

Kelsie Walker

BEHEADING CANADA'S HISTORY

The desecration of
Sir John A. Macdonald's image
in the Canadian national memory

May 2024



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Executive summary | *sommaire*

Canada's first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, used to be regarded as one of Canada's greatest statesmen. Looked upon with high reverence, his name adorned public institutions and his image was crafted in bronze monuments that towered over city streets. However, today the disgraced politician is facing the wrath of cancel culture and woke ideology that seeks to thrust the stains of Canada's history onto one singular person.

In 2018 the City of Victoria removed its Macdonald statue, built in 1982 following public donations. In 2020 Macdonald's Wilmot Township statue in Ontario was removed, despite being part of a publicly funded project that sought to commemorate every Canadian prime minister. In April 2021 the Regina memorial to Macdonald, built following intense public lobbying over 75 years, was removed in secret. In May 2021, the Charlottetown statue of Macdonald was removed following a unanimous vote by Charlottetown City Council. The removal came after consulting a local Charlottetown First Nations community who did not call for the statue's removal, but rather, provided recommendations on how to update the statue to better reflect their historic experiences. In June 2021 Macdonald's statue located in City Park, Kingston, Ontario – built in 1895 following public desire – was forcefully toppled. Toronto's Macdonald statue is currently encased in a wooden and burlap tomb where it has been in hiding for nearly four years. As of 2024, there is only one Macdonald statue left standing and uncovered, located on Parliament Hill.

Few figures, if any, in Canadian history have 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 heaped upon 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 is inaccurately distorted, questioned, and actively diminished, unfairly rendering him guilty of past injustices. 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 underway.

This paper explores the current debate surrounding Macdonald's legacy and examines how his image has changed throughout Canada's history. 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 a new, distorted image of Macdonald is loudly and viciously proclaimed, it is certainly not welcomed by many. [MLI](#)

Sir John A. Macdonald, qui fut le premier des premiers ministres du Canada, a autrefois été considéré comme l'un des plus grands hommes d'État canadiens. Son nom, tenu en grand respect, ornait les institutions publiques, et des monuments de bronze, moulés sur son image, surplombaient nos rues. Toutefois, de nos jours, l'homme politique disgracié subit la vindicte provoquée par la culture du bannissement et l'idéologie woke, qui cherchent à imputer à une seule personne les événements qui ont terni l'histoire du Canada.

En 2018, la ville de Victoria a retiré sa statue de Macdonald, érigée en 1982 grâce à des dons du public. Le canton de Wilmot, en Ontario, a fait de même en 2020, même si cette statue avait été prévue dans le cadre d'un projet financé par des fonds publics visant à commémorer tous les premiers ministres canadiens. Quant au monument à la mémoire de Macdonald érigé à Regina après d'intenses activités de lobbying public échelonnées sur une période de 75 ans, c'est en secret qu'il a été retiré, en avril 2021. En mai 2021, un vote unanime du conseil municipal a sanctionné le retrait d'une autre statue à Charlottetown – après consultation d'une première nation autochtone de l'endroit qui ne l'a pas exigé, formulant plutôt des recommandations sur la manière d'actualiser la statue pour mieux refléter ses expériences historiques. En juin 2021, on a déboulonné de son piédestal la statue de City Park à Kingston, en Ontario – érigée en 1895 à la demande du public. Enfin, la statue de Toronto est entoillée et emmurée derrière des contreplaqués depuis près de quatre ans. En 2024, il ne reste plus que la statue de Macdonald, debout et à découvert, sur la Colline du Parlement.

Peu de personnages, voire aucun, dans l'histoire du Canada, n'ont été rétrogradés aussi radicalement et impitoyablement. Sous l'effet du révisionnisme, du présentisme et du « wokisme » croissant, l'héritage de Macdonald a été anéanti à l'aulne d'une histoire du Canada de plus en plus étudiée sous l'angle de la moralité : on condamne les imperfections et on ignore tout du contexte historique. Ainsi, les doléances du Canada contemporain sont déversées sur Macdonald comme un moyen d'aider sa population à accepter les éléments fondateurs du Canada qui ne correspondent pas aux discours « progressiste », « humaniste » et « multiculturaliste ». L'image de Macdonald repose donc sur une lecture inexacte, déformée, discutable et activement méprisante qui accuse l'homme, à tort, des injustices du passé. Le Macdonald d'aujourd'hui est souvent

considéré comme un tyran raciste et génocidaire, réduit à ses défauts caricaturaux et taxé d'ivrognerie. Des mouvements visant à rétablir une image plus fidèle de Macdonald sont toutefois en cours.

*Ce document explore le débat actuel entourant l'héritage de Macdonald et examine comment l'image de cet homme a changé tout au long de l'histoire du Canada. Pour bien comprendre Macdonald, les deux perceptions qui dominent l'historiographie contemporaine – celle d'un bâtisseur de nation héroïque et celle d'un tyran génocidaire – doivent être replacées dans leur contexte historique et analysées parallèlement. Bien qu'une image nouvelle et déformée de Macdonald soit proclamée haut et fort, celle-ci ne fait certainement pas l'unanimité. **MLI***

Introduction

Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first Prime Minister, was a drunk, intolerant, racist old 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 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.”

Rather than acknowledging the complex history of Canada, Canada's historical narrative is being actively rewritten by a politically correct, left-wing minority to present a sanitized and ahistorical account that aligns better with the “values” of contemporary Canada. The significance of historic actors is being diminished through studying legacies with the lens of morality, intent on condemning imperfections. Revisionist history has set its sights on Macdonald and will not cease until his image is destroyed completely.

Macdonald's image has transformed 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 foundational contributions to Canada. Macdonald played a pivotal role in the formation, consolidation, and expansion of the Canadian state. However, his unique political mastery has been all but forgotten.

Beginning in the late-1970s, the grievances of contemporary Canada started 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 so called "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. Recent debates surrounding Macdonald's image and legacy have shifted 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.¹ However, such a focus, while deserving of conversation, is consumed by social justice trends and "woke" narratives that seek to condemn the past, undermine Canadians' feelings of patriotism, and silence any voices who do not enthusiastically jump aboard the cancel culture train.



The truth is far more complex than Macdonald's detractors would have you believe.

Canada's history is now at stake. History can be reinterpreted; however, it should not be rewritten to fit inaccurate and self-serving goals expressed by a very loud minority. To inaccurately vilify Macdonald is to vilify Canada's past and anyone who does not agree with his outright cancellation. Sir John A. Macdonald played a crucial role in creating Canada. The aggressive attempts to erase his accomplishments are both wrong and dangerous. As this paper reveals, the truth is far more complex than Macdonald's detractors would have you believe.

