgement emerged. Exaggerating his flaws and diminishing his accomplishments, this period marked the start of an intense denigration that has persisted through to the present. This has had drastic impacts on historiography in Canada. The moral repositioning of Macdonald reflects an inability to contextualize and critically interrogate history while being blinded by twenty-first century ideals. While Macdonald's prior images relied on romanticising the past, beginning in the 1970s the new image of Macdonald relies on a demonization of the past as he has been ostracized entirely from the Canadian state. Unlike old images of Macdonald that could be reconciled with the historical record, the contemporary image of Macdonald has emerged as a highly contentious man framed under the guise of morality, with little room to debate his legacy.

No Canadian has faced such a rapid descent in their public image as Macdonald. His name has become synonymous with “white supremacy,” “racism,” “assimilation,” and “murderer,” to the demise of the accolades of “statesman,” “nation-builder,” and “chieftain.”

Macdonald’s career has long been plagued by his controversial policies. However increasingly the only way to discuss Macdonald is through mentioning his ill-intentions, his failures, and the “atrocities” he committed. There is little room for any nuanced discussion of his actions. The mass shift in Macdonald’s image coincided with Indigenous activist movements in Canada alongside theoretical developments in the field of history. There is now less room for Macdonald in history as “professional history grew more aware of industrialization, capitalism, social developments, and Aboriginal affairs” alongside academic historians turning away from political biography and towards social history.¹ Subcategories like women’s, labour, and ethnic history have dominated the discipline and grand, sweeping theories of national development are increasingly delegitimized.² So, if a scholar wants to discuss Macdonald, Macdonald must play a minor, diminished role, one where he is weak, malicious, and filled with evil intent.

The shift in historiography critical of Macdonald post-1970s is also fueled by the increasing dominance of postcolonial theory. Postcolonialism “addresses all aspects of the colonial process from the beginning of colonial contact” to “represent the continuing process of imperial suppressions and exchanges throughout [a] diverse range of societies, in their institutions and their discursive practices.”³ The increased prominence of postcolonialism in the practice of history has fuelled a generation of scholars who are critical of colonial histories,

¹ Dutil, “A Macdonald for Our Times,” 18.

² Dutil “A Macdonald for Our Times,” 18.

³ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helene Tiffin “General Introduction,” *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed., Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, second edition (Routledge: New York, 2006), 3.

casting anything that studies colonialism as negative nationalism. Nationalism is seen as dangerous as it is believed to take hegemonic control over a nation, creating an exclusive and coercive identity that is dependent on rigid national commitment.⁴ Additionally, even certain sources that are viewed as nationalistic, such as political cartoons, are criticized due to their ties to “imperial and colonial projects.”⁵ As a result, “nationalist” histories and sources are dismissed as “colonial,” and writing nationalist histories is more stigmatized than ever. Denoting nationalism as bad history lends itself nicely to a nation like Canada. Canada prides itself on having a liberal and tolerant nature, which means that a defined identity simply cannot serve its contemporary image which seeks exclusion in the name of inclusion. Now, nationalism has no place in Canada. As a result, Canada’s history is poorly understood, and hero-making in Canadian historiography is rare. The issue is reconciling Canada’s intolerant beginnings with its modern image of tolerance, which many seem unable to do. As a result of shifting academic trends and a stigma towards anything even remotely nationalistic, Macdonald is now categorized largely under the buzzwords of “drunk,” “murderer,” and “racist,” and to talk about him in any other light becomes nearly impossible.

⁴ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helene Tiffin “Nationalism,” *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed., Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, second edition (Routledge: New York, 2006), 119.

⁵ Nielson, Carmen J, “Caricaturing Colonial Space: Indigenized, Feminized Bodies and Anglo-Canadian Identity, 1873-94,” in *The Canadian Historical Review* 96 (2015): 474.



Perhaps the strongest persisting image of Macdonald presented by Bengough, is Macdonald's struggle with alcohol. Fueling the contemporary image of Macdonald as an alcoholic, Bengough's use of satire allowed for the popular portrayal of Macdonald's drinking

habits to circulate amongst the public, during a time when talking about such topics went against notions of Victorian respectability. While Macdonald's struggle with alcohol was well-known during his lifetime, it was discussed publicly through humour. Macdonald's keen sense of humour was tied to his heavy drinking, with Macdonald fashioned as a charming, mischievous, "funny drunk"⁶ in efforts to downplay the shamefulness of drunkenness which was highly stigmatized by his contemporaries.⁷ The work of Bengough contrasted this by replacing the image of Macdonald the witty drunk with Macdonald the politically incapable drunk.⁸ Bengough's cartoons often invoked the image of the bottle as shorthand for Macdonald's political corruption, relating his drinking to political scandal. The 1885 cartoon *How Long is This Spree Going to Last?* presents Macdonald as jovial, spending excessive money carelessly through a drunken bout. Shaped by Bengough's personal economic frugality and the Liberal party's concerns about the pocketbook of the voter, Bengough's presentation of Macdonald's struggles with drinking is an exaggerated reality that presents Macdonald as a chronic drunk and ignores the personal struggles that fuelled such an addiction. However, Bengough's portrayal is highly effective in representing a polarizing element of Macdonald's life that continues to divide Canadians today.

⁶ Borrowing the term "funny drunk" from the work of Julia Skelly, I employ the word "drunk" cautiously. While there is no denying that Macdonald struggled with drinking for most of his life, to charge him with alcoholism distorts reality. Historians note his drinking fluctuated, worse at times of political turmoil and personal struggle, not as a chronic illness that undermined his ability to function daily. For a more thorough examination on Macdonald's struggle with alcohol, see Ged Martin, "John A. Macdonald and the Bottle," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 40 (2006).

⁷ Julia Skelly, "The Politics of Drunkenness: John Henry Walker, John A. Macdonald, and Graphic Satire," in *Canadian Art Review*, 40(2015): 79.

⁸ Skelly, "The Politics of Drunkenness," 80.

Macdonald's life was riddled with tragedy at every turn. His dad passed early on in his life, he lost his brother at a young age, his first wife, Isabella, was confined to her bed for 13 years before passing due to complications from pregnancy, he lost his first son, he witnessed the murder of his ally and friend D'Arcy McGee, his daughter Mary was born with hydrocephalus and confined to a wheel chair for her entire life, he received many death threats during the North-West Rebellion, and he watched many of his closest political colleagues and friends die, all on top of the intense political pressures of trying to build a new nation.⁹ It is no wonder he turned to the bottle for comfort. However, while he overcame all of those tragedies, he also overcame his issues with drinking by the 1880s and simply cannot be called an alcoholic. Historians have concluded that Macdonald was not a chronic alcoholic,¹⁰ however his detractors often ignore this fact. He was not permanently intoxicated, and Canada was not created through the nose of a bottle.

This view of Macdonald the drunk, a key figure in Confederation, negatively affects Canadians' perceptions of their national identity and hinders historical analysis.

Two incarnations of John A. Macdonald survive in Canadian popular memory: the creative statesman of Confederation, and the politician who could not handle his drink. Impressionistic evidence suggests that, as many Canadians become vague about their history and cynical towards their politics, his achievements are forgotten while his weakness is emphasized.¹¹

⁹ Patricia Phenix, *Private Demons: The Tragic Personal Life of John A. Macdonald* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006).

¹⁰ To name just a few historians who have concluded that Macdonald was not a chronic alcoholic: Phenix, *Private Demons*; Bliss, *Right Honourable Men*; J.K. Johnson and P.B. Waite, "Sir John A. Macdonald", In the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, 2; Richard Gwyn, *Nation Maker, Sir John A. Macdonald: His life, Our Times volume two: 1867-1891* (Vintage Canada: Toronto, 2012).

¹¹ Martin, "John A. Macdonald and the Bottle," 162.

Ged Martin argues that reconciling Macdonald the drunk with Macdonald the statesman touches a nerve of national insecurity as it forces Canadians to question what type of country truly emerged in 1867 if its architect was highly prone to alcohol abuse.¹² Martin asserts that Macdonald had an alcohol problem from 1856 to about 1876, but that Macdonald was a binge drinker, not someone who was permanently intoxicated or dependent on large intakes of alcohol to get through his daily life.¹³ The modern image of Macdonald ignores the fact that he overcame his drinking problem, without having a single drunk bout after 1880.

Martin argues that it is difficult to classify Macdonald as an alcoholic by contemporary terms, as “spree” drinking does not imply permanent incapacity and that he was a “reformed drunk,” not a “chronic alcoholic.”¹⁴ While Macdonald’s struggle with alcoholism did undermine his politics and capacity to serve in numerous instances and served as easy critique by the Liberal opposition, he did not let it destroy his career. His ability to maintain his political skill and accomplish all he did over such a long career becomes even more impressive when considering that he did so whilst struggling with alcohol abuse. There are many legends that persist today of “Macdonald the drunk,” however, Macdonald overcoming his substance abuse generates far less attention. Perhaps it would be too positive an addition to his image to acknowledge the strength that it takes to beat a drinking problem.

In 1990 J.K. Johnson and P.B. Waite collaborated on a *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* piece on Macdonald which sought to synthesize works written from Creighton onward. Similarly to Martin and numerous other historians, they contend that “when his affairs were in a tangle, when he was depressed, when he was unable to put things off, he might get

¹² Martin, “Understanding Macdonald,” 424.

¹³ Martin, “Understanding Macdonald,” 424.

¹⁴ Martin, “Understanding Macdonald,” 428.

drunk... as the dialectic of life and politics went too savagely against him.”¹⁵ It should come as no surprise then, that to call Macdonald a chronic drunk is a gross exaggeration of reality.

To recognize the severity of Macdonald's drink problem is to underline his ascendancy in Canadian politics. Even during phases of heavy drinking, as in 1864-67, his political achievement was still remarkable. Confederation is not discredited by Macdonald's occasional inebriation: rather, his impairment underlines the political ability that contributed so extensively to a wholly new constitution.¹⁶

At times Macdonald's reliance on alcohol hindered his political performance, such as during the 1873 Pacific Scandal whereby charges of corruption drove him to excessive drinking which made its way into the House of Commons as he frequently appeared heavily inebriated.¹⁷ During an impressive five-hour speech he delivered where he sought to clear his name of the scandal, he had a constant stream of gin, a clear liquid that conveniently looks like water, handed to him as he spoke.¹⁸ However, his struggles with drinking did not detract from his political performance nearly as often as commonly portrayed. If a historian is to focus on his dependency, then they must also recognize his outstanding political skill. Macdonald rightfully pointed out that “Canadians preferred John A. drunk to George Brown sober” as nothing could have detracted from his skill as a politician.¹⁹ Reducing Macdonald to an alcoholic not only distorts the accurate memory of Macdonald, but it dishonours the achievement of Confederation and the very foundations of Canada. However, when compared to other charges against him, perhaps being drunk is not the worst accusation lofted against him.

¹⁵ “Sir John A. Macdonald.” In the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*.
http://www.biographi.ca/en/theme_macdonald.html?p=1

¹⁶ Martin, “John A. Macdonald and the Bottle,” 163.

¹⁷ Phenix, *Private Demons*, vii.

¹⁸ Ged Martin, *John A. Macdonald: Canada's First Prime Minister* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2013), 146.

¹⁹ Martin, “John A. Macdonald and the Bottle,” 172.

Macdonald the *Murderer*

The current dismissive approach to any histories deemed “colonial” plagues Macdonald’s contemporary image especially regarding his policies and treatment of Canada’s Indigenous populations. Macdonald’s approach to Indigenous peoples was certainly complicated. It was one that was shared by many politicians and Canadians alike at the time; he believed in assimilation first under treaty, then through property ownership and enfranchisement, and finally ending “Indian status,” a task the Liberal government under Alexander Mackenzie took seriously with their 1876 *Indian Act*.²⁰ He maintained ideas of assimilation noting that “The Indians are the aborigines – the original occupants of the country, and their rights must be respected” but this could not be done through the “philanthropic” idea of “protecting the Indian” by preserving “semi-savage customs.”²¹

Macdonald, however, unlike many of his contemporaries, lamented the situation of Indigenous peoples on many occasions. In 1869 when discussing tensions in Red River Macdonald stated that “all that those poor people know ... is that Canada has bought the country... and that they are handed over like a flock of sheep to us; and they are told that they lose their lands... under these circumstances it is not to be wondered at that they should be dissatisfied, and should show their discontent.”²² Macdonald held the cabinet position of Interior & Indian Affairs from 1878-1883 followed by the position of minister of Indian Affairs from 1883-1887. His total tenure in these positions was ten years which was the longest tenure in the portfolio ever. As a result, he was acutely aware of issues facing Canada’s Indigenous populations. Historian Richard Gwyn argues that “among all national leaders who succeeded

²⁰ “Sir John A. Macdonald,” 22.

²¹ Martin, *John A. Macdonald*, 167.

²² “Sir John A. Macdonald,” 1, 13.

Macdonald to this day, it is impossible to identify any who better understood Indigenous peoples or who was innately more sympathetic to them.”²³

Macdonald’s sympathy towards Indigenous peoples impacted his policy as he wanted to extend the franchise to them in the 1880s. His 1885 *Electoral Franchise Act*, sought to replace provincial regulations regarding voting eligibility and shift the responsibility of determining criteria and identifying eligible voters to the federal government. Offering unique insight into the perspectives and prejudices of Macdonald and his understandings of who should and should not be considered a Canadian citizen, the Act was “exceptionally imaginative and generous to an astounding degree.”²⁴ It represented a Canadian first whereby certain Indigenous peoples could gain the franchise without losing their legal Indian status or rights covered under the 1876 *Indian Act*. Furthermore, it solidified his achievement as both a party leader and builder which shifts emphasis away from solely viewing his political accomplishments through Confederation.²⁵

Macdonald’s proposed Bill shockingly sought to extend the federal franchise to status Indian men who met certain property qualifications. In the spring of 1885, the topic of First Nations voters dominated House debates. Franchise debates were riveted by the spectacle of Indians, “half-breeds,” and disturbances in the North-west.²⁶ Extending the franchise to certain First Nations men was not an entirely new concept. In 1869 the *Gradual Enfranchisement Act* sought to extend the franchise to Indian men who gave up their legal Indian status, provide for the election of chiefs and councils in the central provinces, and replace tribal regulations with

²³ Gwyn, “Rediscovering Macdonald,” 447.

²⁴ Gwyn, *Nation Maker*, 446.

²⁵ Stewart Gordon, “John A. Macdonald’s Greatest Triumph,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 63(1), 1982: 28.

²⁶ Veronica Strong-Boag, “‘The Citizenship Debates’: The 1885 Franchise Act,” in *Contesting Canadian Citizenship: Historical Readings*, edited by Robert Adamoski, Dorothy E. Chunn, and Robert Menzies (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 80.

municipal powers in the fields of local taxation, health, and enforcement of bylaws.²⁷ The Act failed, however. In 1884 the *Indian Advancement Act* was proposed (and subsequently also failed) and envisioned the voluntary transformation of reserves into model municipalities through instituting elected councils for “the more advanced bands of Indians in Canada.”²⁸ The 1885 *Franchise Act* focused more on integration rather than assimilation. Maintaining rigid ideas of property, Indians who held \$150 or more in property, initially anywhere in the Dominion, were the sights of Macdonald’s inclusion. The new provisions did not require Indians to surrender their tribal rights in exchange for political assimilation, which differed from previous definitions of enfranchisement, as until 1885, enfranchisement meant effective and complete assimilation.

Macdonald was painted with political expediency and corruption as key motivators for the extension, accused of believing that First Nations would vote Conservative. However, his efforts were bold and risky, as popular anti-First Nations sentiment peaked in 1885,²⁹ which makes it doubtful that Macdonald’s desire to gain a relatively small number of Conservative voters fuelled his actions. Macdonald was firmly committed to “uplifting” First Nations through the transmission of citizenship by participation in federal elections.³⁰ He went beyond the argument of assimilation, however, to argue that the franchise was a right of justice as

Indians living in the older Provinces who have gone to school—and they all go to school—who are educated, who associate with white men, who are acquainted with all the principles of civilization, who carry out all the practices of civilization, who have accumulated round themselves property, who have good houses, and well-furnished houses, who educate their children, who contribute to the public treasury in the same way

²⁷ J.I. Little, “Counting the First Nations Vote: Ontario’s Grand River Reserve and the Electoral Franchise Act of 1885,” in the *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d’études canadiennes*, 52(2018): 540.

