NOTES

1 *Maclean's* magazine, 10 June 2011.

2 As quoted by Ged Martin, "Archival Evidence and John A. Macdonald Biography," *Journal of Historical Biography* 1 (Spring 2007): 91.

3 Library and Archives Canada [LAC], Kimberley Papers, A 314, Lisgar to Kimberley 11 May 1871, enclosure, Macdonald to Francis Hincks, n.d. and postscript by Lisgar. It is ironic that historians subsequently blamed Lisgar for hampering Macdonald's diplomatic negotiations by passing on his private letters to British officials.

4 LAC, Kimberley Papers, A 314, Lisgar to Kimberley 11 May 1871, enclosure, Macdonald to Francis Hincks, n.d., Minutes by Kimberley, 23 May 1871; Gladstone 25 May 1871.

5 LAC, Kimberley Papers, A 314, Lisgar to Kimberley, private, 17 August 1871.

6 Library and Archives Canada, 314 Kimberley Papers, 30 August 1871 Lisgar to Kimberley, private.

7 The other 1% of the popular vote went to "other" candidates. Parliament of Canada, Electoral results, 2nd election, autumn 1872, http://www.parl.gc.ca/parlinfo/Compilations/ElectionsAndRidings/ResultsParty.aspx?Season=0&Parliament=4190e40c-3fa8-409c-bab7-5a4008b89f47

8 As quoted by Ben Forster, "Alexander Mackenzie," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/mackenzie_alexander_12E.html

9 John A. Macdonald, 7 March 1876, *House of Commons Debates*, 3rd Parliament, Third Session, vol. 1, 495. http://parl.canadiana.ca/view/oop.debates_HOC0303_03/536?r=0&s=2

10 Ibid.: 493.

11 John A. Macdonald, speech to the Workingmen of Toronto, 30 May 1881 https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/primeministers/h4-4035-e.html

12 Lorne to Hicks-Beach, 3 December 1878, Lorne MS, A 717.

13 Lorne to Hicks-Beach, 8 February 1879, Lorne MS, A 717.

14 Dufferin to Lorne, 22 August 1878, LAC, Dufferin MS, A 416.

15 Hicks-Beach to Lorne, 31 December 1878, Lorne MS, A 717.

16 Lorne to Hicks-Beach, - [?] March 1879, Lorne MS, A 717.

17 Hicks-Beach to Lorne, 11 February 1879, Lorne MS, A 717.

18 As quoted in J.M.S. Careless, *Brown of the Globe*, vol II: *Statesman of Confederation*, 1860-1880 (Toronto: Macmillan, 1963): 305.

19 Ged Martin, *Favourite Son? John A. Macdonald and the Voters of Kingston, 1841-1891* (Kingston: Kingston Historical Society, 2010): 83-94.

20 J.-C. Bonenfant, "George-Etienne Cartier," Dictionary of Canadian Biography http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/cartier_george_etienne_10E.html.

21 LAC, Dufferin Papers, A 407, Dufferin to Kimberley, private, 9 August 1873.

22 Dufferin to Kimberley, despatch 197, 15 August 1873, and enclosure "Memorial" presented 13 August 1873, William Leggo, The History of the Administration of the Right Honorable Frederick Temple, Earl of Dufferin (Montreal: Lovell Publishing, 1878),160-168; LAC, Dufferin Papers, A 410, Dufferin to Macdonald, private, 31 July 1873; Barbara J. Messamore, Canada's Governors General, 1847-1878: Biography and Constitutional Evolution (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), chapter 8.