A Canadian identity crisis in need of a “Great Chieftain”

The 1870s–1940s: Macdonald the Partisan Politician

From the 1870s to the 1940s Macdonald’s image was used for partisan purposes, on partisan lines, by politicians, historians, and newspapers. For much of his career he was presented as a youthful, witty, and highly skilled, eccentric politician. This image, however, glossed over his political shortcomings in the name of partisan politics and acknowledged his flaws only when it served the opposition. The 1870s 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 perception and personal ideology impacted his image. His 1891 death sparked a social panic 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 partisanship manifested itself into debates of nationalism. In 1844, at the age of 29, Macdonald 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 nearly five decades in politics, 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; well above the average tenure of roughly six and a half years (Library of Parliament Canada 2021). He was also Canada’s longest-serving minister of Indian Affairs, maintained the political support of his party and the Canadian public despite numerous scandals and charges of corruption, and created many of new nation’s formative policies, 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 1885.² 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 new generations of Canadian historians was to craft the narrative of the collective Canadian struggle to raise the once fragmented colonies to united provinces (Taylor 1989, 152). Canadian historians attempted to demonstrate how the struggles of the nation could bring about progress and end the racial and linguistic divisions of the past to create a new, unified identity and national consensus (Taylor 1989, 153). Public memory was the focus of these historians as it could be used to form the official narrative of the nation (Neatby and Hodgins 2012, 5). This marked a period of setting Macdonald apart from his contemporaries based on his role in securing Confederation. Historians attributed a unique set of political skills and merit to him, as he became a way for them to stress the significance of Confederation to a Canadian public that was divided on whether Confederation was beneficial now that it had been achieved.

“ Canadian historians attempted to demonstrate how the struggles of the nation could bring about progress.

In 1883 J.E. Collins published *The Life and Times of Right Honourable Sir John A. Macdonald, Premier of the Dominion of Canada*, which marked the first full biography written about Macdonald. Collins presented Macdonald as a central figure to Confederation who was skilled at reading public opinion and acted only when “the time was ripe” (204). To Collins, Macdonald was “the most energetic spirit in the federation movement” as uniting the provinces was “Macdonald’s “fondest dream” (285). He further argued that without “Macdonald, we might not at this day have a Confederation” (316). By the second decade of Confederation, a narrative arose that Macdonald was the most important force behind the building of Canada. This idea became heavily incorporated into Macdonald’s ascending image throughout the first half of the twentieth century as he was presented as inseparable from the Canadian nation in both its constitutional creation and the very fibre of its unity.

Macdonald was commonly portrayed as intertwined with the story of Canada. Biographical writings stressed the themes of nationalism, destiny, and patriotism, while downplaying scandals and charges against his character – a theme that continued into the 1950s. In 1915 Joseph Pope’s *The Day of Sir John A. Macdonald: A Chronicle of the First Prime Minister of the Dominion* revolutionized biographical accounts of Macdonald. Pope grounded his work in research methodology, primary sources, and Macdonald’s personal papers, a source base to which Pope had the most extensive access at this point (Wright 2005; Waite 2003). However, due to his close relationship to Macdonald, any controversial elements of Macdonald’s life were examined less critically. Echoing the work of Collins, he expressed deep admiration for Macdonald’s “strategic ability, delicate finesse, and subtle power over men” throughout the Confederation debates (Pope 1915, 79).

Opposition to Macdonald and the Conservative party was intensely personified in the formal opposition of the Liberals. Opposition Leader Alexander Mackenzie and his fellow Liberals weaponized the prime minister’s shortcomings as a way of criticizing Conservative policy. The Liberals portrayed Macdonald 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 and delay Canada’s development (Pelletier 2014, 375).

This message was amplified by John Wilson Bengough, a cartoonist, editor, and the publisher of the weekly satirical newspaper, *Grip*, which he founded in 1873. Unofficially affiliated with the Liberals, Bengough believed satire could be a powerful tool in politics, saying “that the legitimate forces of humour and caricature can and ought to serve the state in its highest interests.” And while *Grip* was supposedly neutral, its editorial slant seemed to strongly favour the Liberal Party (Cook 2024). In his cartoons, Bengough often drew Macdonald as a skeletal, big-nosed, corrupt alcoholic. His editorial coverage of Macdonald was scathing and persisted until the prime minister’s death in 1891. For Bengough, Macdonald became the living personification of everything that was wrong with Conservative policy. And apparently, satirizing Macdonald was great for business: Bengough sustained *Grip*’s popularity and readership throughout Macdonald’s political controversies. At the newspaper’s peak in the

mid-1880s, *Grip* claimed a paid circulation of 50,000 readers, largely due to its negative portrayals of Macdonald (Cook 2024).

Despite Macdonald's partisan reputation, he managed to maintain respect, even among his critics. Following his death, the Liberal party employed a political strategy of not commenting on Macdonald in the hopes of reducing his incorporation in public memory, and in turn, the Conservative party. From 1896 to 1911 the Liberal party only invoked Macdonald's image when it could be used to advance party objectives (Pelletier 2014, 364).

While in Opposition, Liberal Leader Sir Wilfrid Laurier frequently critiqued Macdonald's policies, including his 1878 National Policy. He argued that such policies hindered the development of Canada, and that he, not Macdonald, could build a modern Canada (Pelletier 2014, 365). However, 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.... 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 (Laurier 1891).

Delivered at Macdonald's state funeral, which included a funeral train and a lengthy procession of more than 20,000 attendees, the eulogy represents that the image of Macdonald the statesman transcended the partisan rhetoric that characterized much of his image during his life. By his death, Macdonald had been inextricably tied to the very fibre of Canada. Even his greatest opponents acknowledged the inseparable nature of his policies and the history of the country.

Following Macdonald's death, immense public desire for his commemoration emerged. While small-scale commemorations of Macdonald occurred during his lifetime, including 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. The November 1, 1893, unveiling ceremony of the first posthumous statue erected to Macdonald in Hamilton, Ontario, amassed large fanfare with “Hail to the Chief” played by the 13th Battalion band, an elaborate electric button that unveiled the statue, and more than 20,000 attendees (Hamilton Public Library 2024). While the commemoration of Macdonald continued largely on political lines, the public desire to memorialize Macdonald through monumentation succeeded as five statues were erected within four years of his death,³ all of which saw large unveiling ceremonies. Public support at the time of his death was widespread and insisted he be remembered in bronze and granite.