²⁸ Little, “Counting the First Nations Vote,” 541.

²⁹ Little, “Counting the First Nations Vote,” 539.

³⁰ Little, “Counting the First Nations Vote,” 539.

as the whites do, should possess the franchise.³¹

The “older provinces,” or central Canada, were instrumental in shaping Macdonald’s understandings and prejudices towards the First Nations. His relationship with the First Nations was far more positive in central Canada than on the plains, with Macdonald even having close First Nations friends and political allies in Ontario.³²

Beyond personal relations, the temperament and social climate of the day shaped his policy. Initially, Macdonald’s *Franchise Act* intended to include all First Nations men across Canada. However, over the course of the debates, a clear differentiation emerged in Macdonald’s attitudes towards Indians in the North-west to those of central Canada. The outbreak of the 1885 Riel Rebellion forced Macdonald to exclude those in the North-west. The Bill, introduced into the House one week before the Battle of Duck Lake on 19 March, could not maintain its generous extension of the vote across the country as Macdonald realized that both his party and opposition members alike would not support extending the vote to peoples believed to have revolted against the government.³³ The events in the North-west provided the Liberal opposition with easy ammunition against the proposal and forced Macdonald’s hand while hardening attitudes of the federal government towards Indians in the North-west. Critics were unrelenting in their questioning of whether potential legislation involved Indians in all areas of Canada, including those in the North-west who were participating in rebellion. Macdonald initially desired a national inclusion which inspired fear into listeners that Indian voters would soon go

³¹ Little, “Counting the First Nations Vote,” 539.

³² Donald B. Smith, “Macdonald’s Relationship with Aboriginal Peoples,” in *Macdonald at 200: New Reflections and Legacies*, edited by Patrice Dutil and Roger Hall (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2014), 77.

³³ David J. Hall, *From Treaties to Reserves: The Federal Government and Native Peoples in Territorial Alberta, 1870-1905* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2016), 152.

“from a scalping party to the polls.”³⁴ Early debates reflected uncertainty as to which Indians were to be enfranchised, with the opposition suggesting that Indians on all reserves would be eligible and Conservatives emphasizing only the privileged and assimilated few.³⁵ The Liberal opposition ultimately feared that “bloody vindictive barbarians” would be enfranchised³⁶ and sought to do everything they could to restrict extending the franchise.

The Liberal opposition persisted in its disgust at Macdonald’s attempts to extend the franchise quite liberally. Liberal speaker David Mills berated the “gentleman” Macdonald, whom he believed knew full well that “the Indian is not a citizen; he does not mingle with the rest of the community; he forms a member of a tribe, and they stand apart.”³⁷ Mills continued, “you do not allow the natural law of the survival of the fittest to operate regarding him. You prevent his extinction by want or disease.”³⁸ Macdonald defended himself against such attacks by maintaining that property was a fundamental principle in both extending the franchise and determining citizenship eligibility. Macdonald suggested, “I fancy that an Indian who is qualified would have a vote if he is a British subject. If an Indian has an income of \$300 a year, he will have a vote the same as any other person.”³⁹ He furthered, “Indians were just as independent as the workingmen of Canada”⁴⁰ and thus deserved the vote. However, the opposition maintained political hysteria surrounding the Riel Rebellion, fuelled by racist references to the enfranchisement of pagans, barbarians, beggars, and savages.⁴¹ Due to such intense pushback,

³⁴ Canada, Official Debates of the House of Commons of Canada [hereafter Debates], volume 18, April 30, 1885 (Ottawa: Maclean, Roger & Co., 1883) <https://parl.canadiana.ca/>, 1484.

³⁵ Strong-Boag, “‘The Citizenship Debates’,” 81.

³⁶ Debates, 1 May 1885, 1521, 1523.

³⁷ Debates, May 11, 1885, 1747-48.

³⁸ Debates, May 27, 1885, 2147.

³⁹ Debates, April 30, 1885, 1484.

⁴⁰ Little, “Counting the First Nations Vote,” 543.

⁴¹ Little, “Counting the First Nations Vote,” 543.

Macdonald had to narrow the scope of his franchise efforts. To garner support for extending the franchise to central Canadian Indians, Macdonald and supporters emphasized the fundamental similarities of Indian voters to white men. Macdonald stated

they are educated men; many of them are doing business and have large property. They are traders or merchants, who have engaged in all sorts of business. But they prefer to stick to their clan system, just as, until lately, in my own country, the Highlanders stuck to their clan system in the highlands of Scotland. Both groups proudly title themselves “British Allies.”⁴²

While Macdonald was forced to restrict which Indians could vote, this was a conscious decision to ensure that the Bill was passed. The restriction broadened his support and addressed many of the fears of his opposition while expanding the franchise to a racial group often not included at this time in conceptualizations of Canadian citizenship.

The Indigenous response to Macdonald’s efforts was divided. Peter E. Jones, the Mississauga Head Chief and the first person of First Nations status to obtain a degree from a Canadian medical school, exercised considerable influence. When the Bill eventually passed in the summer of 1885, Jones wrote to Macdonald, “even if we did not vote you have done our people a great service by introducing this long discussion by which the people of Canada have become so well informed as to our position; and the part of the Bill, which makes the Indian a ‘Person,’ should be written in letters of Gold!”⁴³ Jones’ letter was quoted in the House by Macdonald. The letter thanked the Prime Minister for “making the Indian a ‘person” and expressed optimism surrounding the franchise as a “noble stand” that would “elevate the aborigines to a position more approaching the independence of whites.”⁴⁴ However, not every

⁴² Debates, May 4, 1885, 1574.

⁴³ P.E. Jones, “Letter to John A. Macdonald,” Hagersville, 4 September 1885, in *Sir John A. Macdonald Papers*, MG26A, volume 419, file 203490, Library and Archives Canada.

⁴⁴ Debates, June 8, 1885, 2371.

Indigenous person shared Jones' optimism and many did not welcome enfranchisement. First Nations opposition to the Act was influenced by prior enfranchisement acts designed to promote assimilation, the general lack of interest in holding property, and some maintaining that they were "allies, not subjects of the British Crown."⁴⁵

Reflecting on his success in securing the federal franchise for central Canadian Indian men who met property qualifications, Macdonald wrote

the object I had in extending the privilege of the franchise to the Indians was to place them on a footing of equality with their white brethren. I considered that it was unjust to the original owners of the soil to be prevented from aiding in the election of men who would represent their interests in parliament...⁴⁶

Such sentiments cast Macdonald far ahead of his time. Macdonald combined "a romantic sentimentalism" with "a total disregard" for the rights of First Nations "to keep their ancestral cultures and religions."⁴⁷ His view towards Indigenous peoples was swept up in his ideas surrounding Canadian citizenship. To examine his understandings of citizenship his vision for the new nation must be considered. Macdonald believed in a British Canada in which all groups would eventually conform to British and Canadian values and institutions, and he looked forward to integrating Indigenous peoples into this new Canada.⁴⁸ Macdonald, like many of his contemporaries, did not understand why Indigenous peoples would want to retain their cultures and identities⁴⁹ and thus used the *Franchise Act* to push for integration. While still motivated by nineteenth century liberal views of property, race, and citizenship, his expansion of the vote to Indian men was an "imaginative initiative" that quickly vanished from the Canadian historical

⁴⁵ Donald B. Smith, *Seen but Not Seen: Influential Canadians and the First Nations from the 1840s to Today* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 34.

⁴⁶ Smith, "Macdonald's Relationship with Aboriginal Peoples," 79.

⁴⁷ Smith, "Macdonald's Relationship with Aboriginal Peoples," 58–93.

⁴⁸ Smith, "Macdonald's Relationship with Aboriginal Peoples," 81.

⁴⁹ Smith, "Macdonald's Relationship with Aboriginal Peoples," 81.

record.⁵⁰ It reflected a progressivism unique to Macdonald, a man who hoped “to see some day the Indian race represented by one of themselves on the floor of the House of Commons.”⁵¹ Macdonald was heavily criticized during his day for displaying a progressive romanticism towards Indigenous peoples and for treating Indigenous populations on the plains too well. The Liberal opposition was often outraged at his sympathy, called upon him for harsher cuts regarding both funding and rations, and even went as far as to implement far more restrictive policies. However, the contemporary image of Macdonald ignores his romantic progressivism (and Liberal opposition) and is swept up in debates over his handling of the Riel Rebellions, his role in creating Residential schools, and his use of food as a method of subjugation.



A RIEL UGLY POSITION.

Figure 5: A lasting image that persists today: Bengough’s 1885 depiction of Macdonald caught in a tight position regarding Riel | *Canadiana.ca*

⁵⁰ Gwyn, *Nation Maker, Sir John A. Macdonald*, 420.

⁵¹ Smith, *Seen but Not Seen*, 33.

While Macdonald's identity as the heroic builder of Canada has rapidly declined, it has declined proportionately to the elevation of the heroic status of defender of French-Catholic rights and Metis culture, Louis Riel. Riel's controversial execution provided the narrative of martyrdom, with his contemporary image highly applicable to a variety of identities. Now he is cast as a pluralistic symbol of Canada and the true embodiment of the Canadian character.⁵² The deterioration of Macdonald's image has served to the benefit of the mythic elevation of Riel, with the two images serving as opposites of one another. Macdonald's handling of Riel was an immediate controversial event in his career. So, it is of little surprise that he continues to be haunted by it. What is surprising, however, is the emergence of a clear narrative that frames Macdonald as the colonial villain, and Riel as the contemporary martyr.

The image of Riel has long divided Canadians and historians along linguistic, cultural, regional, religious, and racial lines. Beginning in the 1970s, Riel became engrained in the popular memory of Canada. Batchoche was designated a national historic site, numerous statues of Riel popped up, Riel's writings were published, and plays, popular histories, songs, movies, and an opera were written about him. How, then, has Canada's rebel turned into Canada's hero? Like Macdonald, Riel has consistently been rewritten since 1885 to fill a perceived need, and fit a perceived image, causing him to reflect many identities. Riel is arguably the only individual who has captured the attention of historians and Canadians like that of Macdonald. Over 50 reviews on books related to Riel and 15 articles have appeared throughout the Canadian Historical Review's (CHR) history, and Riel is intertwined with the emergence of professional history in Canada.⁵³

⁵² Douglas Owsam, "The Myth of Louis Riel," *Canadian Historical Review* 63(1982): 336.

⁵³ Max Hamon, "Re-presenting Riel: 100 years in the Canadian Historical Review," *Canadian Historical Review* 102 (2021): 2.

The decision to execute Riel in 1885 for treason against the Canadian state was not easy. Macdonald knew that regardless of which decision was made a large portion of Canadians would be angered and long-term wounds would emerge. However, the majority of the nation, Anglo-Canadians, demanded the execution of a rebellious Riel as by all legalistic definitions his actions constituted treason.⁵⁴ Macdonald took the gamble of angering the French to appease the English while using the 1885 Rebellion to justify the new and expensive railway. To defend signing off on Riel's execution, Macdonald relied heavily on his law background and stayed close to the rule of law, acknowledging that whether or not "law" was skewed against Riel is a different question from the question of his execution. Macdonald knew that calls for clemency for Riel after his conviction would be "a fatal blunder to interfere with the due course of law in his case."⁵⁵ The Riel Rebellions forced Macdonald to clearly choose a side, placed him in a difficult position, and ultimately reflected a pragmatic political decision by a leader whose hands were tied. The story of Riel is now appropriated, the intentions of Macdonald are exaggerated, and Riel's image emerges victorious. Macdonald, viewed as the sole person to blame for Riel's execution, unintentionally provided Canadians with a highly mouldable story and hero to rejoice around, one that is invoked and has been elevated in recent decades with calls to add Riel to the list of "Fathers of Confederation."

Presenting Riel as the embodiment of modern Canada contrasted with the colonial, murderer Macdonald, is a very influential and useful strategy to erode Macdonald's influence in Canada's national memory. The Canadian Broadcast Corporation's (CBC) 1979 docudrama, *Riel*, reflects a mass-produced film intended to influence the Canadian public on both Riel and

⁵⁴ See Jeremy Mumford, "Why Was Louis Riel, A United States Citizen, Hanged as a Canadian Traitor?" *Canadian Historical Review*, 88 (2007).

⁵⁵ "Sir John A. Macdonald," 14.

Macdonald. While problematic for many reasons, including its ridicule of English Canadians, its racially insensitive portrayal of the Metis, and its portrayal of Riel as a clear hero, ignoring his unusual religious and personal beliefs,⁵⁶ its sentimentalization of history exaggerated and made a caricature of Macdonald. Macdonald, played by the late Christopher Plummer, is presented as an erratic, self-absorbed, incapable drunk who is so preoccupied with building a national railway that none of his policies can be separated from his personal motives. Macdonald is depicted as making highly important decisions haphazardly over pool, cocktails, shaving, and playing with model railway cars.⁵⁷

While the docudrama cannot be taken seriously as it has clear historical flaws, some credit can be given for its presentation of Macdonald as reluctant to support the execution of Riel. In the film, “Macdonald” delivers a monologue stressing that “either way I tear the country apart. Why must every issue, federal or provincial, large or small, become a test of the very identity of this country?”⁵⁸ While likely written for the contemporary audience during an era plagued by discussions of Quebec separatism, it adds some nuance to the film’s portrayal of Macdonald as it presents him as having a keen awareness of public sentiment and the struggles of governing a country comprised of many differing identities. But, despite this brief presentation of Macdonald as somewhat competent, the caricature of Macdonald as the deeply troubled, corrupt statesmen who fell victim to his own ambition and alcohol, dominates much of the Macdonald in *Riel*.

⁵⁶ The National, “Louis Riel movie inaccurate, say critics,” *Canadian broadcast Corporation*, (16 April 1979) in *CBC Digital Archives*, <https://www.cbc.ca>

⁵⁷ George Bloomfield (Director), *Riel*, 1979, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation: 30:35, 58:50, 51:22, 1:26:36, accessed 10 June, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wi81BvwrHPw>

⁵⁸ Bloomfield, *Riel*, 2:08:51.

The myth of Riel as Canada's martyr who stood up to the injustices committed by a corrupt government has also emerged in historiography, exemplified in the 2003 graphic history by Chester Brown, *Louis Riel: A Comic Strip Biography*. Brown's work reflects a growing convergence between popular and academic history in a new period where historians are embracing new forms of popular history as legitimate sources. Brown presents the Riel Rebellions as an action-packed, bloody fight characterized by intentional government deception, linguistic divides, and religious lunacy. Brown maintains a relatively neutral portrayal of Riel, despite his work actively seeking to make a clear villain out of Macdonald. Brown acknowledges in the forward of his book that he "mostly focused on Riel's antagonistic relationship with the Canadian government, and even that has been simplified and distorted in order to make it fit into a 241-page comic-strip narrative."⁵⁹ As a result, the book is riddled with intentional historical inaccuracies and distortions.

Brown's work includes footnotes which indicate a clear attempt to root his narrative work in historiographical approaches and research. The book's footnotes are filled with confessions of the intentional use of inaccurate years, events, names, and speeches. Brown relies on the distortion of history to present his narrative, a narrative that sought to make a villain out of Macdonald. Throughout *Louis Riel*, Macdonald is presented as governing through a permanent state of intoxication, placing the completion of the CPR above all else, and intentionally wanting to spark a rebellion. Brown's Macdonald represents a gross misinterpretation of Canada's history. In his portrayal of Macdonald, Brown notes that while much historical interpretation on Macdonald rests on whether one believes he abused his power or that his government simply

⁵⁹ Chester Brown, *Louis Riel: A Comic Strip Biography* (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2003), 5.

operated inefficiently, he ultimately presents the power-hungry Macdonald, not because he is convinced that it is true, but rather because

It makes Macdonald seem more villainous – villains are fun in a story, and I’m trying to tell this tale in an engaging manner. Incidentally, even though I think that Macdonald was capable of abusing his power, I don’t think that he actually was a villain. I disagree with much of what he did and stood for, but I recognize that he tried to do what he thought was best for the country. And quite frankly, I’d rather have lived in a state run by John A. Macdonald than one run by Louis Riel.⁶⁰

By explicitly stating that the goal of his book was to tell a gripping and engaging narrative, bending certain historical actors to fit certain story narrative devices, Brown crafted Macdonald’s image in a very negative and intentional way. While a measure of good historical writing is accuracy, Brown’s open admission to distorting the narrative did not greatly impact the reception of his work. Clearly inaccurate history gets a pass if it serves to villainize Macdonald.