23 Ged Martin, Favourite Son?: 154.

24 Ibid.: 158.

ACKNOWLEDGING PATRIARCH'S FAILURES WILL HELP CANADA MATURE AS A NATION

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In 2015, as the bicentennial of John A. Macdonald's birth is being marked, our first and most important Prime Minister has become a lightning rod for a debate over Canada's past but also over its present. As an historian, I am gratified to see such a thoughtful debate sustained over so long; it seems like Canadian history, and Macdonald's place in it, finally matters. The poles in the argument over his legacy were most succinctly staked out in the debate in the *Walrus* as the anniversary of Macdonald's birth in January 2015 grew near. On one hand, Stephen Marche described our first PM as a corrupt drunken racist deserving our "considered and active contempt."[1] At the other end of the debate, Macdonald's most recent biographer, Richard Gwyn, defended his protagonist portraying Sir John A. as "Canada's First Scapegoat," accused by 21st-century writers of being "a cover for our own failings" as a nation.[2] In his defence of "Old Tomorrow," Gwyn rightfully defended his hero on the charges of corruption (they were all corrupt in those days), on the alcoholism issue (he was sober for most of his time as P.M.), and on his racism (which Gwyn notes was surpassed in the case of the Chinese by Macdonald's Liberal successor, Wilfrid Laurier, who raised the notorious Head Tax by 500%).

The question driving the debate over Macdonald's legacy centres on the question of whether he was a proverbial "man-of-his-time" acting in accord with the prevalent beliefs and attitudes of the day, or whether he was exceptional, being either ahead or behind his time in his opinions and actions. I will admit my own bias in this controversy; I am skeptical about attributing the character of an age to a single individual. As Professor Donald Smith told me, "Biography is not history, the bonding of a writer and the central character is pretty intense," and that enthusiasm for their subjects should come as no surprise.[3] I am also wary of interpreting thoughts or musings of historical figures such as Macdonald on their own. My graduate advisor warned that the study of ideas at the level of ideas was like nailing Jello to the wall.

Instead of the mushy ground of ideas, Macdonald's actions and the legacy of his policies provide evidence that can be assessed in a serious way. There is no denying the long shadow of his influence on our nation. Gwyn is right in presenting him as "The Man Who Made Us." Whether we would all be Americans without him as Gwyn suggested is counterfactual history and a matter of speculation. This discussion focuses on Macdonald's influence on the relationship between the state and its indigenous inhabitants, the most contentious legacy of his time in power. In a recent collection, *Macdonald at 200*, historian J.R. Miller wrote that on his return to power in 1878, the PM also served the longest term as Minister of Indian Affairs in our history and "for good or ill, Macdonald was the architect of Canadian Indian policy. The foundation that he and his government laid would last largely unaltered until the middle of the 20th century."[4] "Indian" issues were so central to his second stretch of time in office that Macdonald oversaw them personally, not entrusting the portfolio to anyone else until 1888, after the CPR was complete, the West was being settled on a massive scale and the subjugated indigenous population of the prairies was all but out of sight and out of mind in the Canadian consciousness.[5] Gwyn wrote, "After Macdonald, early Canadian prime ministers took little interest in Aboriginal issues. History books about that period scarcely mention the actions of native peoples. We succeeded in making them invisible."[6] From the time Macdonald gave up the helm of the Indian department in the late 1880s, the portfolio has been one of the least coveted positions in the cabinet, its Ministers very rarely coming into public prominence except for occasional debacles like the so-called white paper penned by Jean Chrétien in the first years of the Trudeau administration.

Scholars and biographers agree that during his tenure in charge of Indian Affairs, indigenous issues were an integral, if unstated aspect of western settlement. As Macdonald wrote to his Indian Commissioner Edgar Dewdney in 1881, "I have no intention of giving up my present Department so long as I remain in the Government. Routine matters may be attended to by the permanent Heads but Indian matters, and the land granting system, form so great a portion of the general policy of the Government that I think it necessary for the Prime Minister, whoever he may be, to have that in his own hands."[7] As historian J.R. Miller explained: "Without success in dealing with the Indians of the west, settlement would not occur, the railway would not flourish, and the future of a transcontinental Canada would be imperiled."[8] The railway was of course completed. Canada's future as a transcontinental nation was secured. There is no denying that Macdonald's plan for white settlement was a success. By 1920, the population of Saskatchewan reached a million people, a number only surpassed after 2012. The question that remains is at the core of the controversy over Macdonald's place in our collective memory: What was his "success" in dealing with the First Nations of the west?