Canada’s hero emerges: the 1950s and Donald Creighton’s Macdonald

For much of the first half of the twentieth century, Macdonald’s image faded away from the public consciousness of Canadians. But, beginning in the 1930s, Macdonald was slowly reintegrated into Canadian memory. A growing desire to navigate and define Canadian identity fuelled the elevation of Macdonald to national hero status. Embedded with a romantic view of history, one that served the growing nationalistic sentiment in Canada (Berger 1976, 32), Macdonald became the embodiment of nationalism and of the Canadian state. Depicted as a respectable, distinguished, charismatic, heroic knight, and the very epitome of what it meant to be Canadian, Macdonald was rapidly repositioned as 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. His image was now predicated almost entirely on nationalism, whereby any Canadian who supported the Canadian state, supported Macdonald as Canada’s destined ruler.

From 1900 to 1940 Macdonald’s image was practically nonexistent. However, in 1941, after the Liberals spent decades actively ignoring Macdonald’s legacy, the unorthodox William Lyon Mackenzie King brought the ghost of Macdonald back to life. Inspired by the outbreak of the Second World War, along with a mystic vision of Macdonald, the spiritualist Liberal prime minister decided to hold a major commemoration of Macdonald on the fiftieth anniversary of his death, on June 6, 1941 (Pelletier 2015). There had been no national celebration of Macdonald since his 1891 funeral, let alone one held

by the Liberals. However, King saw Macdonald as a figure to whom Canadians could rally as the country's unity was being tested by the looming question of conscription. The event was haphazardly thrown together in a matter of weeks, and broadcast live over radio on June 7, one day after the anniversary of Macdonald's death, to ensure a prime listening audience (Pelletier 2015). 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" (King 1941).

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" (CBC Radio News 1941). King and the entire ceremony ignored any controversial elements of Macdonald's legacy, and a new, heroic Macdonald emerged that served to unite a fractured Canada, just as Macdonald had united the Canadian provinces in 1867. The event succeeded in recasting Macdonald as it reintroduced him to new generations of Canadians (Pelletier 2015).

By the early 1950s the nationalistic framing of Macdonald as Canada's hero, resurrected by King, emerged in Canadian historiography. Historian Donald Creighton pushed this image of Macdonald further through his monumental two-volume biography, *The Young Politician* (1952) and *The Old Chieftain* (1955), the first substantial historiographical work done on Macdonald in nearly 40 years. They quickly became bestsellers, gained critical acclaim, and dominated the writings of Macdonald for decades. Seeking to create biographies that would stand as a national monument (Wright 2015, 171), Creighton used biographic writing to present Macdonald as Canada's "Great Chieftain." The significance of Creighton's work is momentous as after its publication, no one revisited Macdonald in any sustained way for fifty years (Wright 2017, 348).

The 1950s marked the beginning of intense discussions surrounding 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 (Igartua 2006, 2). Creighton's biographies served to connect Canadians to ideas of empire. For Creighton, Macdonald could 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 relied on the motif of the St. Lawrence. The “Laurentian Thesis,” the idea that waterways dominated the expansionism of the Canadian state and helped to connect the continent from east to west, was crucial in Canadian academia throughout the twentieth century.

Reflecting a deep anti-Americanism held by both Creighton and English Canadian historiography (Buckner 1996, 117), Macdonald’s chroniclers sought to tie him to the St. Lawrence, and by so doing, to the destiny of Canada. Creighton furthered the idea that the commercial empire of the St. Lawrence had opened the continent to explorers, adventurers, and traders, just as how the Canadian government, and largely Macdonald, opened the continent to immigrants for settlement (Creighton 1998, 428). The St. Lawrence, and in turn Macdonald, were tied to the very origins of Canada. As a result, Creighton’s Macdonald is crafted as a larger-than-life figure commanding Canada’s political life in the nineteenth century and bending conservatism to fit the needs of the country (Martin 2014, 428).

Creighton portrayed Macdonald as a Tory-nationalist icon – one that he could place his own political views within and use to boost the image of the Conservative Party of the 1950s. With this goal in mind, coupled with his belief that good biography should read as a novel, Creighton continuously put thoughts into Macdonald’s head, invented emotional scenes, and fabricated dialogue. Employing a novelist’s flair, Creighton omitted numerous incredibly significant historical feats accomplished by Macdonald. The biography made no mention of the creation of the North-West Mounted Police (NWMP) across either volume (Gwyn 2014, 440), and included insensitive portrayals of Louis Riel and the Métis. As a result, Creighton “never understood that Macdonald ceased to be Macdonald and had become instead his Macdonald, a creation of his imagination” (Wright 2017, 349).

Ironically, Creighton’s attempt to present Macdonald as a man “destined” to rule Canada actually worked to diminish Macdonald’s political aptitude, perseverance, and ability to rise above the many problems in his life. And, by glossing over Macdonald’s political or personal failures – in effect, transforming him into a symbol of Canada itself – Creighton stripped Macdonald of the human qualities that make him more relatable. The author transformed Macdonald from a complex and crafty politician who prevailed despite incredible odds into an unassailable hero, destined to succeed. And Creighton

suggested that opposing the “Great Chieftain” image was opposing Canada itself. In the immediate wake of Creighton’s two-volume opus, few other historians sought to tackle Macdonald’s legacy in a meaningful way: there were minor works produced throughout the 1960s and into the early 1970s, but many of these made references to Creighton.

“ *During the mid-1960s tensions surrounding the national identity of Canada emerged, an identity that confronted the “Britishness” of Canada.* ”

During the mid-1960s tensions surrounding the national identity of Canada emerged, an identity that confronted the “Britishness” of Canada (Christian 2006, 27). Canadians increasingly desired a defined national identity that could transcend the country’s British and French origins and celebrate universal “Canadian” values. With the 100th anniversary of Confederation looming in 1967, Canadians began to see Macdonald as a symbol of this new Canadian image. They cited his role in striking a masterful balance between the “two founding races” of Canada, overcoming linguistic divides in the name of unity (Igartua 2006, 100). As Canada rolled out a series of Centennial projects, Macdonald’s name and image was incorporated into many of the initiatives, including the “Macdonald-Cartier Bridge” from Ottawa to Gatineau, completed in 1965, and the re-naming of Kings Highway 401 in Ontario to the “Macdonald-Cartier Freeway.” The patriotism extended across the country from Calgary’s Sir John A. Macdonald School, built in 1967, to the City of Regina’s 1967 erection of the John A. Macdonald Memorial, to a new French public school in Ontario, École secondaire Macdonald-Cartier, opened in 1969. In 1971, Macdonald received one of the highest public commemorations a Canadian could receive as he appeared on the \$10 bill (he was subsequently stripped from it in 2018). By 1971 most Canadians saw Macdonald as a national hero, worthy of widespread public commemoration.