Beginning in the 1970s, Riel’s character, career, and motives were increasingly studied while maintaining his legendary status. Building off the initial myth-making of Riel, historians now focus historical scholarship around that of motive, considering what mixture of egoism, insanity, and altruism shaped Riel’s activities while working to vindicate his cause and demanding he be free of any taint of personal ambition.⁶¹ This is blatantly hypocritical as modern portrayals of Macdonald rely on stressing his personal ambition. In order to present Riel in this way, all “colonial” actors are made villainous to serve Riel’s elevation, exemplified in the vilification of Macdonald. Such inaccurate degradations elevate the image of Riel the reluctant hero. In an era of defaming Macdonald and focusing solely on his flaws, Riel’s shortcomings are ignored as his hero status is solidified in a similar fashion to what happened to Macdonald’s image in the 1950s. To make Riel appeal to a large number of Canadians, his image has been

⁶⁰ Brown, *Louis Riel: A Comic Strip Biography*, 138:2-139:5.

⁶¹ Owram, “The Myth of Louis Riel,” 196.

adopted by several different groups including both French Canadians and Indigenous peoples. He has thus evolved as a pluralistic symbol and functions as a relatively unified national myth despite actually reflecting extremely diverse symbolism.⁶² There is some dissent regarding the heroic image of Riel, with a growing tendency to call into question whether his actions actually benefited, or negatively impacted the Metis in 1885. However, such dissent is from a quiet minority, unable to critically challenge Riel's image. Nevertheless, this pushback serves as a reminder of the continuous friction within Canadian popular culture, memory, and historiography. To question Riel's image is not just to question his mythic status, but it is to question the governments', and in turn, Macdonald's treatment of Indigenous peoples.

Inseparable from Macdonald is his role in creating Residential schools, a system that rapidly perpetuated abuse, sexual-assault, cultural assimilation, and intergenerational trauma. Macdonald's policies towards Indigenous people were, at times, ruthless and "perhaps the greatest failure of his career."⁶³ He fully embraced the conventional wisdom of his day whereby assimilation, British citizenship, and productivity were seen as signals of both progress and nation-building. However, Macdonald was deeply ambivalent towards Canada's Indigenous population, an ambivalence not widely shared by his contemporaries. As a result of his complicated views towards Indigenous peoples, analyzing his Indigenous policies divides historians on questions of whether he committed cultural genocide and whether the outcome of Residential schools matched his intentions.

⁶² Owram, "The Myth of Louis Riel," 198.

⁶³ Donald B. Smith, "Sir John A. Macdonald's complicated relationship with Indigenous people," *National Post*, January 1, 2021, <https://nationalpost.com>. See Donald Smith's fullest explication of Macdonald and the Indigenous question in: Donald B. Smith, *Seen but Not Seen: Influential Canadians and the First Nations from the 1840s to Today* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021).

The horrors of the Residential school system saw intense public focus following the 2015 *Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Final Report*. The horrendous outcome of the system cannot be questioned, but when examining the attribution of blame to Macdonald, the role of intent matters. The record shows that there was a willingness and a desire of Indigenous peoples to receive schooling.⁶⁴ Following an 1846 conference in Orillia attended by First Nations Chiefs, Christian missionaries, and Indian Department personnel, the Chiefs in attendance not only accepted Residential schools but would financially support their operation with one-quarter of their annuities for 25 years.⁶⁵ Such support, however, was based on the expectation that the schools would act as a path to aiding adjustment to a changing world, not what quickly emerged as a tool for cultural erasure. The federal responsibility to provide schooling for Indigenous peoples emerged out of the numbered treaties, many of the terms of which were developed out of both precedent set in the Royal Proclamation of 1763, and by the Liberal government under Alexander Mackenzie.⁶⁶ This meant that the Canadian government received the right to administer education, done largely through the implementation of the Residential school system, through the numbered treaties that were developed out of historical precedent and Liberal negotiation, not simply out of Macdonald and the Conservatives' imagination. When Macdonald re-emerged as Prime Minister in 1878, he approached schooling with the dominant sentiment of the Canadian general public, whereby ideas of cultural superiority and a belief in the potential of Indigenous peoples to adapt to euro-Canadian ways fuelled his policy.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ J.R. Miller, "Macdonald as Minister of Indian Affairs: The Shaping of Canadian Indian Policy," *Macdonald at 200: New Reflections and Legacies*, edited by Patrice Dutil and Roger Hall (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2014), 315

⁶⁵ Miller, "Macdonald as Minister of Indian Affairs," 315.

⁶⁶ Miller, "Macdonald as Minister of Indian Affairs," 324.

⁶⁷ Miller, "Macdonald as Minister of Indian Affairs," 325.

Examining intention behind government policy towards Indigenous education reflects an important differentiation between acculturation and assimilation. Acculturation can be defined as “a process of adaption to new conditions of life... whereby the culture of society is modified as a result of contact with the culture of one or more societies.”⁶⁸ It is a bidirectional, two-way reciprocal relationship, with dominance playing a salient factor in determining both direction and degree of acculturation, and is not contingent on a change of values.⁶⁹ Assimilation is rather “a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups; and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in common cultural life.”⁷⁰ Assimilation relies on internal cultural and social change within the “out group” whereby distinguishable differences between the host group and out group are eradicated.⁷¹ While assimilation seeks to remove all identifiers of difference, acculturation allows room for the practices and beliefs which can be incorporated into the value structure of the host society, without destroying their functional autonomy.⁷² Acculturation seeks to adopt and alter the cultural and social practices of a subjugated group into the dominate society, rather than erasing and eradicating culture..

Despite Canada having highly limited financial resources, Macdonald endorsed federally funded Indian Residential schools in 1879 and offloaded much of the cost and responsibility to Christian denominations.⁷³ The initial intention behind Residential schools was acculturation, framed under the nineteenth-century paternalistic concept whereby Indigenous peoples were seen

⁶⁸ Raymond H.C. Teske and Bardin H. Nelson, “Acculturation and Assimilation: A Clarification,” the *Journal of the American Ethnological Society* 1 (1974): 351.

⁶⁹ Teske, “Acculturation and Assimilation,” 358.

⁷⁰ Teske, “Acculturation and Assimilation,” 359.

⁷¹ Teske, “Acculturation and Assimilation,” 360.

⁷² Teske, “Acculturation and Assimilation,” 361.

⁷³ Smith, “Macdonald’s Relationship with Aboriginal Peoples,” 71.

as a dying race whose very survival rested on their ability to culturally conform to the broader Canadian whole.⁷⁴ Such an idea was fuelled by Macdonald's own patriotism and views of Canada. Macdonald openly ignored much of his Scottish ancestry, dropping any sense of "hyphenated Canadianism." Rarely did he define himself as "Scottish-Canadian" but rather simply "Canadian." He applied that belief to the rest of Canada, whereby he maintained all races and ethnicities should drop their cultural identifiers to be part of the great Canadian nation he was building, as he believed in a united Canada in which all groups, including French Canadians, would conform to Canadian values and institutions through state-integration.⁷⁵ Residential schools could be a way to assist this process with Indigenous people and to create a Canada without ethnic identifiers. So, while Residential schools quickly turned into centres of assimilation, Macdonald's intention behind them was to aid in the process of acculturation in order to ensure the survival of Canada's Indigenous populations and were in-line with his ideas of acculturation towards all minority groups within Canada.

The first Residential school was built in Canada in 1828 as an "Industrial school," when Macdonald was only 13; 15 years before he stepped foot into the political sphere.⁷⁶ From the start of the Residential and Industrial school system until the last school's closure in 1996, 155 schools operated in total.⁷⁷ By Macdonald's 1891 death there were 51, with 47 created while he was Prime Minister.⁷⁸ That leaves 104 schools created following his death, and 108 created in

⁷⁴ Smith, "Macdonald's Relationship with Aboriginal Peoples," 81.

⁷⁵ Smith, "Macdonald's Relationship with Aboriginal Peoples," 81

⁷⁶ While counting formal Residential schools is difficult, I utilized the list compiled of Residential schools recognized by the *Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement* as it is the most comprehensive publicly accessible list. Residential School Settlement, "List of Residential Schools" (database). <http://www.residentialschoolsettlement.ca/schools.html>

⁷⁷ Residential School Settlement, "List of Residential Schools."

⁷⁸ Residential School Settlement, "List of Residential Schools."

total while he was not at the helm. While the contemporary image of Macdonald maintains that he was responsible for the entirety of the Residential school system, a politician cannot act from the grave. This image ignores the subsequent generations of politicians and Canadians following Macdonald's death who sought to perpetuate and strengthen the system he is often solely blamed for. The actions of a singular person, Macdonald, are held more critically than the generations of politicians who actively and intentionally perpetuated the system, a church who exacerbated the system, and a complicit Canadian public. As the person who proposed the schools, Macdonald rightfully shares the blame for their human consequences, however he cannot be blamed for their operation and for the atrocities committed in them in the 104 years after his death, when the worst wrongs and abuse in the schools happened. How could he have been aware of future consequences or correct them? Macdonald's Residential school policies were not tyrannically and undemocratically imposed for posterity. Numerous leaders from Laurier to Pierre Trudeau and their Governments could have altered Residential school policies and improved conditions had they the insight and political will. Who really is to blame then? Attributing the blame of Residential schools solely to Macdonald reflects a misunderstanding of Canada's political system, as it presents him as a tyrannical dictator⁷⁹ who singlehandedly enacted any policy he wanted, ignoring public support and consent of the House.

Popular portrayals of Macdonald's attitudes toward Indigenous peoples draw attention to his infamous 1883 quote advocating for Residential schools as "when the school is on the reserve, the child lives with his parents who are savages; he is surrounded by savages, and

⁷⁹ Macdonald's contemporary image has been increasingly equated with the likes of dictator of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Joseph Stalin, and German dictator Adolf Hitler. See Gao Buchan, "Is John A. Macdonald our version of Stalin?" *Toronto Star*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.thestar.com/>

though he may learn to read and write, his habits and training and mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write.”⁸⁰ While Macdonald’s quote is blunt, it is merely one often-cited quote. Macdonald’s tolerance for Indigenous peoples cannot be over-asserted, but it also cannot be ignored through the virtue signalling of one misappropriated quote.

Macdonald less famously in 1880 said

We must remember that they are the original owners of the soil of which they have been dispossessed by the covetousness or ambition of our ancestors. Perhaps, if Columbus had not discovered their continent – had left them alone – they would have worked out a tolerable civilization of their own. At all events, the Indians have been great sufferers by the discovery of America, and the transfer to it of a large white population.⁸¹

Reconciling a sympathetic sentiment with his 1883 quote proves difficult. Can the same person who created policies advocating for acculturation also acknowledge the historic injustices inflicted on a group of people? The reality is yes. The former does not diminish the latter, but it highly complicates portrayals. Despite a paternalistic tone stressing the European “discovery” of America, such a statement is highly useful in examining Macdonald’s views towards Indigenous peoples, as it displays sympathy for them, the acknowledgement of land disposition, and the impact of white settlers on their society. Phrased under civilization arguments characteristic of the day, it reflected Macdonald’s struggles with the deeply troubling prospect of Indigenous cultural demise, an awareness which adds nuance to his often-cited damning quotations.

⁸⁰ Tristin Hopper, “Here is what Sir John A. Macdonald did to Indigenous people,” *National Post*, 28 August, 2018, <https://nationalpost.com>

⁸¹ Smith, “Macdonald’s Relationship with Aboriginal Peoples,” 72.



"CHRISTIAN STATESMANSHIP."
Sir John: Indians starving? Oh, well, they're not "friends of Dewdney,"
 you know. I'll see that *you* don't come to want, though, Mr. Contractor.
 [Note: Edgar Dewdney was the Lieutenant-Governor of the North West Territories.]

Figure 6: A 1888 Bengough cartoon, "Starved by a 'Christian' Gov'", depicting Macdonald taking care of political allies while starving the Plains Indians | *Histoire sociale/Social History*

Despite Macdonald's deep ambivalence towards Indigenous peoples, any and all sympathy he held is intentionally omitted from his modern image. Macdonald is now commonly associated with his rationing policies towards the Plains Indians in the 1880s. Such policies, and the intentions behind them, are misunderstood and have sparked intense debate. On one side are scholars such as James Daschuk, author of perhaps the most damning account of Macdonald, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation and the Loss of Aboriginal Life*. On the other side, are scholars such as David Hall and Patrice Dutil who seek to present history as accurately as possible, detached from appeals to emotion. Daschuk argues that Macdonald intentionally employed a systematic policy of starvation towards Indigenous peoples in the Northwest that ignored treaty obligations to force a reliance on his government and speed up territorial

expansionist policies.⁸² This argument serves as a tool for the contemporary movement to demonize Macdonald as part of the immoral, flawed, and racist Canadian colonial project of state expansion, as it ties the contemporary disparities between Canadian society and Indigenous peoples directly to Macdonald, nearly 130 years after his death. *Clearing the Plains* personified many of the ills of Canadian society into Macdonald, and framed historians as intentionally covering up a horrible history.

The arguments put forth by Daschuk, a Kinesiology professor, and their reception by historians reflect a growing tension whereby historiography is divided between two dominating views. The first maintains a “traditional” and empirical approach and presents historical narratives as detached from emotion. The second, rapidly growing in popularity, stresses a “progressive” and revisionist approach, relying on appeals to emotion. Increasingly, the era of treaty-making in historiography has been tainted by examining it through the revisionist approach whereby government corruption, planned deception, gross negligence, and charges of genocide characterize Canada’s history. Such an approach grossly misinterprets the intention of the Canadian government, carelessly throws around loaded terms, ignores conditions that caused pragmatic political responses, and reflects an anti-Conservative bias as it ignores cultural and social conventions by placing the blame solely on Macdonald and the Conservative Government. This approach reflects the broader shift in historiography to present “progressive” accounts of history that are coloured by virtue signaling in attempts to appeal to political correctness. As a result, historical narratives are rewritten in the name of “inclusivity.” Genuine historical inquiry and scholarship are now being undermined as appeals to emotion dominate understandings of this era of Canada’s history.

⁸² Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains*, 127.

Studying the era of treaty-making in Canada is tainted through the debate of whether the treaties can be characterized by cultural misunderstandings or by the government's intention to commit acts of genocide and engage in planned starvation. Hall's 2015 *From Treaties to Reserves: The Federal Government and Native Peoples in Territorial Alberta, 1870-1905* offers a counter approach to Daschuk, arguing that the treaty-making process was characterized by cultural misunderstanding ultimately leading to two diverging interpretations of the treaties and their implementation. Hall argues that Indigenous peoples "believed that the treaty process was about not surrendering their lands, but sharing them" whereas the Canadian government saw the treaties' principal objective as acquiring full rights to the land and to "enable Indians to survive by transforming them... educating them, and preparing them for assimilation into the wider society," believing that Indigenous peoples had accepted and desired fundamental change.⁸³ He concedes that the government's treaty policy was highly politicized and characterized by "incompetence, corruption, inconsistency, and tight-fistedness,"⁸⁴ ultimately reflecting a pragmatic political response to treaty negotiations.

Hall reflects an increasingly contentious argument to make. He acknowledges that the Canadian government's treatment of its Indigenous population was a combination of benevolence, corruption, and pragmatic politics. However, this challenges the contemporary view of the treaty process that maintains that the government colonized, subordinated, and took advantage of a people who were facing *planned* mass disease, starvation, and death. Arguing against such a deeply troubling narrative is nearly impossible, and certainly controversial, to do.

⁸³ David J. Hall, *From Treaties to Reserves: The Federal Government and Native Peoples in Territorial Alberta, 1870-1905* (Toronto: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), 4.

