

JOHN A. MACDONALD: CANADA'S CONTRADICTIONARY SYMBOL

HE IS NOT A SYMBOL TO REVERE, BUT ONE TO HELP US LEARN OUR TRUE HISTORY, NOT THE MYTH, WRITES GUELPH'S PAUL SMITH



PAUL SMITH
Column

Canadians think of our nation as, well ... nice. The peaceable kingdom, said Northrop Frye, with "peace, order and good government" written right into our constitution. In contrast to ... well, you know who. That is our national myth, part truth, part fantasy.

Yet John A. Macdonald was our first Prime Minister — and a racist. He symbolizes the contradiction in our origin myth of Canada. Being a racist in 1867 was unremarkable — the majority of people in Canada probably fit the bill. White supremacy underpinned all the European nations' colonial empires. So, why the fuss about John A. statues, place names and legacy? Why the red paint? Is it just cancel culture or revisionist history?

Why do we erect statues and name schools and streets after historical figures? To revere these people and their role in nation building and history making.

But when that figure also directed the wilful starvation of thousands of people, dispossession of tens of thousands, taking children from thousands of families and a lingering 150-plus year legacy of residential schools? Of course John A. is an indelible part of our

history, brokering Confederation and overseeing Canada's coast-to-coast expansion — at a huge human cost. This is Canada's contradiction.

'SERIOUS CRIMES AGAINST INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'

History is clear, Macdonald committed serious crimes against Indigenous people, both First Nations and the Michif or Métis Nation; no revisionist history. It was common knowledge in his time, editorialists drew "cartoons" about starving Indigenous people due to Macdonald's policy. He despised my own people, the Métis Nation, called us "miserable half-breeds," arranged our betrayal and executed Louis Riel.

In the 1980s, Pierre Trudeau and Richard Nixon even compared notes on US and Canadian treatment of Indigenous people in their colonial history, with Trudeau noting that Canada starved First Nations into submission.

Guelph has no contentious statues or schools named after Macdonald. Guelph has not engaged in the fractious public debate about John A. that Montreal, Kitchener, Waterloo and Wilmot have.

John A. does have a significant connection to Guelph. He was a real estate developer in the Ward, was feted at city hall on occasion and made a famous whistle-stop in the 1882 election in support of the Conservative candidate, James Goldie (of Goldie Mill fame), who lost.

Of course, the die was already cast against First Nations by the British in pre-Confederation treaties like that for Guelph and surrounding area, the Between the Lakes Treaty of 1792 between the Anishinaabe and the British colo-



Namish Modi/Torstar
The controversial Sir John A. Macdonald statue in Baden.

nial governor John Graves Simcoe. The British dispossession and betrayal of First Nations is also well-documented, their military allies against the United States in both the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812.

Both Canada and the United States were engaged in a furious expansion west in the 19th century. Macdonald's "Clearing the Plains" of First Nations and Métis Nation people is what we remember as among his most heinous acts. My own great grandparents fled Red River to escape the "reign of terror" unleashed by Macdonald's betrayal of the Manitoba Act. They survived, unlike many others.

Perhaps John A. Macdonald is the perfect symbol for Canada, because of the contradiction. Not a symbol to revere, but to help us learn our true history, not the myth. Today, Canada is indeed a leader as a liberal democracy with rights and freedoms. Canada's constitution and courts have been used by Indigenous people to prove that Canada and John A. perpetrated these grave acts against them. That is a hopeful irony. Canada could become more of that peaceable kingdom through real reconciliation.

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