Historiographical works on Macdonald slowly crept into publication, with Canadian historian P.B. Waite publishing several pieces including his 1967 article “Sir John A. Macdonald: The Man,” his 1975 book *Macdonald: His Life and World*, and his subsequent 1976 book *John A. Macdonald*. All three works depicted 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 used partisan politics to his advantage (Waite 1967, 144–156; Waite 1975). 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” (Swainson 1971, 10). Lena Newman’s 1974 *The John A. Macdonald Album* deeply humanized Macdonald as she 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). However, these works did not capture the minds of Canadians like Creighton’s did and paled in comparison in their ability to substantially expand the image of Macdonald crafted by Creighton. As Canadians were in an intense period of navigating their identity, they needed a symbolic hero; that hero was Creighton’s Macdonald. In Macdonald, Canadians saw the values of 1967 Canada reflected – that is, an unapologetic and celebratory Canadian that embodied Canada’s growing sense of multiculturalism and nationalism.

However, historians soon began turning away from Creighton’s celebratory nationalism. By the mid-to-late 1970s, historians were increasingly challenging the image of the “Grand Chieftain,” and raising concerns about his Macdonald’s drinking, corruption, and his policies towards Indigenous peoples. The trend accelerated over the ensuing decades, and by the 2000s, Macdonald’s reputation had deteriorated under accusations of outdated colonial historiography, murder, racism, and genocide.

Canada's hero or Canada's colonizer?

Following the elevation of Macdonald to heroic status, his image has faced sustained attacks and efforts to remove him from Canadian consciousness altogether. Beginning in the 1970s, a crazed, neurotic, power-hungry, drunk emerged in both historiography and popular culture. This marked the start of an intense denigration that persists today and reflects an unwillingness to contextualize and critically interrogate history. Previous iterations of Macdonald relied on romanticising the past, however, the new image of Macdonald relies on demonizing the past. Today, it seems impossible to discuss Macdonald beyond examining his failures, shortcomings, and the “atrocities” he committed. Canada’s first prime minister is being entirely written off as a “drunk,” “murderer,” and “racist” – a symbol of Canada’s intolerant beginnings, completely at odds with modern notions of tolerance. Any attempt to rationally discuss Macdonald’s complex legacy is met with a backlash. As a result, Canada’s history is poorly understood and misappropriated.

Macdonald the Drunk

Dominating the contemporary image of Macdonald is “Macdonald the drunk,” with almost every damning account of the politician stressing his struggles with alcohol.

Certainly, Macdonald was known to indulge himself, especially during times of hardship. His life was riddled with tragedy at every turn: his father died 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, 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 (Phenix 2006). It is no wonder he turned to alcohol for comfort. However, Macdonald overcame every tragedy – and he also overcame his issues with drinking by the 1880s. Indeed, historians have concluded that Macdonald was not a chronic alcoholic.⁴

Despite common misconceptions, Macdonald was not permanently intoxicated, and Canada was not created through the nose of a bottle. The view

of Macdonald the drunk 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 (Martin 2006, 162).

Reconciling Macdonald's image as a drunk with his impressive statesmanship arguably 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 (Martin 2014, 424).

While Macdonald's struggle with alcoholism did undermine his performance in the House of Commons and capacity to serve in numerous instances, 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 substance abuse. There are many legends that persist today of "Macdonald the drunk," however, Macdonald overcoming substance abuse generates far less attention. Reducing Macdonald to an alcoholic not only distorts the accurate memory of Macdonald, but it diminishes the achievement of Confederation. However, when compared to other charges, perhaps being drunk is not the worst accusation lofted against him.

Macdonald the *Murderer*

Macdonald's policies and treatment of Canada's Indigenous populations plagues his image. Macdonald's approach to Indigenous peoples was certainly complicated (Smith 2021b). Much like many other nineteenth century Canadian politicians, he believed in political 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 its 1876 *Indian Act* (Johnson and Waite 2024, 22). Macdonald noted 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” (Martin 2013, 167).

However, unlike many of his contemporaries, Macdonald 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” (Johnson and Waite 2024, 1, 13).

Macdonald held the cabinet position of Interior & Indian Affairs from 1878 to 1883 followed by the position of minister of Indian Affairs from 1883 to 1887. His total tenure in these positions was ten years. 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 Macdonald to this day, it is impossible to identify any who better understood Indigenous peoples or who was innately more sympathetic to them” (Gwyn 2014, 447).

Macdonald’s sympathy impacted policy as he extended the franchise to certain Indigenous men 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, largely through property qualifications. The act was “exceptionally imaginative and generous to an astounding degree” (Gwyn 2012, 446) and 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*.

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 Northwest (Strong-Boag 2002, 80). Extending the franchise to certain First Nations men was not an entirely new concept.⁵ However, the 1885 *Franchise Act* focused on integration rather than assimilation. Maintaining rigid ideas of property, “Indians” who held \$150 or more in property were the sights of Macdonald’s inclusion. The new provisions did not require First Nations peoples 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.

At the time, Macdonald's critics accused him of simply trying to woo First Nations people into voting Conservative. However, his efforts were risky, as popular anti-First Nations sentiment peaked in 1885 (Little 2018, 539). Initially, Macdonald's *Franchise Act* intended to include all First Nations men across Canada. However, the outbreak of the 1885 Riel Rebellion forced Macdonald to exclude those in the Northwest. The bill, introduced into the House of Commons one week before the Battle of Duck Lake, Saskatchewan, on March 19, 1885, could not maintain its 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 (Hall 2015, 152). The Liberal Opposition feared that "bloody vindictive barbarians" would be enfranchised (Official Debates of the House of Commons of Canada 1 May 1885, 1521, 1523) and attempted to do everything they could to restrict extending the franchise to people they labelled "pagans," "barbarians," "beggars," and "savages" (Little 2018, 543).

Narrowing the scope of the franchise ultimately ensured that the bill was passed. Peter E. Jones, the Mississauga head chief, wrote to Macdonald, "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!" (Jones 1885). While not every Indigenous person shared Jones' optimism and many did not welcome enfranchisement (Smith 2021, 34) the *Franchise Act* marked a distinct difference from prior attempts to extend the franchise and reflected sentiments 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" (Smith 2021, 33).

Macdonald's views towards Indigenous people are complex as, while often regarded as problematic, in many instances his views can be considered 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" (Smith 2014, 58–93). He 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 treatment, and even went as far as to implement far more restrictive policies. However, the contemporary image of Macdonald ignores this romantic progressivism (and

Liberal Opposition) and is swept up in debates over Macdonald's handling of the Riel resistance and rebellion, his role in creating residential schools, and his use of food as a method of subjugation.