⁸⁴ Hall, *From Treaties to Reserves*, 4.

Hall notes that “the government of the later nineteenth century thus has, in many accounts, become an irredeemable villain” which “distorts understanding of the government’s policy and actions.”⁸⁵ A strength of Hall’s work is his effort to understand government actions in their social context, detached from romantic hindsight. His work does not seek to elevate the Canadian government or to ignore their mismanagement of Indian policy. Rather, through utilizing Indigenous oral tradition, autobiographical memoirs, and government documents, Hall argues that the two sides failed to understand one another due to cultural differences. He notes that “both words and actions meant different things to each party” and “each side made many assumptions about the essence of human nature and good faith, and about what the other understood. In fact, they often did not understand each other at all.”⁸⁶

Hall does not support the narrative that the treaty process was led mainly by an evil Conservative government under Canada’s villain, Macdonald. Hall argues instead that Canada’s approach to Indigenous policy was shaped by legal precedent and past practice coupled with their understanding of Indigenous customary laws and traditional ways to settle intertribal disputes.⁸⁷ He discusses how the 1876 *Indian Act*, which provided the framework for the administration of Indigenous peoples in western Canada, was passed by the Liberal government. The treaties ultimately, then, were shaped by British legal conventions and understandings of land ownership, past treaty-making experiences, and broader assumptions about Canada’s role in developing the west. “Perhaps Indians thought the treaties were about sharing the land, but the government did not... Canadians believed that their Indian policy would be peaceful and more

⁸⁵ Hall, *From Treaties to Reserves*, 5.

⁸⁶ Hall, *From Treaties to Reserves*, 17, 22.

⁸⁷ Hall, *From Treaties to Reserves*, 42.

humane than the aggressive destructiveness of the Americas.”⁸⁸ Indigenous peoples, however, did not think they were selling their land and rather viewed the treaties as a way to ensure physical survival while maintaining their culture in changing circumstances.⁸⁹ Such drastically different cultural understandings and interpretations of the treaties are integral when examining intention and implementation. But such important distinctions are ignored as history is examined with the lens of presentism and molded to fit contemporary notions of “genocide.”

No work greater exemplifies the new, blatantly partisan revisionist approach to Canada’s history than Daschuk’s. He presents the Canadian government as racist with the Conservatives introducing “draconian policies” and abusing their power by using food as a means to subjugate a vulnerable population.⁹⁰ At the head of this scheme was a corrupt and cynical Macdonald who let the creation of the CPR guide all his policies. While Daschuk acknowledges that the Liberals engaged in Indigenous policy making, to Daschuk, this was a position of “relative ignorance” compared to “one of outright malevolence during the Macdonald regime. ‘Pacification’ of the plains Indians was an integral, if not always explicit, component of the Tory government’s program of development.”⁹¹ To Daschuk, Macdonald’s role as Superintendent General of Indian Affairs while holding the role of Prime Minister reflected his efforts to ensure the west would be ready for the incoming railway and wave of settlement, and furthered his intentional destruction of Canada’s plains peoples.⁹² The troubling part of Daschuk’s work is that his very interpretation of government policy rests in a partisan attack against Macdonald and his Conservative government. Despite a brief acknowledgement that the Liberal government criticized the

⁸⁸ Hall, *From Treaties to Reserves*, 54.

⁸⁹ Hall, *From Treaties to Reserves*, 55.

⁹⁰ Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains*, xxiv.

⁹¹ Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains*, 109.

⁹² Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains*, 109.

Conservative government for spending too much on its famine relief plan, Macdonald, yet again, faces the blame for not increasing expenditures.⁹³ How could he have increased relief spending without the support of the House? Daschuk's work does not include a nuanced examination of the understandings, values, perceptions, and attitudes of the broader Canadian public in the nineteenth century and lacks serious context as it seeks to present the policies of the nineteenth century Conservative government as directly connected to contemporary issues facing Indigenous populations.

Daschuk glazes over the uncomfortable reality about this era of policy: Macdonald was not solely to blame, and the Liberals under Mackenzie did even more harm to the Plains Indians than they are credited for. From 1877-1878, the last year of its mandate, the Mackenzie administration spent \$421, 504 on Indian affairs, a number which by the following year Macdonald increased by 16 per cent and continued to increase throughout his time in office, with spending on Indian Affairs growing 181 per cent to \$1, 183, 414 by 1882.⁹⁴ Indian Affairs, under Macdonald, had now constituted the third largest program expense of the Dominion. Additionally, Macdonald, while harshly criticized by the Liberals for providing too much assistance to the west, was consistently supported by Canadians at the polls. Voters in the west gave Macdonald strong political support until the time of his death as "they understood the government was doing the best it could under difficult circumstances, and that his opponents would have treated them worse had they formed government."⁹⁵ So, he and his handling of the

⁹³ Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains*, 122.

⁹⁴ Patrice Dutil, "Not Guilty: Sir John A. Macdonald & the Genocide Fetish," in *The Dorchester Review* 10 (2021):13.

⁹⁵ J.R. Miller, "In his time, the West appreciated Sir John A. Macdonald and backed him at the polls," *the National Post*, December 30, 2020, <https://nationalpost.com>

west had the broad and sustained support from Canadians, support that Daschuk overlooks as he attempts to make Macdonald Canada's grand villain.

Few books have been as influential and controversial in Canadian history as *Clearing the Plains*. To Daschuk history is clear: the government oppressively managed the Department of Indian Affairs, created a police force to act as agents of subjugation, and Macdonald effectively starved "uncooperative Indians onto reserves and into submission."⁹⁶ As a result, Daschuk seeks to tell the reader exactly what they should think, leaving no room for interpretation. By presenting the government as using food as a weapon to get Indigenous peoples to be subservient, Daschuk's work interrogates issues of "genocide." While he does not use the term once during his book,⁹⁷ the very nature of his argument makes this debate central to the reader. Daschuk makes little attempt to differentiate between the intention of the government and the outcome of their policies. As a result, Daschuk reveals tensions between word selection, as his work is often used as ammunition for the argument calling Canada's actions "genocidal" despite his intentional omission of the term. Historians must be careful in their word choice when describing what happened, as over-using a highly loaded term not only undermines nuanced discussions of debates, but also engages in word inflation. If genocide is applied in every colonial setting the power of the word will be undermined, and its meaning will be lost.⁹⁸ Thus, like in the work of Hall, historians must distinguish between intention versus outcome, to not

⁹⁶ Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains*, 127.

⁹⁷ He has, however, used the term in numerous newspaper articles including in: James Daschuk, "When Canada used hunger to clear the West", *The Globe and Mail*, 19 July 2013. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com>

⁹⁸ See: Benjamin Madley, "Re-examining the American Genocide Debate: Meaning, Historiography, and New Methods", *The American Historical Review* 120, 1 (2015): 98-139.

only understand this period of Canada's history but to ensure appropriate meanings and definitions of terms are maintained.

Patrice Dutil, political science professor turned-Macdonald defender launched fierce criticism of Daschuk. Dutil has become an outspoken advocate for preserving Macdonald's legacy. Professor in the Department of Politics and Public Administration at what was formerly Ryerson University (now renamed Toronto Metropolitan University in light of Egerton Ryerson's cancellation), Dutil has written and spoken extensively on the current debate surrounding Macdonald. In his 2021 article "Not Guilty: Sir John A. Macdonald & the Genocide Fetish," Dutil argues that Daschuk ignored other factors that contributed to the starvation of Plains Indians, including the influence of various epidemics that overtook the west in the 1870s-1880s, to frame the starvations as purely a result of Macdonald's "economic and cultural suppression."⁹⁹ Dutil further argues that Daschuk's work ignores the reality that Canada did not have the infrastructure to supply food and economic support to the Plains Indians and that Macdonald's government was heavily criticized for doing too much to help a "barbarist" group.¹⁰⁰ Macdonald explicitly stated "we cannot allow them to starve and we cannot make them white men. All we can do is endeavor to induce them to abandon their nomadic habits, and settle down, and cultivate the soil."¹⁰¹ Dutil criticizes Daschuk for over-utilizing published literature as his source base (and thus underutilizing letters drawn from the Macdonald Papers and annual reports of the Department of Indian Affairs), for creating "a false binary between the Indigenous nations and the rest of Canadians," and for trying to present policies towards the Plains Indians

⁹⁹ Dutil, "Not Guilty: Sir John A. Macdonald & the Genocide Fetish," 13.

¹⁰⁰ Dutil, "Not Guilty: Sir John A. Macdonald & the Genocide Fetish," 14

¹⁰¹ Dutil, "Not Guilty: Sir John A. Macdonald & the Genocide Fetish," 14.

as a newly uncovered history.¹⁰² As evidenced in Bengough's 1888 cartoon, *Starved by a 'Christian' Gov,* cartoons were published and widely circulated that depicted Macdonald's harsh policies towards the Plains Indians. Canadians were well aware of the plight of Indians in the North-west yet continued to politically support Macdonald.¹⁰³ However, this does not matter to Daschuk. Through seeking to present a direct line from the government's policies towards the Plains Indians in the 1880s to disparities they face today, Daschuk fails to account for several important realities: the government could not control and did not create the various epidemics that took the west by storm, and there was very little infrastructure in the 1880s that made shipping large quantities of fresh food to the west feasible. The fact is the famine on the plains in the 1880s was not deliberately set in motion. Not by Macdonald and not by anyone else in the Canadian government. While both the Liberal and the Conservative governments can certainly be criticized for not providing enough aid to stop famine, they cannot be charged with creating it.

Macdonald's open disdain towards starvation policy contradicts the image of Macdonald as intentionally and systematically starving the Plains Indians. However, the work of Daschuk succeeded in directing the public to view Macdonald as a murderous tyrant who can be blamed for many of the contemporary economic and social disparities between Indigenous Canadians and the rest of Canadian society. The reality is, Macdonald did not cause famine, he was relatively sympathetic towards the plights of Plains Indians, the majority of the west's treaties were created under the Liberal government, and there was little infrastructure in place to facilitate large amounts of aid to the plains.¹⁰⁴ The arguments made by Daschuk, however, are more comfortable for Canadians to hear. It offloads the blame solely onto Macdonald and the

¹⁰² Patrice Dutil, "Reputations: Not Guilty," *The Dorchester Review* 10 (2020): 10-11

¹⁰³ Dutil, "Reputations: Not Guilty," 11.

¹⁰⁴ See Hall, *From Treaties to Reserves*.

Conservative government rather than forcing Canadians to confront the uncomfortable reality that Canada's history was built upon widely shared opinions of assimilation, across all political parties. Comparatively, the empirical approach by Hall is far too challenging for Canadians to face as it forces a deeper understanding and debate of Canada's complex history. What must be understood is that during the treaty negotiation process, deception, negotiation, pressure, misunderstanding, and benevolence altogether characterize the intention of government actors. The government was willing to do what they perceived as necessary to maintain the well-being of Canada as a whole. Such an acknowledgement should not be dismissed under charges that it represents an older school of thought. The treaties cannot be examined in a polarized dichotomy whereby the villainous intentions of colonial actors are assumed, and the debate is closed. Nothing is settled in historical inquiry and history relies on debate to function, not perceived consensus that silences discussion.

Macdonald the *Racist*

In the discipline of history scholars are increasingly calling for deeper understandings of the past, understandings that are "potentially more sensitive to the requirements of generally accepted standards of historical criticism."¹⁰⁵ Pushing back against nationalist history, some scholars have called for an "anti-racist" history that "takes seriously the existence of racisms and asks questions about their roles in shaping institutions and experiences."¹⁰⁶ To these historians, racism does not fit within nationalist historical frameworks and thus nationalist histories do not present a rich historical account. This is undoubtedly a presentist perspective, with commitments "to

¹⁰⁵ Stanley, "Why I killed Canadian history," 79.

¹⁰⁶ Stanley, "Why I killed Canadian history," 79.

fighting racism in the world today” as the basis to some approaches to history.¹⁰⁷ This view has led to increased study of Macdonald’s treatment of the Chinese, and the “invention of Chinese and British difference.”¹⁰⁸

During the 1880s, Chinese immigration was integral to the completion of the CPR. Due to difficulties obtaining a work force in British Columbia to help construct the railway, the government began to hire Chinese laborers who were willing to work in poor conditions for very little pay.¹⁰⁹ Between 1881 and 1884, over 17,000 Chinese immigrants came to Canada under work contracts to build the railway, which intensified racism and fears of foreign labour in British Columbia.¹¹⁰ These fears seeped into federal politics, as debates surrounding the Chinese and their ability to assimilate in Canada garnered attention during the Parliamentary sessions of the 1880s. Macdonald is inextricably tied to the CPR as he devoted much of his career to ensuring its successful completion, which means he is inextricably tied to assimilatory policies towards the Chinese. To many Canadians and historians, Macdonald and the railway are synonymous terms. While initially this link was within the realm of patriotic nationalism, forging together a nation from sea to sea through a national railway, Macdonald’s treatment of the Chinese now fuels the image of Macdonald the racist. As discussed, by the standards of the day Macdonald was liberal on many matters of race. However, his attitudes towards outsiders were decidedly different as he made a sharp distinction between those he believed could assimilate and those he believed could not.¹¹¹ Due to his personal beliefs surrounding foreign assimilation,

¹⁰⁷ Stanley, “Why I killed Canadian history”, 81.

¹⁰⁸ Stanley, “Why I killed Canadian history”, 96.

¹⁰⁹ Peter W. Ward, *White Canada Forever: Popular Attitudes and Public Policy toward Orientals in British Columbia* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), 11.

¹¹⁰ Ward, *White Canada Forever*, 3.

¹¹¹ Gwyn, *Nation Maker, Sir John A. Macdonald*, 528.

the same *Franchise Act* that was generous towards Indigenous peoples became Canada's first implemented explicitly discriminatory, race-based legislation.¹¹² Undoubtedly, Macdonald's views of Canadian identity fueled his desire to both include and exclude certain groups from the Federal franchise. Macdonald's vision for Canada was one based on a hierarchy of races in which desired races would assimilate to a growing sense of Canadian identity, thus founding a "worthwhile civilization."¹¹³

The *Franchise Act* represented a Canadian first whereby certain Indigenous peoples could gain the franchise without losing their legal Indian status *and* was an international feat as Macdonald was the first federal leader in the world to attempt to extend the vote to certain women.¹¹⁴ However, the Act was blatantly racist towards the Chinese, and defined who did not fit into new understandings of Canadian citizenship. While Macdonald's views of citizenship were unique to Canada and were incredibly progressive for his time, he still maintained colonial understandings of race within his enfranchisement efforts, albeit slightly more inclusive ones, as he maintained traditional Anglo-masculine conceptualizations of citizenship through stressing the importance of property rights. However, Macdonald's strong advocacy of property qualifications could not triumph his racist attitudes towards the Chinese.

Debates over the legislation highlighted the ongoing struggle over federal-provincial rights, and whether the franchise should be inclusive or exclusive in both gendered and racial terms. Macdonald radically sought to enlarge the electorate with new groups of voters, yet his

¹¹² Gwyn, *Nation Maker*, Sir John A. Macdonald, 533.

¹¹³ Timothy J. Stanley, "The Aryan Character of the Future of British North America': Macdonald, Chinese Exclusion, and the Invention of Canadian White Supremacy," in *The John A. Macdonald Retrospective 2-Book Bundle: Macdonald at 200 / John A. Macdonald*, edited by Patrice Dutil, and Roger Hall (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2014), 406.

¹¹⁴ Gwyn, *Nation Maker*, 446.

progressivism had limits: any Chinese men residing in Canada were simply not to have the vote.¹¹⁵ Both the appointment of revising officers and the expansive definition of who could vote sparked intense debate in the House of Commons and accusations of corruption, partisanship, and gerrymandering. Nonetheless, following the Act's 1885 passage, Macdonald referred to it as "the greatest triumph of [his] life."¹¹⁶ On 4 May 1885, Macdonald proposed inserting the words "and excluding a Chinaman" after the inclusion of Indians. He felt confident that he would receive the support of the House and did not feel the need

to discuss, at any length, the reasons for this amendment. The Chinese are not like the Indians, sons of the soil. They come from a foreign country; they have no intent, as a people of making a docile of any portion of Canada; they come and work or trade, and when they are tired of it, they go away, taking with them their profits. They are, besides, natives of a country where representative institutions are unknown, and I think we cannot safely give them the elective franchise.¹¹⁷

He justified explicit disenfranchisement on the grounds that the Chinese were "aliens" who did not belong in Canada and were a different species from people of European origins.¹¹⁸ He stressed that if the Chinese were not excluded, Canada "would have a mongrel race ... [and] the Aryan character of the future of British America should be destroyed..."¹¹⁹ In his advocacy to exclude the Chinese based on racialized prejudices, a large portion of the Act reflected active attempts to legislate restrictive qualifiers to Canadian citizenship.

