

To Commemorate or to Un-commemorate?

The sticky question of John A. Macdonald and Indigenous history

Perhaps no historical debate has raged so hotly this past summer and fall as the debate over Canada's first Prime Minister. Specifically, whether, in spite of the good that he accomplished, Sir John A. Macdonald should be removed from public displays of commemoration for the role that he played in the subjugation of Indigenous people. As PM and as Minister of Indian Affairs, Macdonald led a government that was parsimonious in its relief efforts for Indigenous peoples, lackluster in its fulfillment of treaty promises, and all too effective in its implementation of the residential schools system.

Opinions have varied significantly as to what should be done about Macdonald's place in the commemorative record, and there is no apparent consensus among historians. In a "point / counter-point" series on the CBC, Ryerson University's Patrice Dutil argued that "the accusation of genocide is outsized,"¹ whereas Idle No More organizer Tori Cress insisted that commemorating Macdonald serves to whitewash history and Canada's past "policies of genocide."² Macdonald biographer Richard Gwyn, meanwhile, insists that the bad must be taken with the good: "Macdonald's overall contribution to Canada was irreplaceable." Gwyn cites Macdonald's assertion of Canadian autonomy from Britain, his efforts to avert American annexation in the northwest, his emphasis on Anglophone/Francophone accommodation, and even his sympathy for women's suffrage.³

Many historians would agree that Macdonald's approach to Indigenous issues was, in large part, the product of nineteenth century sensibilities. They would certainly disagree, however, as to how far this might exonerate him. At the time, racist and assimilationist policies were the norm, providing government relief to the poor and destitute was unusual, and the country was experiencing an economic crisis.

Macdonald's Indigenous policies, and those of later prime ministers, might also be understood (and I do mean 'understood,' not 'excused') through a different lens: regionalized indifference.

¹ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/opinion/macdonald-name-1.4269060>

² <http://www.cbc.ca/news/opinion/removing-macdonalds-name-1.4268975>

³ https://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2015/01/09/sir_john_a_macdonald_the_greatest_pm_of_all.html



Sir John A. Macdonald. Photo | Photographie : Brady-Handy.

The prairie West was a distant, far off and unfamiliar place for most of the politicians and bureaucrats setting policy and holding the purse strings in Ottawa. (Indeed, Macdonald would only pay a visit in 1886, upon completion of the railway.) When a place and its people seem distant and far off, both physically and conceptually, they become less tangible, less real, and less consequential in our mind's eye, and so their challenges become easier to ignore. In this context, and from the vantage point of a prime minister living in Ottawa, the suffering of Indigenous people in the West, half a continent away, could be reduced to an abstraction, a vague notion or an idea, whilst the concerns being raised by politicians representing the more familiar East would have seemed far more real and pressing. Indeed, the West's negligible political influence would not have helped things. In 1878, when Macdonald returned to office, the West held less than 5% of the seats in the House of Commons. (It holds over 30% today.) Having been incorporated into Confederation and having averted American annexation – a process that was more or less complete by the late 1870s with the signing of the Numbered Treaties – the challenges of the region became that much easier to ignore, and budgetary cuts could become easier to justify.

Except, perhaps, from the vantage point of some of the relatively few Eastern politicians who actually went West, lived there, and came to know its people and the serious challenges they faced. Take, for instance, Macdonald's contemporary, Alexander Morris, who served as Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba and the Northwest during the 1870s and who led negotiations for several of the Numbered Treaties. Like Macdonald, Morris grew up in eastern Upper Canada. He even worked for a time in Macdonald's Kingston law office, and served in the federal cabinet before being sent West by the prime minister, in 1872.

Before going west, Alexander Morris had conceived of the region in terms of its potential to serve the economic interests of central and eastern Canada. He was relatively dismissive of Indigenous interests, writing in 1858: “the fact is obvious and indisputable, that ... the rights of colonization and trade must be free and unfettered.”⁴ After living in the West, however, and after having met with Indigenous leaders and having learnt firsthand about the severe challenges they faced, and after having personally entered into Treaty with them, Morris’s views changed significantly. “[We] are bound by Treaty,” he wrote with growing frustration, in 1877, to penny-pinching officials back in Ottawa. “As to the sales, homestead and pre-emption rights [of settlers], I attach little importance to these.”⁵ Unlike Morris, however, for Macdonald, the West and the suffering of Indigenous peoples there remained far removed from his own personal, lived reality. (The regionalized compartmentalization of Indigenous issues seems all the more possible when one considers that Macdonald apparently conveyed a relatively positive outlook toward Indigenous groups closer to home, in Ontario.

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By any standard – be it nineteenth or twenty-first century – the Indigenous policies of Canada’s first Prime Minister and of those who followed were characterized by indifference, cynicism, parsimony, and racism. The question remains, however: Should this legacy outweigh Macdonald’s “immeasurable contribution to Canada,” as Dutil puts it? Should it serve as grounds to remove Macdonald from the commemorative historical record?

The decision has already come down to remove Macdonald from what is arguably the most important medium for his commemoration – the ten dollar bill. Last year, in a move that solicited surprisingly little debate, the federal government decided to replace Macdonald’s likeness with that of civil rights pioneer Viola Desmond. This year, Macdonald has been ‘transitioned out,’ so to speak, with a special ‘Canada 150’ bill that includes Macdonald alongside the likenesses of French-Canadian political leader George-Étienne Cartier, the first person with Indian status to become Senator, James Gladstone, and the first woman to be elected to the federal parliament, Agnes Macphail.

But is there a consensus amongst those who truly know this subject that more should be done to remove Macdonald from the commemorative historical record? Apparently not. James Daschuk, author of *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starva-*

⁴ Alexander Morris, “The Hudson’s Bay and Pacific Territories,” 1858, p.88.

⁵ LAC, RG 10, vol. 3624, file 5217-1, Alexander Morris to the Minister of the Interior, 19 January 1877.

tion, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life, suggested that communities that are exploring the possibility of removing Macdonald’s name should begin with a frank discussion about “the good and the bad,” of his legacy, and then “decide for themselves.”⁶ Senator Murray Sinclair, who chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, has stated that, rather than calling for the removal of Macdonald, our energies should be focussed on honouring Indigenous heroes instead.⁷

Perhaps Senator Sinclair has a point. Instead of removing Macdonald, why not, at the very least, emphasize those things that we can agree *do* need more commemorating? Only a few months ago, Ottawa unveiled a new national Holocaust memorial opposite the War Museum. It will stand as a powerful symbol and provide a commemorative space for remembrance and healing for survivors and their descendants, and for all Canadians who seek to acknowledge the complacency and indifference that this country exhibited toward the suffering of Jews before, during and after the Holocaust.



Is it time, then, for a national memorial on a similar scale to the suffering and subjugation of Indigenous peoples, or rather, to Indigenous resiliency in the face of such subjugation? At the very least, should we not have a national memorial for what was, as John S. Milloy put it, our greatest “national crime,” the residential schools system? Should such a memorial not be placed in the nation’s capital, to occupy a place of prominence equal to our other great national memorials, to our wars, our peacekeeping, and our parliamentary democracy? As a permanent fixture, it would create a space for healing and reconciliation, and serve as a reminder for policy-makers, public servants, ministers, and even the prime minister, as they make their way to and from work each day, of the need to resist the complacency and indifference that have for too long marked this country’s relationship with Indigenous peoples.

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⁶ <http://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1052201/john-a-macdonald-historien-james-daschuk>

⁷ http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2017/08/29/sen-murray-sinclair-honour-indigenous-heroes-instead-of-debating-john-a-macdonald_a_23189684/