Macdonald's image as the heroic builder of Canada has rapidly declined proportionately to the elevation of the heroic status of defender of French-Catholic rights and Métis culture, Louis Riel. Riel's controversial execution in November 1885 turned him into a martyr, especially for French and Indigenous Canadians. Today, he is considered by many Canadians to be a pluralistic symbol of Canada and the embodiment of Canadian character (Owram 1982, 336). As a result, a new narrative has arisen that frames Riel as a hero martyred by Macdonald, Canada's new colonial villain.

“ *Macdonald's decision to execute Riel in 1885 for treason was controversial.* ”

Macdonald's decision to execute Riel in 1885 for treason was controversial. Macdonald knew that regardless of which decision was made, a large portion of Canadians would be angered. However, a majority of the nation (overwhelmingly Anglo-Canadians) demanded Riel's death.⁶ Macdonald took the gamble of angering the French to appease the English while using the 1885 rebellion to justify the new and expensive Canadian Pacific 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 “law” was skewed against Riel is a different question than whether he should be executed (Johnson and Waite, 14). The Riel rebellion forced Macdonald to clearly choose a side and ultimately reflected a pragmatic political decision by a leader whose hands were tied.

This shift in the public's perception of Riel was evident in the 1979 CBC docudrama, *Riel*. In it, Macdonald is portrayed as a caricature: an erratic, self-absorbed, incapable drunk who could not separate policy from personal motive (Bloomfield 1979). *Riel* shows Macdonald haphazardly deciding the fate of the nation over pool and cocktails, or while playing with model railway

cars. Rather than presenting a balanced, thoughtful portrayal of the politician, *Riel* smears Macdonald as a deeply troubled, corrupt, and drunken statesman who fell victim to his own ambition.

Contrast that portrayal with the Riel we meet in Chester Brown's 2003 graphic history, *Louis Riel: A Comic Strip Biography*. Brown portrays Riel as a martyr who stood up to injustices committed by a corrupt colonial government (Brown 2003). Macdonald, meanwhile, is presented as governing through a permanent state of intoxication, placing the completion of the CPR above all else. Brown's Macdonald is a power-hungry villain, despite the author's actual beliefs to the contrary. Explaining his choice to portray Macdonald so one-dimensionally, Brown says "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... And quite frankly, I'd rather have lived in a state run by John A. Macdonald than one run by Louis Riel" (Brown 2003, 259).

It is extremely telling that Brown intentionally crafted Macdonald's image in a negative light to tell an engaging story and faced virtually no criticism for doing so. The modern woke narrative that elevates Riel to hero and Macdonald to villain has no room for nuance. Today, Riel has become a pluralistic symbol that functions as a unified national myth despite reflecting extremely diverse symbolism (Owram 1982, 198), while Macdonald symbolizes a problematic history.

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" (Smith 2021).⁷ However, his deeply ambivalent views towards Indigenous people have left historians divided on how to examine his intentions. 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 attributing the sole blame to Macdonald is not only factually incorrect, but greatly oversimplifies a highly contested and complex issue. 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 (Miller 2014, 324). 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 (Miller 2014, 325).

Despite Canada having limited financial resources, Macdonald endorsed federally funded Indian Residential schools in 1879 and offloaded much of the cost and responsibility to Christian denominations (Smith 2014, 71). The initial intention behind residential schools was framed under the nineteenth-century paternalistic concept whereby Indigenous peoples were seen as a dying race whose very survival rested on their ability to culturally conform to the broader Canadian whole (Smith 2014, 81). Residential schools could be a way to assist this “survival” process. The first residential school was built in Canada in 1828 as an “industrial school,” when Macdonald was only a teenager, years before he stepped foot into the political sphere.⁸ From the start of the residential and industrial school system until the last school’s closure in 1996, 140 schools operated in total (see endnotes, “List of Residential Schools”). By Macdonald’s 1891 death there were 51, with 47 created while he was prime minister (“List of Residential Schools”). That leaves 89 schools created following his death, and 93 created in total while he was not at the helm. The contemporary image of Macdonald maintains that he was responsible for the entirety of the residential school system, but a politician cannot act from the grave. The actions of a Macdonald are held more critically than those of the generations of politicians who actively and intentionally perpetuated the system, the churches that 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 the atrocities committed in them in the 104 years after his death, when the worst wrongs and abuse in the schools happened.

In addition, Macdonald’s residential school policies were not tyrannically and undemocratically imposed for posterity. Successive governments, both Conservative and Liberal, could have altered residential school policies to improve conditions for Indigenous peoples, or eliminated the system altogether, had they the insight and political will. And yet, Macdonald is increasingly portrayed as solely responsible – in effect, a tyrannical dictator⁹ who singlehandedly enacted any policy he wanted without public support.

Popular portrayals of Macdonald's attitudes toward Indigenous peoples draw attention to his infamous 1883 quote advocating for residential schools: "... when the school is on the reserve, the child lives with his parents who are savages; he is surrounded by savages, and 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" (Hopper 2018). Macdonald's tolerance for Indigenous peoples cannot be over-asserted, but it also cannot be accurately reflected through one popularized quote. Macdonald less famously 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 (Smith 2014, 81).

Reconciling this sympathetic sentiment with his 1883 quote proves difficult. However, it is possible for the same person who created policies advocating for assimilation to also acknowledge historic injustices inflicted on a group of people. The former does not diminish the latter, but it highly complicates portrayals. Phrased under civilization arguments characteristic of the day, it reflects Macdonald's struggles with the deeply troubling prospect of Indigenous cultural demise, an awareness that adds nuance to his often-cited damning quotations.

Macdonald's deep ambivalence towards Indigenous peoples is omitted from his modern image. Macdonald is now commonly attacked for his rationing policies towards the First Nations peoples of the Plains in the 1880s. Such policies, and the intentions behind them, are misunderstood. No work greater exemplifies the new revisionist approach to Canada's history than James Daschuk's 2013 *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life*. Daschuk's book immensely contributed to the contemporary movement to demonize Macdonald as part of the immoral and flawed Canadian colonial project of state expansion, as it tied the contemporary disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians directly to Macdonald.

Clearing the Plains personified many of the ills of Canadian society into Macdonald, and framed historians as intentionally covering up a horrible history. Daschuk presents a racist Canadian government led by the Conservatives who introduced “draconian policies,” abused their power, and used food as a method of subjugation (Daschuk, 2013, xxiv). 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 Indigenous was an integral, if not always explicit, component of the Tory government’s program of development” (109). 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 facilitated his intentional destruction of Canada’s Plains peoples (109).