Macdonald's views coincided with the broader shift in the British Empire away from notions of essentialized differences around culture, to ones based on biological concepts used to

¹¹⁵ Strong-Boag, "'The Citizenship Debates'," 69.

¹¹⁶ Macdonald to Charles Tupper, 27 July 1885, in Donald G. Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: the Old Chieftain*, 47.

¹¹⁷ Debates, May 4, 1885, 1582.

¹¹⁸ Stanley, "'The Aryan Character of the Future of British North America'," 393.

¹¹⁹ Debates, May 4, 1885, 1589.

justify European superiority.¹²⁰ In the 1880s Canada experienced westward expansion, completion of the CPR, and the suppression of the North-west Rebellion. Within this context, Macdonald injected racism based on alleged biological differences, or “scientific racism” into the Canadian state federally, organizing race as a political principle.¹²¹ His initial proposal to disenfranchise the Chinese through amending the clause defining a “person” was challenged by the Liberal opposition on the grounds that the Chinese could be economically productive, property-holding men. However, Macdonald stressed cultural differences as

The Chinese are foreigners... [W]e know that when the Chinaman comes here he intends to return to his own country; he does not bring his family with him; he is a stranger, a sojourner in a strange land, for his own purposes for a while; he has no common interest with us... the Chinese has no British instincts or British feelings or aspirations and therefore ought not to have a vote.¹²²

These views echoed arguments made by British Columbia House members, who fiercely advocated for Chinese exclusion. Macdonald’s amendment to introduce Chinese exclusion was similar to what had been discussed and implemented in British Columbia, where multiple pieces of legislation discriminated against “Chinamen.”¹²³ The uniqueness of Macdonald’s proposed legislation, however, was both that it was at the federal level and that it made appeals to biological arguments of race. To Macdonald, the Chinese race was simply too different from white European races to be considered citizens.

Liberal opposition persisted. The challenge, however, is judging whether the Liberal opposition was based on genuine desires for more expansive definitions of citizenship or if it was merely out of the pragmatic parliamentary convention of being the official opposition.

¹²⁰ Stanley, “‘The Aryan Character of the Future of British North America’,” 394.

¹²¹ Stanley, “‘The Aryan Character of the Future of British North America’,” 394.

¹²² Debates, May 4, 1885, 1582.

¹²³ Stanley, “‘The Aryan Character of the Future of British North America’,” 400.

Nonetheless, opposing voices sparked intense pushback from Macdonald, crystalizing his ideas surrounding restriction. In response to a question concerning whether naturalized “Chinamen” ceased to be “Chinamen” and instead become British subjects¹²⁴ Macdonald argued that

if they came in great numbers and settled on the Pacific coast they might control the vote of that whole Province, and they would send Chinese representatives to sit here, who would represent Chinese eccentricities, Chinese immorality, Asiatic principles altogether opposite to our wishes; and, in the even balance of parties, they might enforce those Asiatic principles, those immoralities ... the eccentricities which are abhorrent to the Aryan race and Aryan principles, on this House.¹²⁵

He went even further to warn that “the Aryan character of the future of British North America” was at risk.¹²⁶ Beyond an expression of anti-Chinese sentiments, his statements reflected the kind of Canada he desired, and whom he saw as proper Canadian citizens. Through racializing the Chinese, he racialized Canadians, and he appealed to anti-Chinese fears evident within Canada.

Macdonald’s Aryan vision for Canada and his rigid definitions of Canadian citizenship reflect very radical and racialized prejudices. However, as the debates persisted, the reaction of the House of Commons to Macdonald’s sentiments was largely muted, as such opinions were “clearly in the majority.”¹²⁷ While this racist discourse was not unique to Macdonald or the House, Macdonald was the only member of the House and Senate during this era to refer to Canada as an “Aryan” country.¹²⁸ Macdonald himself saw the potential prejudice in his views and in 1887, admitted “on the whole, it is considered not advantageous to the country that the Chinese should come and settle in Canada, producing a mongrel race, and interfering very much with white labor in Canada. That may be right, or it may be wrong; it may be prejudice or

¹²⁴ Debates, May 4, 1885, 1582.

¹²⁵ Debates, May 4, 1885, 1588.

¹²⁶ Debates, May 4, 1885, 1589.

¹²⁷ Strong-Boag, “The Citizenship Debates,” 88.

¹²⁸ Debates, May 12, 1882, 1477.

otherwise; but the prejudice is near universal.”¹²⁹ Despite his awareness that he may hold prejudice, he nevertheless maintained his claims that the Chinese were biologically incompatible with Anglo-Europeans. To do so, he relied on an impermeable distinction between the two populations of Indian and Chinese arguing that “Indians... are Canadians and British subjects; and therefore, if they have the property qualification, I think they ought to be treated as other British subjects. The Chinese are foreigners. ... [with] no British instincts or British feelings or aspirations”¹³⁰ His comments highlighted that the First Nations were in a different position from Chinese people due to their perceived ability to conform to “Canadian character” and thus could be included within Canadian state formation. By stressing the biological differences of the Chinese, Macdonald sought to ensure that the Chinese could never become Canadian.¹³¹

The House ultimately reflected similar attitudes to Macdonald and expressed significantly less sympathy for the Chinese than for the First Nations. The vote to exclude them was passed, and the exclusion initially written as “Chinaman to designate a race” was deliberately expanded on to read “excluding a person of the Mongolian or Chinese race.”¹³² By the passage of the *Franchise Act*, both Macdonald and his contemporaries successfully demonstrated that Canadian citizenship could be restricted, using standards placed on men of European origin to define the preferred image of a citizen. The clause that explicitly disenfranchised the Chinese made biologically-defined “race” into the main criterion for deciding who could be Canadian.¹³³ While the 1885 debates reflect that “two competing visions of what Canada should be” existed – one that was to be an exclusive domain of “the white man” and the other as a colour and ethnicity-

¹²⁹ Debates, May 31, 1887, 642.

¹³⁰ Debates, May 4, 1885, 1582.

¹³¹ Stanley, “‘The Aryan Character of the Future of British North America’,” 416.

¹³² Debates, May 4, 1885, 158.

¹³³ Stanley, “‘The Aryan Character of the Future of British North America’,” 417.

blind state that could embody multicultural British citizenship and equality before the law for all citizens – racist sentiments won the day and racialized Chinese people would not have the right to vote throughout the country until 1947,¹³⁴ over 50 years after Macdonald's death.

The *Franchise Act's* conceptualization, drafting, debating, and subsequent revision were all highly influenced by Macdonald's politics, a "style and approach... largely his own."¹³⁵

However, it was passed with wide support of the House. Thus, as was the case with Residential school policy, Macdonald did not act alone or tyrannically. Displaying a confident and forward-thinking mentality, Macdonald's orchestration of the franchise legislation reflected mastery of the problems of party and his ability to purposefully exercise power in Canadian politics.¹³⁶ The Bill, the debates it aroused, and the final Act are instructive about the ways that citizenship was constructed both in Canada and to Macdonald. It reflected who could be integrated, or excluded from Canadian citizenship, a citizenship that maintained ideas of a masculinist settler state.¹³⁷

What emerged was legislation that expanded the voting base, while reflecting discriminatory and exclusionary conceptualizations of race. The exclusion of the Chinese reflects that Macdonald's progressive ideas regarding Canadian citizenship only went so far. Displaying how intentional racism could impact policy, the exclusion reflects the capabilities of the state to define citizenship in terms of Anglo-centric understandings of belonging, voting rights, political activity, and property. However, it must be noted that Canadians desired harsh measures towards the Chinese, harsher than the 1885 implementation of a fifty-dollar head tax, as the Chinese were viewed as undercutting Canadian labour and being unassimilable to the Canadian culture.¹³⁸ This

¹³⁴ Stanley, "'The Aryan Character of the Future of British North America'," 417-418.

¹³⁵ Gordon, "John A. Macdonald's Greatest Triumph," 22.

¹³⁶ Gordon, "John A. Macdonald's Greatest Triumph," 27.

¹³⁷ Strong-Boag, "'The Citizenship Debates'," 76.

¹³⁸ Gwyn, *Nation Maker*, 533.

does not diminish the reality that Macdonald, and his contemporaries, enacted Canada's first-ever explicit discriminatory legislation,¹³⁹ and should be criticized for it, but criticized within the context of racial understandings within the British Empire and social conventions of the time.

Challenging the New “Macdonald”

It would appear that Macdonald's modern image is beyond repair. While the degradation of his image is immense, there is strong pushback. Those who are critical of the new image of Macdonald the villain are cautious, as critical and complex ideas are not easily marketable to the broader public who often cannot historically contextualize nuanced issues. Counterarguments to the defamation of Macdonald must navigate charges of racism, sexism, and ageism, as accounts that attempt to critically study Macdonald and reconcile his downfalls with his accomplishments are often silenced and ostracised from the discussion. Nevertheless, attempts are being made to recentre an accurate image of Macdonald in light of such charges. While the majority of this discourse is situated within the world of professional academia, some public portrayals have attempted to maintain a positive portrayal of Macdonald.

Historical writing has shifted away from nationalist narratives, however television histories have not. The CBC, acting as Canada's national television network, “aims to serve the public good” through cementing popular ideas about history “central to the naturalization of nations and nationalist as a way to think about the world.”¹⁴⁰ In 2001 a 17-episode documentary, *Canada: A People's History* sought to present Canadian history in a dramatic and romantic light. Acting as a vehicle to build “Canadian awareness and identity through innovative, nation-

¹³⁹ Gwyn, *Nation Maker*, 532.

¹⁴⁰ Monica MacDonald, *Recasting history: How CBC Television Has Shaped Canada's Past* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019), 9.

binding programming” the program aligned with the CBC’s nation-building mandate through television.¹⁴¹ Undertaking the difficult project of presenting the entirety of Canada’s history, the well-received program maintained a relatively fair portrayal of Macdonald. Episode eight, *The Great Enterprise*, presents Macdonald as highly driven, bold, humorous, and calculated. While he may have had a penchant for drinking, he is portrayed as using this flaw to his advantage. This episode shows him persuading politicians at the Charlottetown Conference to agree to Confederation through loosening them up with alcohol.¹⁴² Episode nine, *From Sea to Sea*, portrays Macdonald as authoritative and firm while struggling with his mental health and dealing with the murder of Darcy McGee and the death of George-Etienne Cartier.¹⁴³ Presenting Macdonald’s political decisions as highly impacted by the horrible circumstances around him humanized him as it balanced all he worked up against with all he managed to achieve. This episode focuses on the Pacific Scandal, however, presents Macdonald’s resignation as honourable and necessary. Macdonald was not portrayed in a purely positive light for the entire series, however. Episode 10, *Taking the West*, presents Macdonald as blinded by his ambition to build a national railway. In this episode he is not only anti-French but also anti-Metis.¹⁴⁴ Relying on the political cartoons of Bengough and the motif of the railway, Macdonald is presented as carelessly ignoring the grievances of the Metis at Red River and throwing millions of dollars away to put down a rebellion that could have been avoided.¹⁴⁵ Here, Macdonald’s often-cited “let

¹⁴¹ MacDonald, *Recasting history*, 9.

¹⁴² Mark Starowicz (Producer), “Episode 8: The Great Enterprise 1850-1867,” *Canada: A People’s History* (2001) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQjVm5VTOMU>

¹⁴³ Mark Starowicz (Producer), “Episode 9: From Sea to Sea,” *Canada: A People’s History* (2001) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RvJF1NtJ8hg>

¹⁴⁴ Mark Starowicz (Producer), “Episode 10: Taking the West,” *Canada: A People’s History* (2001) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DhjCsyBr9Q>

¹⁴⁵ Starowicz, “Episode 10: Taking the West.”

every dog in Quebec bark in his favour” quote is used to present Macdonald as villainous and anti-French, and Riel is ultimately accredited with helping Macdonald complete his railway.¹⁴⁶ However, altogether the series was a sensationalized, but relatively fair account of Macdonald and succeeded in presenting Canadian history to Canadians through television.

A seminal biographical work on Macdonald had not been completed since the 1955 work of Creighton. But, with this renewed interest in Macdonald, journalist and historian Richard Gwyn published his two-volume biography, *John A: The Man Who Made Us: The Life and Times of John A. Macdonald* and *Nation Maker: Sir John A. Macdonald: His Life, Our Times*, in 2008 and 2012. In the epilogue of Volume One, Gwyn observes that he wrote the biography in efforts to make Canadian history alive and relevant again while bringing Macdonald back into the minds of Canadians.¹⁴⁷ The biographies’ sought to reintroduce an accurate image of Macdonald back into the public memory of Canadians. This image that maintained Macdonald was “among all the ablest nineteenth-century democratic leaders” and was “one of the most skilled and most experienced” politicians, utilizing his exceptional determination to pursue both Canada’s and his own interests.¹⁴⁸ The biographies’ stress Macdonald’s witty nature, his jaunty quips, and his elegant nonchalance, despite his countless personal struggles.¹⁴⁹

Gwyn, an outspoken advocate for the remembrance of Macdonald argues that “it is beyond doubt that Macdonald was the most important of all our prime ministers ... [Macdonald] was irreplicable.”¹⁵⁰ Volume Two quickly became a national best-seller, winning numerous awards and receiving high praise. Such accolades reflect that Canadians crave to learn about

¹⁴⁶ Starowicz, “Episode 10: Taking the West.”

¹⁴⁷ Gwyn, *John A: The Man Who Made Us*, epilogue.

¹⁴⁸ Gwyn, “Nation Maker,” 4.

¹⁴⁹ Gwyn, “Nation Maker,” 4.

¹⁵⁰ Gwyn, “Rediscovering Macdonald,” 437.

their history. Gwyn's work presents one of the best accounts of how Macdonald should be remembered contemporarily, as he does not shy away from presenting Macdonald as corrupt, opportunistic, arrogantly optimistic, and at times blinded by personal ambition, while still managing to be a great statesman. Written to make "Canadian history alive and relevant again,"¹⁵¹ Gwyn's biography succeeded. He echoes the argument of many contemporary supporters of Macdonald the nation-maker, as "had there been no Macdonald, there almost certainly would be today no Canada. In a great many ways, what Canadians have become began with him. He, a nation-maker, made us."¹⁵² To Gwyn, the current issue with Macdonald's image is an issue of historians abandoning Macdonald and not telling Canadians their full history.¹⁵³



Figure 7: A youthful, colourful Macdonald contrasted with a serious and conventional George Brown served the basis of the two statesmen's portrayals in the 2011 film *John A. Birth of a Country* | *Macleans*.

Gwyn's recentering of Macdonald inspired such a renewed interest in Macdonald that a 2011 feature film, *John A: Birth of a Country*, based its screenplay on his book. The film chronicles the personal ambitions, pragmatic politics, vendettas, and rivalries that led to

¹⁵¹ Gwyn, *John A: The Man Who Made Us*, 596.

¹⁵² Gwyn, *John A: The Man Who Made Us*, 592.

¹⁵³ Gwyn, "Rediscovering Macdonald," 449.

Canada's Confederation. The film begins by presenting a young, spry, and charismatic Macdonald whose unrelenting over-the-top approach contradicted the low energy and respectable nature of British colonial politics.¹⁵⁴ The film relies on physical presentations of Macdonald as a unique man who did not fit into the group of politicians around him, as shown by his odd fashion sense, unkempt hair, and naked face. A political opportunist and highly skilled debater, the film portrays Macdonald's downfalls including his deeply personal conflict with Grit leader George Brown. It does not shy away from exploring Macdonald's tendency to drink, including multiple scenes of him arriving to the House of Commons drunk. However, it ultimately maintains Macdonald's perseverance and ability to transcend both personal and political turmoil, and his ability to convince all dissenting voices to form the Grand Coalition of 1864. It ends on a patriotic note with Macdonald exclaiming "just as we have formed together one grand coalition, we will form together one grand nation."¹⁵⁵

The highly dramatized, fast-paced, and humorous film, unlike Canadian docudrama's made prior, presents this era of politics as interesting and action-packed, marking a clear shift from boring and dated portrayals. The film only covers up to 1864, however, and its proposed sequel was never picked up. In the era of Macdonald's decline it is hard to imagine that a sequel will ever be made. Portrayals of Macdonald through film have been scarce following *John A: Birth of a Country*.¹⁵⁶ A 2014 "Heritage Minute," *Sir John A. Macdonald*, focuses on

¹⁵⁴ Jerry Ciccoritti, (Director) *John A: Birth of a Country*, CBC drama special (2011) <https://curio.ca/en/video/john-a-birth-of-a-country-804/>

¹⁵⁵ Ciccoritti, *John A: Birth of a Country*.

¹⁵⁶ In 2017 the CBC produced a ten-episode series, *Canada: The Story of Us*. Macdonald appears briefly, in one episode, but is presented largely through his desire for a national railway, preoccupied with such a dream, with little mention of his policy and life outside of the railway. See: Bristow Global Media (production company), "Expansion (1858-1899)" in *Canada: The Story of Us*, CBC Television: 2017.

Macdonald's vision for Confederation whilst en route to the Charlottetown Conference of 1864. It depicts Macdonald set on "winning" the talks and bribing fellow delegates with liquor.¹⁵⁷ A relatively simplistic portrayal of Macdonald, no other Prime Minister has received a "Heritage Minute," and no other Father of Confederation, except for Cartier, has received one. However, as discussed below, even this 60-second portrayal of Macdonald has faced controversy. As Macdonald's image remains stigmatized it seems easier to not even engage with the question of Macdonald's legacy, unless he is cast as a clear villain, than it is to present him in a nuanced light. However, there is public desire for commemorating history, which has made Macdonald's image a very public problem.

Canadians crave commemoration. With the establishment of the Canadian Register of Historic Places (CRHP) in 2001, heritage designation, conservation, and recognition of sites of historic importance has increased. There are currently thirty-three sites tied to Macdonald listed on the Canadian Register of Historic Places, including his Ontario gravesite, his Earnscliffe Ottawa home, his summer residence at Riviere-du-Loup, and his Bellevue Kingston home.¹⁵⁸ Denoting heritage value to a particular site does not inherently assert veneration, but it does imply a recognition that the history of that site is important, deserves to be remembered, and should be commemorated. In March 2002, *Sir John A. Macdonald Day* was established, occurring every 11 January on his birthday to "teach young people about our first Prime Minister

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XAxrNei0d4&list=PLJyG4btas2dkKZXp5fxgeGWmbakN-KfM6&index=2>

¹⁵⁷ Historica Canada, "Sir John A. Macdonald," as part of *Heritage Minutes* (2014)

<https://historicacanada.ca>

¹⁵⁸ Canadian Register of Historic Places, "Sir John A. Macdonald search results," in *Canada's Historic Places* database, accessed February 1, 2023, <https://historicplaces.ca>

and the founding of our country.”¹⁵⁹ The holiday is not acknowledged anymore. In 2015 the City of Kingston threw a Bicentennial commemorative weekend event for Macdonald’s 200th-birthday, a birthday which subsequently has not been celebrated since 2016. The celebration included a new Bicentennial logo that highlighted the close relationship between Macdonald and his hometown of Kingston, a commemorative weekend, an update of tourism signage to promote Kingston as the first capital of the Dominion of Canada and as the hometown of Macdonald, the redevelopment of Macdonald’s City Park monument, including the installation of a plaque sharing information about his life and legacy, a digitized version of the “in Sir John A.’s Footsteps” walking tour, and a “Sir John A. Macdonald’s Kingston” exhibition at City Hall.¹⁶⁰

Despite efforts to commemorate Macdonald’s legacy, an irreconcilable duality of the image of Macdonald emerged beginning in the 1970s and continues to govern modern understandings of Macdonald today. It maintains that Macdonald was a racist drunk who must be cast aside from Canada’s history, omitted as a Father of Confederation, and given no credit for the good national policies that were developed in the late-nineteenth century, yet receive all the blame for creating the controversial policies. Such a polarizing debate casts those who oppose recognizing Macdonald’s accomplishments as morally superior and on the “right” side of Canadian history, reflecting the true Canadian values of tolerance, liberalism, and acceptance. Those in support of Macdonald are often dismissed and silenced under the charges of being old,

¹⁵⁹ Government of Canada, “Sir John A. Macdonald Day, January 11,” *Important and Commemorative days* database on the Government of Canada’s website, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/important-commemorative-days/sir-john-macdonald-day.html>

¹⁶⁰ The City of Kingston, “Sir John A. Bicentennial,” *Culture, History & Art* on the City of Kingston’s website (2015), accessed March 5, 2021, <https://cityofkingston.ca>

racist, white men who are intolerant and use nationalistic histories to glorify a genocidal tyrant.

This debate is now highly evident in the emotionally charged battleground of public monuments.

Chapter Three:

Decapitating Canadian History



Figure 8: The head of Montreal's Macdonald statue lies separated from its body after being pulled down during a "peaceful" demonstration on 29 August 2020. Pat Hickey | Montreal Gazette.

Debating Macdonald's legacy has not stayed within the confines of academic history. It has rapidly spread into the public and is an issue that impacts every Canadian. Macdonald's detractors have intensified their criticism; statues of him are forcibly torn down, national historic sites associated with him are vandalized, anyone who dares defend him risks losing their career and "cancellation," and even the very celebration of Canada Day is cast as outdated, racist, and colonial. Canada, and its history, are no longer respected. Macdonald's name and image are being stripped from every facet of the public sphere with frequent news emerging of yet another way the woke mobs have found to cancel Macdonald and Canada alike. Now, Macdonald is simply all of his shortcomings, his flaws outweighing everything he did for Canada. Even sharing facts about the accomplishments of Macdonald is becoming too much. By refusing to

consider accurate history, no matter how uncomfortable the realities may be, the treatment of Macdonald in Canada is wrong as it is both untrue and unjust.¹

The Legacy of Macdonald as a Monument to Colonialism

An appalling image dominated Canadian headlines on 29 August 2020: the decapitated head of Macdonald lying on the pavement, separated from its monument, pulled during a demonstration

by the Coalition for Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) Liberation in Montreal.

The demonstration, beginning as a “peaceful” march advocating for the reduction to police

funding, quickly turned its sights onto vandalizing the Macdonald monument, a statue which

they argued celebrated a “European colonizer.”² There is no greater, and more deplorable, way to

disrespect the history of Canada than chopping off the heads of its founders. While a shocking

incident, such vandalism is becoming all too common in Canada as calls to remove any and all

commemorations to controversial figures dominates public dialogue. Unfortunately for

Macdonald, he is currently facing the full rage of this mob. One of the original five monuments

to Macdonald, the 70-foot-high Montreal *Macdonald Monument*, unveiled on 6 June 1895,

presented a stoic Macdonald looking to the North-west under the canopy of the industrialized

and agriculturalized trades practiced in the Dominion of Canada, with seven children

symbolizing the seven provinces that made up Canada in 1895. The statue had faced many

controversies, including a 1992 decapitation, and numerous vandalisms of paint and carvings.

However, the 2020 toppling proved to be its breaking point, as it has not been repaired nor

reinstalled yet and likely will not be. Removal advocates have called for the city to “distance

¹ David Frum, “The Fight Over Canada’s Founding Prime Minister,” *The Atlantic*, June 21, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com>

² Pat Hickey, “John A. Macdonald loses his head as protestors topple statue,” *The Chronicle Herald*, August 29, 2020, <https://thechronicleherald.ca>

itself from the policies of assimilation and genocide against Indigenous peoples that were championed by... Macdonald.”³ On a 2020 petition calling for the removal of “15 racist statues in Canada,” Macdonald’s statues took up nine of the spots.⁴ The narrative has been solidified that Macdonald is Canada’s leading racist and Canada’s problematic past can be purged once his statues are removed, even if violent force is necessary.

This rhetoric is poor history and is actively distorting of the historical record. It views the past through the lens of morality and present-day values and employs revisionist history to counteract histories deemed “nationalistic.” This movement sees Canadian history as a series of mistakes, failures, and racist policies, and therefore not worthy of remembrance under any guise of nationalism. National pride is increasingly reduced to historical “baggage,” with support for Macdonald dismissed as shameful patriotism.⁵ Presenting the entire historical narrative in a nuanced way is not simply pro-Canadian rhetoric. Denoting “nationalist” history in Canada as poor history reflects a grave misunderstanding of Canada’s history. In efforts to cancel Macdonald, however, his image has become so separated from the image of the Canadian state, that many of the downfalls and blemishes of Canadian history have been vested into him and public commemorations of him are dismissed as nationalistic rhetoric.

Educational institutes sharing Macdonald’s namesake have sought to rid their halls of the memory of Macdonald. On 12 November 2020, “Sir John A. Macdonald High School” in Nova

³ “Montreal committee says toppled statue of John A. Macdonald should not be put back,” *National Post*, November 21, 2022, <https://nationalpost.com/>

⁴ Jody Brimacombe, “15 racist statues in Canada that people want removed,” *Freshdaily*, June 12, 2020, <https://www.freshdaily.ca/news/2020/06/racist-statues-in-canada/>

⁵ Jerry Bannister, “Debating (Canadian) Presentism: Narrative, Nation, and Macdonald in 2021,” *Early Canadian History* (2021) <https://earlycanadianhistory.ca>

Scotia announced it would be renamed to foster an “inclusive environment.”⁶ On 19 October 2020, Queen’s University decided to remove Macdonald’s name from their law school building due to the name sending “a conflicting message that interferes with the values and aspirations of the current law school and Queen’s community.”⁷ Despite Macdonald’s achievements as a highly-skilled lawyer playing a fundamental role in drafting one of Canada’s most prominent legalistic achievements, *The British North America Act 1867*, a Canadian law school will not even recognize his legacy. Even more disturbing is the “Sir John A. MacDonald Fact Sheet” published by the Social Healing and Reconciliatory Education (SHARE) research group at Queen’s. Misspelling Macdonald’s name in its very title, the research behind the document is questionable at best and every time his name is mentioned it is spelled differently. The four-page document presents important “facts” for Canadians to know about Macdonald, all of which are under the heading of “racism and oppression committed by Sir John A. Macdonald,” making no mention of the work he did to forge together the Canadian nation, “quotes by Sir John A. MacDonald” which do not show any quotes outside of his damning statements on Indigenous peoples, and the “reaction white settlers” can have to “MacDonald.”⁸ If Queen’s sought to rid their institute of their version of “MacDonald,” then it is welcomed because clearly it is not an accurate one. More recently, in March 2022 *Sir John A. Macdonald Public School* in Brampton was renamed to *Nibi Emosaawdang* to reflect Ontario’s School Board’s “commitments to anti-

⁶ CBC News, “Sir John A. Macdonald High School to be renamed to reflect inclusivity,” *CBC News*, November 12, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca>

⁷ Laura Glowacki, “Queen’s University to remove Sir John A. Macdonald’s name from law school building,” *CBC News*, October 19, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca>

⁸ Social Healing and Reconciliatory Education (SHARE) research group, “Sir John A. MacDonald Fact Sheet,” *Queen’s Faculty of Education* (2020): 1-4. <https://educ.queensu.ca/sites/webpublish.queensu.ca.educwww/files/files/JAM%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>

colonialism, anti-racism, [and] anti-oppression.”⁹ Pickering similarly renamed their Macdonald school to Josephine Mandamin.¹⁰ Now, *Sir John A. Macdonald School* in Calgary is under question. Following calls for removal which apparently came entirely from the mind of a 12-year-old, the Calgary Board of Education announced in 2022 that a name review committee for the school would be created to investigate the “complex history attached to the name.”¹¹

Decisions to rename institutes that do not align with the “values” of Macdonald, despite such institutes owing their very existence to Macdonald are embedded in hypocrisy. No renaming initiative is as hypocritical as the 2018 decision to rename the “Sir John’s Public House” pub in Kingston to “Public House.” The pub, operating as a hot tourist spot in Kingston, is housed in Macdonald’s 1849-1860 law office.¹² The very appeal of the pub, its historical significance and ties to Macdonald, has been removed along with any external iconography including his image on the door and signage demarcating the building as “Sir John A. Macdonald’s Law Office.” Done to be “more inclusive... and welcoming to all Canadians,”¹³ changing the name of a building with direct ties to Macdonald will not attract any more Canadians who already felt alienated by its name and it will not remove the historical ties of the building to Macdonald. If one is not comfortable dining in an establishment named after Macdonald, it is unlikely that they would want to dine in the very building that furthered much of his political career. Keeping the pub’s namesake would have appeased both sides of the present

⁹ Tristin Hopper, “As another school takes down Sir John’s A’s name, Canadians don’t support ‘rewriting’ history,” *National Post*, March 21, 2022, <https://nationalpost.com>

¹⁰ Hopper, “As another school takes down Sir John’s A’s name, Canadians don’t support ‘rewriting’ history.”

¹¹ Taylor Simmons, “As CBE explores renaming Sir John A. Macdonald School, historian details former PM’s ‘ruthless’ history,” *CBC News*, May 3, 2022, <https://cbcnews.ca>

¹² Tamar Harris, “Kingston pub changes name to remove reference to Sir John A. Macdonald,” *Toronto Star*, January 9, 2018, <https://thestar.com>

¹³ Harris, “Kingston pub changes name to remove reference to Sir John A. Macdonald.”

debate, as it would have maintained the public awareness of the historical significance of the building, and it would have served the negative image of Macdonald, as what better way to solidify the image of Macdonald the drunk than to have his name decorating a Scottish pub?

Beyond renaming institutions, it seems that everything that commemorates Macdonald is now under fire. The Johnson and Waite *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* Macdonald biography has been slapped with a red note stating, “a revised biography, which includes references to Residential schools and related matters, is forthcoming.”¹⁴ Interesting, as the biography already thoroughly and fairly presents Macdonald’s role in creating Residential schools, his harsh policies towards the Plains Indians, and his treatment of Riel. What else can they possibly add to the narrative, other than a politically correct, historically incorrect, appeal to emotion? Macdonald’s 2014 “Heritage Minute” has since been made private on *Historica Canada*—an action that they will not offer any explanation on, despite numerous attempts to seek clarity.¹⁵ Since 2021 Macdonald’s biography has been erased entirely from his “Historic Person” designation on Parks Canada’s *Directory of Federal Heritage Designations*. The only information on his page that remains is simply a declaration that “this designation has been identified for review.”¹⁶ Additionally, on the Parks Canada general webpage on “National historic persons” Macdonald cannot even be found. He can only be found buried within the directory, not via search. It seems that not only can Macdonald no longer be discussed, but he must be hidden away, out of sight, from Canadians.

¹⁴ “Sir John A. Macdonald,” 1.

¹⁵ I’ve reached out to Historica Canada via email multiple times, only to be ignored. Yet, when I inquire about any other topic, I get a quick response.

¹⁶ Parks Canada, “Macdonald, Sir John A. National Historic Person,” *Parks Canada Directory of Federal Heritage Designations*, https://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/dfhd/page_nhs_eng.aspx?id=1663

The most alarming public displays against the memory of Macdonald is seen through the treatment of statues commemorating him. Between 2020-2022, six Macdonald statues have been removed. As a result, only two Macdonald statues, his statue in Toronto and his statue in Ottawa, remain. However, his Toronto statue can hardly be considered as standing, as while it may not be torn down as of yet, it remains hidden away behind wooden planks and burlap. It is only a matter of time until the planks come down and we are left with an empty podium. Canadians have always held an intense need to commemorate and remember history, however now the questions of why, when, where, and for whom is the past meaningful are no longer a consideration as present-day sensitivities and cancel culture spearheaded by a loud minority outweighs historical context and significance. “Macdonald monuments across Canada were erected out of deep and deserved respect for his accomplishments”¹⁷ however in 2023, the truth no longer matters.