“*Voters in the West gave Macdonald strong political support until the time of his death.*”

Daschuk glazes over the uncomfortable reality about this era of government policy: Macdonald was not solely to blame, and the Liberals under Mackenzie did more harm to the Plains Indigenous than they are credited for. During 1877–1878, the last year of its mandate, the Mackenzie administration spent \$421,504 on Indian affairs. Macdonald, taking office mid-1878, increased spending by 16 percent that same year and continued to increase it throughout his time in office, with spending on Indian Affairs growing 181 per cent to \$1,183,414 percent by 1882 (Dutil 2021, 13). 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” (Miller 2020). Macdonald had broad and sustained

support from Canadians, support that Daschuk overlooks. Few books have been as influential and controversial in Canadian history as *Clearing the Plains*. Daschuk inaccurately concludes that 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” (127). However, the famine on the plains in the 1880s was not deliberately set in motion. While both the Liberal and the Conservative governments can rightfully be criticized for not providing enough aid to stop famine, neither can be charged with creating it.

The era of treaty-making is now tainted by examining it through a revisionist lens whereby government corruption, planned deception, gross negligence, and charges of genocide characterize the narrative. Such an approach misunderstands the intention of the Canadian government, carelessly throws around loaded terms, ignores conditions that caused pragmatic political responses, and erroneously attributes blame solely to Macdonald and the Conservative government. This approach reflects a broader shift in historiography that is marred by appeals to political correctness. David Hall’s 2015 *From Treaties to Reserves: The Federal Government and Native Peoples in Territorial Alberta, 1870–1905* offers a counter-approach and argues 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 (Hall 2015, 4). He adds that the government’s treaty policy was highly politicized and characterized by “incompetence, corruption, inconsistency, and tight-fistedness” (Hall 2015, 4), ultimately reflecting a pragmatic political response to treaty negotiations.

Hall’s argument, however, is increasingly contentious. 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 and the villain narrative that maintains that the government colonized, subordinated, and

took advantage of a people who were facing *planned* mass disease, starvation, and death. Today, arguing against such a deeply troubling narrative is nearly impossible, and certainly controversial, to do. 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” (5). Hall does not exonerate the Canadian government or ignore its mismanagement of Indigenous policy. Rather, he ultimately argues that the two sides failed to understand one another due to cultural differences.

Macdonald’s reluctance to implement harsher rationing policies, as desired by the Liberal Opposition, and the Conservative government’s increased spending on Indian Affairs, contradicts the image of Macdonald as intentionally and systematically starving the Plains Indigenous. However, the narrative of 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 is set. The reality is, Macdonald did not cause famine, he was relatively sympathetic towards the plights of Plains Indigenous, 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.¹⁰ However, that is not a comfortable reality for Canadians to come to terms with, and it is far easier to offload the blame solely to Macdonald and the Conservative government.

Macdonald the Racist

In efforts to challenge what they consider to be overly nationalistic history, some scholars have called for an “anti-racist” approach to history (Stanley 2000, 79) that has largely led to the critical study of Macdonald’s treatment of the Chinese. 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 labourers who were willing to work in poor conditions for very little pay (Ward 2002, 11). Between 1881 and 1884, more than 17,000 Chinese immigrants came to Canada under work contracts to build the railway, which intensified racism and fears of foreign labour in BC (Ward 2002, 3). These fears seeped into federal politics, as debates surrounding the Chinese and their ability to assimilate 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. Macdonald's treatment of the Chinese fuels the image of Macdonald the racist, arguably the most accurate of the accusations loosed towards him. While Macdonald was liberal on many matters of race, 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 (Gwyn 2012, 528). The same *Franchise Act* that was generous towards Indigenous people became Canada's first implemented explicitly discriminatory, race-based legislation (Gwyn 2012, 533).

“*The Franchise Act was blatantly racist towards the Chinese.*”

The *Franchise Act* was blatantly racist towards the Chinese. While Macdonald's views of citizenship were progressive for his time, he had his limits: all Chinese men residing in Canada were simply not to have the vote (Strong-Boag 2002, 69). On May 4, 1885, Macdonald proposed this exclusion. 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 (Stanley 2014, 393). 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...” (Official Debates of the House of Commons of Canada 1885, 1589). In his advocacy to exclude the Chinese based on racialized prejudices, he attempted to legislate race-based qualifiers to Canadian citizenship.

Macdonald injected racism based on alleged biological differences, or “scientific racism,” into the Canadian state federally, organizing race as a political principle (Stanley 2014, 394). 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 has no British instincts or British feelings or aspirations and therefore ought not to have a vote” (Official Debates of the House of Commons of Canada 1885, 1582). Echoing arguments made by BC House members who called for Chinese exclusion, Macdonald’s amendment to introduce Chinese exclusion was similar to provincial legislation that discriminated against “Chinamen” (Stanley 2014, 400). The uniqueness of Macdonald’s proposed legislation, however, was that it was at the federal level and that it made appeals to biological arguments of race. To Macdonald, the Chinese were too biologically different to be considered citizens.

Macdonald fiercely defended his ideas surrounding restrictions. In response to a question concerning whether naturalized “Chinamen” ceased to be “Chinamen” and instead become British subjects, Macdonald argued that “the Aryan character of the future of British North America” was at risk (Official Debates of the House of Commons of Canada 1885, 1589; Stanley 2014). Beyond an expression of anti-Chinese sentiments, his statements reflected the kind of Canada he desired. 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 racialized prejudices. However, as the debates persisted such opinions were “clearly in the majority” (Strong-Boag 2002, 88). Macdonald himself saw the 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 otherwise; but the prejudice is near universal” (Official Debates of the House of Commons of Canada 1887, 642). He maintained his claims that the Chinese were biologically incompatible with Anglo-Europeans, and unlike the First Nations, were incapable of displaying “British feelings or aspirations” (Official Debates of the House of Commons of Canada 1885, 1582).

The vote to exclude the Chinese was passed, as the House expressed significantly less sympathy for the Chinese than for the First Nations. Through the passage of the *Franchise Act*, both Macdonald and his contemporaries successfully demonstrated that biologically defined “race” could be used as the main criterion for deciding who could be Canadian (Stanley 2014, 417). 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" (Gordon 1982, 22). However, it was passed with wide support of the House. The exclusion of the Chinese reflects that Macdonald's progressive ideas regarding Canadian citizenship only went so far. However, Canadians desired harsh measures towards the Chinese, as there was widespread belief that the Chinese were undercutting Canadian labour and were unassimilable to Canadian culture (Gwyn 2012, 533). This does not diminish the reality that Macdonald, and his contemporaries, enacted Canada's first-ever explicit discriminatory legislation (Gwyn 2012, 532), and should be criticized for it, but criticized within the context of racial understandings within the British Empire.