Figure 9: Unable to even rest in peace, Macdonald’s gravestone was vandalized with red paint in 2020. It was subsequently vandalized in 2021, because once was not enough for his critics to display their “tolerance.” | *Global News*.

¹⁷ Dutil, “Reputations: Not Guilty”, 17.

Kingston City Council voted to remove Macdonald's publicly funded *City Park Statue* in June 2021.¹⁸ Upon removing it, there was *peaceful* protest (unlike the highly violent protest that characterizes Macdonald's removal) by two veterans carrying Canadian flags. They lamented that "we're a young country with not too many national monuments and this is one that looms large" and "it's a part of me that they're tearing down."¹⁹ While city council claimed the statue would be relocated to Cataraqui cemetery where Macdonald is buried, nearly two years later it lays in storage out of the eyes of Canadians. However, perhaps for now that is for the best as even Macdonald's gravesite, one of the most sacred ways to memorialize a person, is not safe from deplorable acts of vandalism. Around Canada Day in 2021, his gravestone was doused in red paint and the words "for all the pain you cause, burn in hell" on its nearby plaque.²⁰ Interestingly, the images of this vandalism have been scrubbed from the internet quickly after their circulation and are now no longer accessible to the public. Nothing says "tolerance" like desecrating a gravesite. Those who seek to cancel Macdonald will stop at no lengths to do so, committing even the most unforgiveable acts of vandalism to achieve their goal.

Macdonald's Hamilton statue, which amassed one of the largest unveiling ceremonies in 1893 with over 20,000 attendees, was toppled in 2021.²¹ While Hamilton's mayor, Fred Eisenberger, has called for the reinstallation of the statue with added context of Macdonald's role in creating Residential schools, the statue, much like Kingston's, remains in hiding.²² The

¹⁸ "Sir John A. Macdonald statue moved from Kingston, Ont., park," *CBC News*, June 18, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/>

¹⁹ "Sir John A. Macdonald statue moved from Kingston, Ont., park."

²⁰ Alexandra Mazur, "Sir John A. Macdonald's gravesite in Kingston, Ont., vandalized," *Global News*, July 6, 2021, <https://globalnews.ca/>

²¹ Bobby Hristova, "Hamilton mayor wants John A. Macdonald statue reinstalled with residential school context," *CBC News*, April 29, 2022, <https://cbcnews.ca>

²² Hristova, "Hamilton mayor wants John A. Macdonald statue reinstalled with residential school context."

recently unveiled 2015 statue of Macdonald, *Holding Court*, in Picton was removed in 2021 where the statue now lays in storage awaiting its sentencing.²³ Charlottetown's Macdonald statue, a statue where one could go sit next to Macdonald and have a conversation with the disgraced Prime Minister, was removed in May 2021 despite initial acceptance of recommendations from local First Nations groups that the statue could remain public so long as changes were made. These recommendations included the addition of an Indigenous figure to the bench so that it could not be a new used for photo opportunities, a plaque detailing his contributions to Residential schools, and consultation from a Mi'kmaw artist.²⁴ Interesting how city council decided to go against the wishes of local Indigenous groups, during a process that is supposedly being undertaken to further reconciliation and incorporate Indigenous voices.



Figure 10: Far more disturbing than Macdonald's face, Toronto's Macdonald statue is boarded up in "temporary" scaffolding, where it has sat since 2020 | *Toronto Sun*.

²³ "Fate of Sir John A. Macdonald sculpture under discussion in Picton," *The Intelligencer*. January 14th, 2022, <https://intelligencer.ca>

²⁴ Ross and Carolyn Ryan, "Sir John A. Macdonald statue to be removed from Charlottetown corner."

In August 2018 the statue of Macdonald was removed from Victoria City Hall and replaced by a plaque explaining the monument's removal. The statue now sits in storage.²⁵ In September 2020, the Macdonald statue in Wilmot was moved into storage "temporarily," following vandalism occurring as frequently as three times a week.²⁶ The statue remains in storage today. Following an 18 July 2020 dousing in paint and the subsequent installation of security cameras, Macdonald's Toronto statue located in Queen's Park got boarded up in scaffolding, a state it has remained in ever since.²⁷ On 5 March 2021 a notice was added to the fully intombed Macdonald, stating "though we cannot change the history we have inherited, we can shape the history we wish to leave behind. The speaker of the Legislative Assembly is considering how the depictions of those histories in the monuments and statuary on the Assembly's grounds can respect all of our diverse cultures and peoples."²⁸ The "history we wish to leave behind" (whoever this "we" may be) seems not to be history at all but rather outright cancellation, erasure, and historical revisionism.

The *John A. Macdonald Memorial* in Regina, built following public lobbying over 75 years, had been vandalized three times between 2014-2018, had its hands painted red on Canada Day 2020, and received a temporary sign recognizing its "harmful legacy." Following a 31 March vote to remove the statue by the city, on 13 April 2021 the statue was *secretly* removed. The removal was intentionally not publicized for "security reasons" and the statue was moved

²⁵ CBC News, "John A. Macdonald statue removed from Victoria City Hall," *CBC News*, August 11, 2018, <https://cbcnews.ca>

²⁶ Hutchins, "A statue of John A. Macdonald rests in purgatory."

²⁷ Rob Ferguson, "What should Queen's Park do with its statue of John A. Macdonald?" *Toronto Star*, January 14, 2023, <https://torontostar.ca>

²⁸ Joe Warminton, "has entombed Sir John A. Macdonald already been cancelled in Ontario?" *Toronto Sun*, March 5, 2021, <https://torontosun.com>

into storage where it will sit for the unforeseeable future.²⁹ Were those “security reasons” perhaps a Canadian public who no longer will passively stand back while their history is taken from them? As proven by the peaceful protest that took place in Kingston, it is not the Macdonald defenders who are security issues; it is not the Macdonald defenders who are violently and aggressively protesting; it is not the Macdonald defenders who have beheaded statues; it is not the Macdonald defenders who have vandalized gravesites; and it is not the Macdonald defenders who have made the installation of security cameras around numerous statues necessary. Yet, the general public is not even informed when a statue is removed anymore. So, is this removal process really a two-way conversation? It seems to be imposed onto Canadians far more than the creation of any of these statues were. With all of these statues removed under the notion of “reconciliation” and with promises that they will be publicly displayed in different ways, they alarming all remain in storage, out of the eyes, hearts, and minds of Canadians. Perhaps the goal really is for Canadians to forget their history and to lock away everything that does not bend to a particular political agenda. The only statue of Macdonald left standing, unobstructed, is the statue of him in the nation’s capital on Parliament Hill in Ottawa. This statue, however, likely remains untouched solely because removing it may force light on Canada’s other Prime Ministers.

Perhaps what is most alarming about this issue is that it is being presented as a consensus in Canada that every Canadian agrees with. However, the fact is, most Canadians do not support the removal of Macdonald’s image from the public and the vandalism and anger that has been carried out against statues of Macdonald is only being done by a small fringe of Canadians. A 2018 poll by the *Angus Reid Institute* found that 70 per cent of Canadians opposed the erasure of

²⁹ Atter, “Sir John A. Macdonald statue removed from Regina’s Victoria Park.”

Macdonald's image, and a poll conducted in 2020 by *Leger* found that 75 per cent of Canadians opposed the "spontaneous teardown of Macdonald statues."³⁰ Another *Leger* poll conducted in 2022 found that "a majority of Canadians opposed the nationwide trend towards purging memorials to figures with "questionable" biographies, and it's not necessarily because they favour a whitewashed version of Canadian history, but rather the exact opposite: A national story that confronts the evils of its players rather than trying to bury them."³¹ 44 per cent of respondents want a version of history that tells the "good and bad" while not pretending that Canada's key framers "did not have a positive role in Canada's history" simply because they "do not look good by today's standards."³² 59 per cent of respondents even reported that Macdonald's foundational role as father of Canada "outweighs his role in the creation of Residential schools."³³ More interesting are the results on racial lines. Even among Indigenous respondents, 43 per cent did not favour "a wholesale removal of Macdonald memorials" and, while overall 67 per cent of respondents retained a "favorable" impression of Macdonald, this sentiment was identical between white Canadians, at 67 per cent, and non-white Canadians at 65 per cent.³⁴ These numbers confirm that "Canadians are still attached to their roots and hunger for more knowledge about their history. They want more Canadian history taught in schools and they want to see it discussed in the media."³⁵

³⁰ Frum, "The Fight Over Canada's Founding Prime Minister."

³¹ Hopper, "As another school takes down Sir John's A's name, Canadians don't support 'rewriting' history."

³² Hopper, "As another school takes down Sir John's A's name, Canadians don't support 'rewriting' history."

³³ Hopper, "As another school takes down Sir John's A's name, Canadians don't support 'rewriting' history."

³⁴ Hopper, Tristin. "As another school takes down Sir John's A's name, Canadians don't support 'rewriting' history."

³⁵ Patrice Dutil, "Canadians refuse to let Sir John A. Macdonald be cancelled," *National Post*, April 2, 2022, <https://nationalpost.com>

Attempts are being made to preserve statues and place names. In April 2023 a new not-for-profit emerged, dedicated to promoting Canada's history. The *Canadian Institute for Historical Education* was created with the mission of promoting academic research and history into "all aspects of contributions, good and bad, made by significant historical figures," and to "facilitate educational analytic discussion regarding measures aimed at removing or changing existing historical commemoratives."³⁶ Echoing the sentiment shared by many Canadians, one of the group's founding members, former Ontario politician Gordon Walker, stated that the group was created out of a concern surrounding the perversion of history with "different facts, alternative facts, [and] false information."³⁷ It is clear that many Canadians do not support the current treatment of public history in Canada and they are not willing to let their history be tyrannically torn-down without a fight.

Memorialization through monuments preserves significance and ensures relevancy to a contemporary audience. The process of memorialization integrates cultural, social, and political histories, and offers insight into the desires and values of the broader public. The past matters and should be critically interrogated in the public sphere. Memory is "embodied in living societies [and] subject to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting... [and] always a phenomenon of the present."³⁸ While monuments and commemorations emerge following a particular event or person, their content is chosen directly by a society with lived experience, and that lived experience cannot be diminished purely because a contemporary society does not agree with the values commemorated by a different generation. Monuments' meanings are dependent

³⁶ Tyler Dawson, "How a new history group aims to defend Canadians like Macdonald and Dundas," *National Post*, April 20, 2023, <https://nationalpost.com>.

³⁷ Dawson, "How a new history group aims to defend Canadians like Macdonald and Dundas."

³⁸ Szpunar, "Monuments, Mundanity and Memory," 381.

on contemporary society. So, just because a statue exists does not necessarily imply veneration and celebration. Interpretations of public statues can change over time. The power lies in the present; therefore, these statues are not as damaging as they are purported to be. They spark discussion and debate, which is central to the preservation of history. The present cannot be morally postured as superior to the past, and history must not be judged through the lens of morality.

In 2016 American historian John Fabian Witt came up with the “Witt Test,” a test designed to judge a historical figure’s actions both by contemporary values and the standards of their times.³⁹ The test has since been adapted to suit Canada. The “Canadian Witt test” calls for the following four questions to be asked when determining whether a statue should be removed: (1) Is the principal legacy of the person fundamentally at odds with Canadian values? (2) Was the relevant principal legacy of the person significantly contested during their lifetime? (3) At the time the statue was erected, was the person being honoured for reasons fundamentally at odds with Canadian values? (4) Does the statue play a substantial role in forming community?⁴⁰ Such questions would be very useful when looking at contentious historical figures. Macdonald’s legacy would benefit greatly from these questions as his career and accomplishments would have to be examined in their entirety and further proof, aside from emotional virtue signalling, would be needed before tearing down his statues. Employing this list, or a similar streamlined process to it, would help standardize and rationalize this highly emotional and reactive process and would certainly halt the rapidity of the removal of contentious monuments. However, employing

³⁹ Lloyd W. Robertson, “How to Cool Canada’s Overheated Statue Removal Business,” *C2C Journal: Ideas that Lead*, July 12th, 2021. <https://c2cjournal.ca/2021/07/how-to-cool-canadas-overheated-statue-removal-business/>

⁴⁰ Robertson, “How to Cool Canada’s Overheated Statue Removal Business.”

fact seems all too difficult to do now, as historical actors, and the masses that desired their commemoration, have been stripped of their voices.

Individuals are active agents in history and create the dominant narratives incorporated in monuments. Monuments emerge out of the popular opinion that society actively desires commemoration for. A monument can only function, good and bad, in the public realm. To encourage discussion, critical thought, and the interrogation of history, society must not publicly sanitize the historical record simply because confronting it is uncomfortable and raises fundamental questions concerning the foundation of the Canadian nation. Macdonald was no saint, but modern society is not morally superior. Public commemoration ensures an evolving image is preserved, rather than rewriting history under the lens of presentism. For Canadians to have a complete presentation of their history, one that displays good and bad, Macdonald's statues must not be hidden away from the public eye in statue purgatory. While the future of Macdonald's image does not look bright, nuanced public presentation can be achieved only when public commemoration and memorialization are kept public, not cancelled under the guise of an inaccurate caricature of Macdonald's image. If Macdonald's image is preserved in the public sphere, then Canadians will gain a greater understanding of the man who helped build the Canadian nation and his image will be one rooted in accuracy. "Leave Macdonald's monuments to weather in the respect they deserve, in the parks and squares of the gentle country he founded in his own kindly image."⁴¹

⁴¹ Frum, "The Fight Over Canada's Founding Prime Minister."

Implications on Canadian History and Society

On 12 January 2021 over 200 historians, policy experts, educators, business leaders, and public figures signed a joint statement in defence of Macdonald. The statement noted that his inexcusable errors must be weighed against “an impressive record of constitution and nation building, his reconciliation of contending cultures, languages and religions, his progressivism and his documented concern and friendship with the Indigenous peoples of Canada.”⁴² It acknowledges that “Macdonald was neither angel nor devil, but a fallible human being who accomplished great things. Looking solely at our past errors is not the right standard by which to measure Canada or Macdonald and their great achievements.”⁴³ The signatories of the statement urge governments, historians, media, teachers, and Canadians alike to ensure that everyone can access a balanced view of Canada’s past and the people who made Canada what it is today. Canadian history is in a period of intense crisis that seeks to popularize historical revisionism and drown out critical discussion. What’s emerged is a historical crusade against calls for the removal of everything related to Macdonald that invoke revisionist history and distort the record through a modern lens of moral judgement. Unrelenting in their defamation campaign, proponents seek to thrust many of the injustices of Canadian society onto Macdonald by presenting their views as “tolerant,” versus the “intolerant” of those who acknowledge that Macdonald, much like the rest of Canada, was by no means perfect, and should not be blindly celebrated, but rather should be remembered in a nuanced and complex way. Unfortunately, revisionist history and presentism are winning the day in Canada.

⁴² The Friends of Sir John A. Macdonald and the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, *In Defence of Sir John A. Macdonald and his Legacy*, January 12, 2021 <https://www.macdonaldlaurier.ca/defence-sir-john-macdonald-legacy/#macdonald-legacy-statement>

⁴³ The Friends of Sir John A. Macdonald, *In Defence of Sir John A. Macdonald and his Legacy*.