Decapitating Canadian history

The fierce debate over Macdonald's legacy has rapidly spread to the public realm. 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 being cancelled, and even the very celebration of Canada Day is cast as outdated and racist. A growing chorus of voices are replacing traditional Canadian historical narratives with new ones slanted to their personal biases. In essence, Macdonald is being cancelled across the country that he helped to create; reduced to his shortcomings, his flaws outweigh everything he did for Canada. The deliberate mischaracterization Macdonald and his legacy is, plainly put, wrong and unjust (Frum 2021).

The legacy of Macdonald as a monument to colonialism

An appalling image dominated Canadian headlines on August 29, 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 (Hickey 2020). The demonstration, beginning as a peaceful march advocating for the reduction of police funding, quickly turned its sights onto vandalizing the Macdonald monument, a statue that the demonstrators argued celebrated

a “European colonizer” (Hickey 2020). Such vandalism is all too common in Canada as calls to remove all commemorations of controversial figures dominates public dialogue. Unfortunately for Macdonald, he is facing the full rage of this mob. One of the original five monuments to Macdonald, the 21-metre-high Montreal Macdonald Monument, unveiled on June 6, 1895, 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 will not be reinstated. This comes as no surprise, as Macdonald’s statues took up nine of the 15 spots on a 2020 petition calling for the removal of “racist statues in Canada” (Brimacombe 2020). Clearly, the anti-Macdonald crowd sees him as Canada’s leading racist and believes that Canada’s problematic past can be purged once his statues are removed.

Educational institutes sharing Macdonald’s namesake are now forsaking him. On November 12, 2020, “Sir John A. Macdonald High School” in Nova Scotia announced it would be renamed to foster an “inclusive environment” (CBC News 2020). On October 19, 2020, Queen’s University decided to remove Macdonald’s name from their law school building due to the moniker sending “a conflicting message that interferes with the values and aspirations of the current law school and Queen’s community” (Glowacki 2021). Despite Macdonald’s achievement as a highly skilled lawyer who played a fundamental role in drafting *The British North America Act 1867*, a Canadian law school will not even recognize his legacy. More recently, in March 2022, Sir John A. Macdonald Public School in Brampton, Ontario, was renamed to *Nibi Emosaawdang* to reflect the Ontario’s School Board’s “commitments to anti-colonialism, anti-racism, [and] anti-oppression” (Hopper 2022). Pickering similarly renamed its Macdonald school to Josephine Mandamin (Hopper 2022). Now, Sir John A. Macdonald School in Calgary is under question. Following calls for removal, 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” (Simmons 2022).

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. Even a Kingston, Ontario, pub, “Sir John’s Public House,” changed its name to “Public House.” Housed in Macdonald’s 1849–1860 law office, the pub’s owners removed all ties to Macdonald in an effort to be “more inclusive... and welcoming to all Canadians” (Harris 2018).

Anything that even mentions Macdonald is under fire. The J.K. Johnson and P.B. 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” (Johnson and Waite 2024, 1). The biography already thoroughly presents Macdonald’s role in creating residential schools, his harsh policies towards the Plains Indigenous, and his treatment of Riel. Macdonald’s 2014 “Heritage Minute” has been made private on *Historica Canada*’s website (Historica Canada 2024). In 2021 Macdonald’s biography was erased entirely from his “Historic Person” designation on Parks Canada’s *Directory of Federal Heritage Designations*. The only information that remains is a declaration that his “designation has been identified for review.”

Especially alarming are the ongoing efforts to remove statues of Macdonald – sometimes forcibly. Between 2020–2022, six Macdonald statues have been removed. The questions of why, when, 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. Kingston City Council voted to remove Macdonald’s publicly funded City Park Statue in June 2021 (CBC News 2021). After the statue’s removal, there was peaceful protest (unlike the prior violent anti-Macdonald protest) 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” (CBC News 2021). While city council claimed the statue would be relocated to Cataraqui cemetery where Macdonald is buried, over 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 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” were written on its nearby plaque (Mazur 2021). This followed a 2020 vandalism.

Macdonald’s Hamilton statue, which amassed one of the largest unveiling ceremonies in 1893 with over 20,000 attendees, was toppled in 2021 (Hristova 2022). Despite calls for reinstallation, it remains in hiding, much like Kingston’s statue. The recently unveiled 2015 statue of Macdonald, *Holding Court*, in Picton, Ontario, was removed in 2021. The statue now lays in storage awaiting its sentencing (Postmedia Staff 2022). Charlottetown’s Macdonald statue, which depicts the Prime Minister sitting on a park bench, was removed in May 2021 despite the initial acceptance of recommendations

from local First Nations groups that the statue could remain public so long as changes were made (Stewart 2020). These recommendations included the addition of an Indigenous figure to the bench so that it could not be used for photo opportunities, a plaque detailing his contributions to residential schools, and consultation from a Mi'kmaw artist (Ross and Ryan 2021). The wishes of local Indigenous groups were ignored.

In August 2018 a 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 (CBC News 2018). In September 2020, the Macdonald statue in Wilmot, Ontario, was moved into storage "temporarily," following vandalism occurring as frequently as three times a week (Hutchins 2020). The statue remains in storage today. Following a July 18, 2020, dousing in paint and the subsequent installation of security cameras, Macdonald's statue located in Toronto's Queen's Park was boarded up in scaffolding where it has remained since (Ferguson 2023). On March 5, 2021, a notice was added to the fully entombed Macdonald, stating "though we cannot change the history we have inherited, we can shape the history we wish to leave behind" (Warmington 2021). The "history we wish to leave behind" (whoever this "we" may be) seems not to be history at all but rather outright cancellation and erasure.

The John A. Macdonald Memorial in Regina 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 March 31 vote by the city to remove the statue, on April 13, 2021, the statue was *secretly* removed. The removal was intentionally not publicized for "security reasons" and the statue was moved into storage where it will sit for the unforeseeable future (Atter 2021). We are left to guess what "security reasons" prompted such secrecy. The only statue of Macdonald left standing, unobstructed, is his statue on Parliament Hill in Ottawa. This statue likely remains untouched solely because removing it may force light on Canada's other prime ministers.

Decisions to tear down Macdonald are being presented as a consensus. However, the fact is, most Canadians do not support the removal of Macdonald's image from the public. A 2018 poll by the Angus Reid Institute found that 70 percent of Canadians opposed the erasure of Macdonald's image, and a poll conducted in 2020 by Leger found that 75 percent of Canadians opposed the "spontaneous teardown of Macdonald statues" (Frum 2021). 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” (Hopper 2022). Forty-four percent 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” (Hopper 2022). Fifty-nine percent of respondents even reported that Macdonald’s foundational role as the father of Canada “outweighs his role in the creation of Residential schools” (Hopper 2022). More interesting are the results on racial lines. Even among Indigenous respondents, 43 percent did not favour “a wholesale removal of Macdonald memorials” and, while overall 67 percent of respondents retained a “favourable” impression of Macdonald, this sentiment was identical between white Canadians, at 67 percent, and non-white Canadians at 65 percent (Hopper 2022). 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” (Dutil 2022).

Efforts are underway 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 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” (Dawson 2023). 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” (Dawson 2023). Clearly, 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.

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 (Robertson 2021). 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 (Robertson 2021)? Such questions would be very useful when looking at contentious historical figures. Macdonald's legacy would benefit from interrogating these questions as his career would have to be examined in its entirety. Further proof, aside from appeals to emotion, would be needed to justify tearing down his statues.

Implications on Canadian history and society

On January 12, 2021, more than 200 historians, policy experts, educators, business leaders, and public figures signed a joint statement in defence of Macdonald. The statement noted that his faults and 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” (The Friends of Sir John A. Macdonald and the Macdonald-Laurier Institute 2021). 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.” 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.

On July 1, 2023, 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” (Canadian Historical Association 2021). Presenting their opinion as a “broad consensus... among historical experts” they further argued 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.” The letter concluded with the statement “we encourage Canadians to recognize this history for what it is: genocide” (Canadian Historical Association 2021).

The highly divisive and politically loaded statement removed any room for debate. There was, and is, no consensus amongst historians about how to characterize Canadian history. In response, an open letter to the CHA was penned by Chris Dummitt and J.R. Miller. The letter stated 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 (Hopper 2021).

The letter criticized 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 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” (Hopper 2021). Despite the compelling letter, along with others sent from esteemed and respected historians, the CHA never retracted nor apologized for its statement. However, as the struggle over Macdonald’s image shows, there is no consensus on how to characterize Canada’s history.

Canadians should reflect upon their history. However, when debate is silenced, this process becomes dangerous. With Macdonald, discussion is circumvented, and the outcome is immediate condemnation. 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 the embodiment of 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” (Sweeney 2020). Canadians cannot keep having their history torn down with no say in the 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” (Sankey 2022). 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. The truth is, tearing down statues or obliterating certain figures from Canada's history does nothing to bring healing or justice to Indigenous communities.

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In 2019, the Government of Canada and Parks Canada announced plans to systematically review thousands of existing plaques and historic designations in an effort to “advance reconciliation and to confront the legacy of colonialism” (Ostola 2022). They announced a new framework for Canada's commemoration process, one intended to create a “new way of sharing history.” Since then, 208 historical individuals, locations, and events have been identified as problematic enough to warrant further investigation – including Macdonald. *Parks Canada* gives four reasons for placement on this list: terminology, absence, colonial assumptions, and controversial beliefs and behaviour (Ostola 2022). The categories of “colonial assumptions” and “controversial beliefs and behaviours” are particularly alarming. “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” (Ostola 2022). This process is clearly ideologically driven revisionism. Where do we draw the line? It is doubtful that any historical figure will emerge unscathed following this “review.” Rather than sanitizing Canadian history and tearing down prominent historical actors, historical context must be considered, and contributions to Canada must be acknowledged. “If we are standing on their shoulders today, at the very least we owe them a plaque on which to rest their feet” (Ostola 2022).

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.”*

– Sir John A. Macdonald, Toronto, May 30, 1881
(quoted in Martin 2013, 192)

Macdonald’s image has drastically declined since the 1970s as he is now the enemy of a “tolerant” 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 and at times 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 a mastery of politics. Macdonald’s 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.

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 won the most elections as party leader in Canada's history (Schlee 2018). 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. Macdonald was fundamental in shaping Canada and made it his life's mission. "Canada was his cause and Canada was worth it" (Gibson and Milnes 2015, xxix).

The way that Canadian history is being dishonoured and diminished is revolting. 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 to the increasing trend of cancel culture. Macdonald's image has always functioned to serve the present generation, 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 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" (The Friends of Sir John A. Macdonald and the Macdonald-Laurier Institute 2021). [MLI](#)

About the author



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Endnotes

- 1 See: Daschuk, James. 2013. *Clearing the Plains*. University of Regina; Stanley, Timothy J. 2000. “Why I killed Canadian history: Conditions for an anti-racist history in Canada.” *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 33(65), 79–103.
- 2 In referring to the North-West Rebellion of 1885 I am using the term “rebellion” rather than “resistance,” which can be applied to the 1869 uprising in Red River. This is because the latter was an insurrection against a provisional government in Manitoba in 1870. See Douglas Owrarn, “The Myth of Louis Riel” in *The Canadian Historical Review* 63:3 (1982): 319.
- 3 The initial five statues of Macdonald were 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: Yun, Tom. 2018. “Where Sir John A. Macdonald stands in Canada: an interactive map.” *Macleans*, August 19, 2018. <https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/where-sir-john-a-macdonald-stands-in-canada-an-interactive-map/>
- 4 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”; Gwyn, *Nation Maker*.
- 5 In 1869 the *Gradual Enfranchisement Act* sought to extend the franchise to First Nations 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 municipal powers in the fields of local taxation, health, and enforcement of bylaws. 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.” See: Little, J.I. 2018. “Counting the First Nations Vote: Ontario’s Grand River Reserve and the Electoral Franchise Act of 1885.” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Volume 52 Issue 2, Spring 2018.

- 6 See Mumford, Jeremy. 2007. “Why Was Louis Riel, A United States Citizen, Hanged as a Canadian Traitor?” *Canadian Historical Review*, 88(2), 237–262.
- 7 See Donald Smith’s fullest explication of Macdonald and the Indigenous question in his 2021 book, *Seen but Not Seen: Influential Canadians and the First Nations from the 1840s to Today*.
- 8 This paper utilizes the compiled list of residential schools recognized by the *Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement* as it is a relatively comprehensive, publicly accessible list. Residential School Settlement, “List of Residential Schools” (database). <http://www.residentialschoolsettlement.ca/schools.html>
- 9 Macdonald’s contemporary image has been increasingly equated with the likes of dictators Joseph Stalin of Soviet Union and Germany’s Adolf Hitler. See: Buchan, Giao. 2020. “Is John A. Macdonald our version of Stalin?” Letter to *Toronto Star*, September 15, 2020. <https://www.pressreader.com/canada/toronto-star/20200915/281818581250641>.
- 10 See Hall, *From Treaties to Reserves*.

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