Only 1 July 2021, a day celebrating the nation's achievements and history, the *Canadian Historical Association* (CHA) issued a public statement on behalf of *all* historians across Canada, recognizing that Canada's history warrants the use of the word "genocide."⁴⁴ Presenting their opinion as a "broad consensus... among historical experts" they further argue that by failing to acknowledge Canada's history as genocidal, "historians have therefore contributed in lasting and tangible ways to the Canadian refusal to come to grips with this country's history of colonization and dispossession."⁴⁵ The letter concludes with the statement "we encourage Canadians to recognize this history for what it is: genocide."⁴⁶

This highly divisive and politically loaded statement, through presenting the CHA's conclusions as a "consensus," removed any room for debate and discussion. However, there was and is no consensus amongst historians. In response, an open letter to the CHA was written by Chris Dummitt and J.R. Miller, the latter being one of the most prolific historians on Indigenous-white relations in Canada. The letter states that "there are no grounds for such a claim that purports to represent the views of all of Canada's professional historians" and that the CHA

has a duty to represent the ethics and values of historical scholarship. In making an announcement in support of a particular interpretation of history, and in insisting that there is only one valid interpretation, the CHA's current leadership has fundamentally broken the norms and expectations of professional scholarship.⁴⁷

The letter further criticizes the CHA for "insulting and dismissing the scholars who have arrived at a different assessment," for "presenting the Canadian public with a purported 'consensus' that

⁴⁴ "Canada Day Statement: The History of Violence Against Indigenous Peoples Fully Warrants the Use of the Word 'Genocide.'" *Canadian Historical Association*, July 1, 2021, <http://activehistory.ca>

⁴⁵ "Canada Day Statement."

⁴⁶ "Canada Day Statement."

⁴⁷ Tristan Hopper, "Historians oppose statement saying Canada is guilty of genocide," *National Post*, August 11, 2021, <https://nationalpost.com>

does not exist,” for “insulting the basic standards of good scholarly conduct,” and for “violating the expectations that Canadians have of academia to engage in substantive, evidence-based debate.”⁴⁸ Despite the compelling letter, along with others sent from esteemed and respected historians, the CHA never retracted nor apologized for its statement. Rather, it simply ignored criticism and continued in its delusion that there is an overwhelming consensus. As the struggle over Macdonald’s image and these displays of pushback show, there is no consensus among Canada’s professional historians, and Canadians alike, about how the violence against Indigenous peoples in Residential schools should be characterized.

The issue with examining history through the lens of presentism is not unique to Canadian Historical Associations. In 2002 Lynn Hunt, then president of the *American Historical Association* (AHA), issued a foretelling statement on presentism. She argued that “presentism, at its worst, encourages a kind of moral complacency and self-congratulation. Interpreting the past in terms of present concerns usually leads us to find ourselves morally superior.”⁴⁹ She concluded by arguing that respect for the past is crucial as it “enables us to see beyond our present-day concerns.”⁵⁰ The debate over what role presentism should play in the discipline of history, if any, has continued within the AHA. Following Hunt’s seemingly ignored warnings, in August 2022 the AHA’s current president, James H. Sweet, offered further comments on the dangers of presentism. Particularly taking issue with the trend in America to use history as a

⁴⁸ Hopper, “Historians oppose statement saying Canada is guilty of genocide.”

⁴⁹ Lynn Hunt, “Against Presentism”, *Perspectives on History: The newsmagazine of the American Historical Association*, 1 May 2002. <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/may-2002/against-presentism>

⁵⁰ Hunt, “Against Presentism.”

“grab-bag,” picking and choosing what historical events to conveniently cite to further particular political agendas, Sweet calls for “doing history with integrity.”⁵¹ He argues that

history is not a heuristic tool for the articulation of an ideal imagined future. Rather, it is a way to study the messy, uneven process of change over time. When we foreshorten or shape history to justify rather than inform contemporary political positions, we not only undermine the discipline but threaten its very integrity.⁵²

While seemingly a view that any rational scholar of history would agree with, Sweet’s comments sparked intense anger, particularly as he argued that “political relevance” and “contemporary social justice issues” misses the complexity of history.⁵³ Some were angered that Sweet was attacking the political traditions of Black studies and branded Sweet a racist.⁵⁴ Of course, it did not matter to critics of Sweet that he himself is a leading historian of the African diaspora. All that mattered was that he is white. As a result, Sweet had to swiftly apologize for his comments and for “alienating” his colleagues.⁵⁵ Backed into a corner his only options were to denounce his own views entirely, two days after saying them, or face outright cancellation. This is becoming the new norm in the field of history and academia alike. There is no room for free speech or debate as hostility and identity politics are overpowering critical thought.

It is good practice for Canadians to reflect upon their history and to use history as a method of education. However, when debate is silenced, this process becomes both unfair and dangerous. With Macdonald, discussion is circumvented, and the only outcome is immediate

⁵¹ James H. Sweet, “Is History History? Identity Politics and Teleologies of the Present.” In *Perspectives on History: The newsmagazine of the American Historical Association*, 17 August 2022. <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/september-2022/is-history-history-identity-politics-and-teleologies-of-the-present>

⁵² Sweet, “Is History History?”

⁵³ Jennifer Schuessler, “As Historians Gather, No Truce in the History Wars”, *The New York Times*, 8 January 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com>

⁵⁴ Schuessler, “As Historians Gather, No Truce in the History Wars.”

⁵⁵ Sweet, “Is History History?”

condemnation. There can be no nuanced debates or understandings about his image. Canadians are being told that anything so much as an acknowledgement of Macdonald and his accomplishments must not be made public. Macdonald, vilified for not meeting the ideals of twenty-first century Canadians, is now everything wrong with Canada's past. "A country with little knowledge of its own history is being told by a loud but small minority that Macdonald is disposable, and that Canadians should not even use his record and legacy as a learning experience."⁵⁶ Canadians must be able to form their own opinions on Macdonald, on his legacy, and how he should be best commemorated. They cannot be told what to think and have his legacy torn down with no say in their outcome. "We are supposed to be headed down a path of reconciliation. But for many on the left... the only valid reconciliation is that which adheres to their woke narrative."⁵⁷ That is, a reconciliation that seeks not to address real, long-lasting issues, but rather cancel a select few historical figures, offload blame to dead politicians, and take no accountability in creating and perpetuating long-lasting social inequities. Both the Conservatives and the Liberals treated Indigenous peoples poorly, yet Macdonald and his Conservative party are the only ones facing blame. As far into the 1960s, new Residential schools were opened under Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, subjecting an additional two generations to abuse. Do we tear down his statues? Cancel his image? Remove his name from buildings and streets? If Macdonald is facing such treatment, then it is only fair for every Prime Minister who followed him to face the same, if not worse, harsh condemnation.

⁵⁶ Christopher Sweeney, "Sir John A. Macdonald's legacy is a tool for education (not a standard for wokeness)," *National Post*, December 29, 2020, <https://nationalpost.com>

⁵⁷ Chris Sankey, "Why, as an Indigenous-Canadian, I will be voting Conservative in the next election," *National Post*, August 15, 2022, <https://nationalpost.com>

While Residential schools in particular have left deep scars in Canada, Canadians are looking for who to blame for the horrors that took place in them. Targeting Macdonald has become an easy way for Canadians to come to terms with their colonial history. Major contributors to abuse, including those who worked in Residential schools, are ignored, and one man is being persecuted for the crimes committed by others for over a century.⁵⁸ There seems to be nothing that the woke left will stop at to achieve their goals. Macdonald's image can be removed entirely from the public, his pictures can be removed from history books, and his name can be forgotten about entirely, but none of that will bring healing or justice into Indigenous communities. Systemic issues will not go away simply because Macdonald's statues have been removed. "Cancelling culture and removing history is not going to change the issues Indigenous people face today... it is easier to tear something down than it is to build a community up."⁵⁹ Tearing down a historical figure and their statues is counterproductive to reconciliation efforts and will only further divide Canadians.

This is bigger than just Macdonald. In 2019 to "advance reconciliation and to confront the legacy of colonialism" a new framework for Canada's commemoration process was announced, intended to create a "new way of sharing history" through systematically reviewing thousands of existing plaques and historic designations.⁶⁰ Since then, 208 historical individuals, locations, and events have been identified as problematic enough to warrant further investigation— including Macdonald of course. *Parks Canada* gives four reasons for placement

⁵⁸ Melissa Mbarki, "Cancelling John A. Macdonald will do little to help Indigenous people," *National Post*, June 4, 2021, <https://nationalpost.com>

⁵⁹ Mbarki, "Cancelling John A. Macdonald will do little to help Indigenous people."

⁶⁰ Larry Ostola, "Perils of 'Presentism': Plaque Removal: Ottawa's Naughty List Puts the Titans of Canadian History on Trial," *C2C Journal: Ideas that Lead*, October 6, 2022, <https://c2cjournal.ca>

on this list: terminology, absence, colonial assumptions, and controversial beliefs and behaviour.⁶¹ While outdated terminology and the absence of historical fact and context are valid grounds for review, the “colonial assumptions” and “controversial beliefs and behaviors” categories are alarming. These categories are inherently presentist, contain huge ideological baggage, and attempt to impose woke perspectives onto what should be a fact-driven and apolitical commemoration process. “Colonial assumptions” refers to “designations related to colonial and religious leaders and their actions, and to settlement and nation building from an overly European perspective” while “controversial beliefs” includes “views, actions, and activities condemned by today’s society.”⁶² This process is blatant ideologically driven revisionism fuelled by the growing rise of presentism and will undoubtedly tear down any target in its sight. This self-indulgent, anti-history process will have no end. No history, and very few historical actors, emerge with their image intact when placed under the moral virtue tests of the twenty-first century. This process seeks to cancel anyone and everything that does not align with modern day values, and tear down historical figures to the level of insignificance. To combat this, historical stature must be appreciated, contributions to Canada must not be diminished, and the context of their times must be stressed. “If we are standing on their shoulders today, at the very least we owe them a plaque on which to rest their feet.”⁶³

⁶¹ Ostola, “Perils of ‘Presentism’.”

⁶² Ostola, “Perils of ‘Presentism’.”

⁶³ Ostola, “Perils of ‘Presentism’.”

Conclusion

There are many things I have done wrongly, and many things I have neglected that I should have done... I have tried, according to the best of my judgment, to do what I could for the well-being of good government and future prosperity of this my beloved country.¹

- Macdonald, Toronto, 30 May 1881

Macdonald's image has constantly evolved and reflects the memories and values of Canadians throughout Canada's history. As examined in Chapter One, from the 1870s-1940s Macdonald's image was highly partisan and invoked for political purposes. This period stressed Macdonald's youthful, humorous, eccentric, and at times, corrupt, approach to politics while maintaining that he was a central figure in achieving Canadian Confederation. By the 1960s, owing largely to the momentous Macdonald biography written by Donald Creighton, Macdonald became "Canada's Chieftain." He was widely celebrated by Canadians who were seeking to discover Canadian identity as he became the all-encompassing definition of what it meant to be Canadian. His image was at its pinnacle and he was cast as a heroic statesman destined to rule and unite Canada, the single individual responsible for Confederation. Chapter Two traced the rapid decline of Macdonald's image, beginning in the 1970s through to the present. Macdonald's image has now been morally repositioned to create a gross caricature of a man whose flaws are exaggerated to the ignorance of his accomplishments, as many of the contentious elements of Canada's history have been vested into him. In Chapter Two, debates surrounding whether charges of "racism," "drunkenness," and "murder," can be accurately applied to Macdonald were interrogated and reconciled with historical narrative. Movements to reclaim the accurate image of Macdonald were examined, displaying that while the new, distorted Macdonald may be loudly proclaimed, it is not agreed upon nor welcomed by many. Finally, Chapter Three explored the

¹ Martin, *John A. Macdonald*, 192.

intense current debates surrounding Macdonald's image in the public sphere including monuments, institutional names, and heritage sites. As evidenced, these debates have ignored the values and voices of previous generations of Canadians who sought to commemorate Macdonald for posterity and contend the majority opinion of the Canadian public. I concluded with a discussion of the implications of the removal of Macdonald from the public, including the impact this divisive debate has in the field of history and on the broader public.

Macdonald's image has drastically declined since the 1970s as he is now the enemy of a "progressive" Canada. As a result, he is unfairly criticized and held to a standard no politician could ever meet. To properly understand Macdonald, the two images that dominate contemporary historiography, one of him as a heroic nation builder, and the other of him as a genocidal tyrant, must be examined in historical context and in tandem with one another. Reconciling contradicting images of Macdonald will allow him to re-emerge in the Canadian National memory as: a politically corrupt, racially motivated, opportunist who struggled with mental health and drinking for much of his life, all while managing to forge a strong, united Canada through skilled politics as he sought to put the desires of the Canadian nation above everything else. As Macdonald said, all of his hopes, dreams, and remembrances were Canadian. His principles and prejudices were Canadian. He was by all-encompassing definitions of the term, Canadian, and must be remembered as such.

To separate Macdonald from Canada ignores the dominant sentiment of the time. Macdonald is rightfully owed criticism, but that same criticism must be applied to the society, government, and conventions that he operated within and that persisted for decades following his death. Macdonald was not a single tyrannical actor isolated from the general will of Canadians. Remembering Macdonald reflects a balance between commemoration, history, memory, and

monumentation. While balancing such tensions is no easy feat, it is necessary to ensure Macdonald's image is reconciled with historical fact. Canadian identity is often ill-defined and confused, but the historic practices of Canada are not. Commemorative practices reveal how Canadians interpreted their history and how they sought to reconcile national histories and memories. These histories became expressions for Canadian identity and ultimately functioned as a way for Canadians to interrogate, create, and sustain national myths and memories that are foundational to the contemporary Canadian state today. Remembering Macdonald rests on the memory of past generations, and his image must remain public to continue serving the present dialogue.

Macdonald's role in creating Canada cannot be overstated. Macdonald made Confederation possible, played a key role in shaping the *British North America Act* (with 50 of the 72 resolutions agreed-upon written by him), developed the English-French governance that became the nation's pattern, had the vision and political drive to secure the completion of CPR despite many setbacks, formed the NWMP, is the only Prime Minister to win six majority governments, the only to win five consecutive elections, the oldest person to serve as Prime Minister, and he won the most elections as party leader in Canada's history.² That is a remarkably impressive portfolio that deserves remembrance. Only death could take Macdonald out of office, and he committed his entire life to ensuring the success and development of Canada as a nation.

John A. had been the true founding father, not only of his country, but of the distinctively Canadian version of monarchical parliamentary politics. Macdonald's career set the genetic code for the role of Prime Minister of Canada. Most of his successors inherited strands of Macdonald's political DNA. Some mastered, others fumbled, the job of adapting the legacy to rapidly changing times. Some were more successful than

² Schlee, *Unknown and Unforgettable*, 3.

Macdonald, some were more respected. None was more loved.³

Even Liberal opposition leader, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, acknowledged that Macdonald was devoted to “Canada’s welfare, Canada’s advancement, and Canada’s glory.”⁴ Canada remains one of the few countries to be governed for over a century and a half through the same basic document, a document created largely by Macdonald.⁵ Macdonald was fundamental in shaping Canada and made it his life’s mission. “Canada was his cause and Canada was worth it.”⁶

Canadians should be disgusted at the way their history is being dishonoured and diminished. Today’s Macdonald carries the burden of imagined policies that were elaborated long after his death; his flaws are elevated while his accolades are diminished. He has fallen victim to the increasing trend of cancel-culture. He is a victim of today’s society and what is happening to his image is disrespectful in every sense. He now is categorized under the universal buzzwords of “racist,” “intolerant,” “genocidal,” and “settler colonialist.”⁷ Macdonald’s image has always served the present generation who creates it, and the same tradition will continue. But, if Macdonald is ostracized from Canada, diminished in the historical record, and invoked purely as an inaccurate manufactured image for Canadians to criticize, a Macdonald that accords with historical record will be replaced by a pale and grossly distorted reflection in which the real man is barely recognizable. And when this occurs, the historical Macdonald will all but have disappeared. I conclude by drawing attention to the 2021 *Statement of Defence of Sir John A. Macdonald’s Legacy* which effectively maintains “all Canadians deserve to hear the full story

³ Michael Bliss, *Right Honorable Men*, 73.

⁴ *Canada Transformed: The Speeches of Sir John A. Macdonald, A Bicentennial Celebration*, edited by Sarah Katherine Gibson & Arthur Milnes (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2015), 453.

⁵ Martin, *John A. Macdonald*, 191.

⁶ *Canada Transformed*, xxix.

⁷ Dutil, “Reputations: Not Guilty,” 18.

about Macdonald, the founding of Canada, and Canadian history generally. Only then can we form reasoned views about the historical record... looking at our history with a dispassionate eye will give us a much clearer vision of the future. Let's start with Sir John A. Macdonald.”⁸

⁸ Friends of Canadian History, *In Defence of Sir John A. Macdonald and his Legacy*.

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