The first issue to consider in his relationship with the indigenous population was his opinion regarding race. The editors of *Macdonald at 200* were particularly diplomatic in this regard: "He was, like most people of his age, deeply suspicious of people who did have the same skin colour as his own."[9] Donald Smith's contribution to *Macdonald at 200* stressed the positive nature of his relationship with First Nations people in the east, noting that, "Without question, Macdonald did care about individual Aboriginal people, particularly those anxious to make their way in the dominant society."[10] In cataloguing a number of good relationships with western-educated indigenous professionals like Oronhytekha (Dr. Peter Martin), Professor Smith generalized about Macdonald's "optimism" in trusting his vision of an integrated indigenous population into the new Canada to "the understaffed and underfunded Department of Indian Affairs, and the equally poorly funded Christian missionaries." In light of the failures of Indian policy and the residential school system, Smith's explanation of why Macdonald's hopeful vision was never realized seems out of place: "In fairness to our first prime minister, it only became known in the 20th century how slowly cultures change. The expansion of the new discipline of anthropology helped further understanding of how strong and resilient North American Indian cultures are."[11]

Professor Smith's rationale for the failure of a century of Indian policy is questionable but his research shows that Macdonald was not driven by simplistic notions of racial superiority. Indeed, his friendships and professional interactions with indigenous leaders in the east point to "what might have been" on the issue of Indian Affairs. Instead, Macdonald took a different approach in the West, where he believed "you cannot judge the wild nomad of the North-West by the standard of the Indian of Ontario."[12] By the late 19th century, there had been more than a century of interaction and intermingling in Ontario and the two societies had long experience with each other. In contrast, Canadians were seen as invaders in the West, even to many in the Red River colony in the aftermath of the Rupert's Land Purchase in 1870. Canada's aggressive stance toward the West waned in the years the Tories spent in the political wilderness after the Pacific Scandal.

On their return to power in 1878, the fate of Macdonald, his party, and the finances of the entire nation hinged upon the swift completion of the railway to the Pacific. The indigenous population of the plains, the nations of which had entered into the various numbered treaties between 1871 and 1877 when development of the region was thought to be decades away, soon came to be seen as the greatest impediment to the fruition of the National Policy. The completion of the "Numbered Treaties" and the surrender of land they entailed literally provided the legal foundation for the white, agrarian society that soon came to dominate the region. In exchange for access to all but the tiniest allotments of land held in trust by the Dominion for the benefit of the original people of the region (Reserves), Canada agreed to take on a series of legal obligations to compensate their treaty partners as their part of the equation. The treaties were not imposed upon impoverished communities of the West. Amendments to the original wording of the agreements came after serious and occasionally acrimonious negotiations.

When the bison disappeared in the spring of 1878, the balance of power between the treaty partners was irrevocably lost. Almost overnight, hunting communities that had relied on the herds for generations found themselves without food and in need of Canadian assistance. Some, like Chief Beardy of the Plains Cree, had foreseen the collapse and secured a promise of humanitarian relief as part of Treaty Six:

> That in the event hereafter of the Indians comprised within this treaty being taken over by any pestilence, or by a general famine, the Queen, on being satisfied and certified thereof by Her Indian Agent or Agents, will grant to the Indians assistance of such character and to such an extent as Her Chief Superintendent of Indian Affairs shall deem necessary and sufficient to relieve the Indians from the calamity that shall have befallen them.[13]

In the early days of the famine, when the few Canadian authorities in the region scrambled to secure food for the hungry, correspondence surrounding the issue reveals a genuine concern for the welfare of the indigenous population on the part of the Northwest Mounted Police. The election of the Tories in the fall of 1878 brought a new imperative to famine relief. Food distribution took on an ever-increasing aspect of coercion as rations were used not just to sustain the hungry but to control them. An opposition politician called the new measures "a policy of submission shaped by a policy of starvation," wherein only those who signed on to treaty and taken up their appointed reserves were provided with food. In the first year after the Tories returned to power, at least four Chiefs took up reserves near Battleford in exchange for food.[14]

Instead of honouring the spirit of the treaty, officials increasingly used food as a means to control the malnourished and increasingly sick indigenous population. On May 3, 1880, Macdonald described the management of the ration program in the House of Commons:

> *In some instances, perhaps, the Indians have been fed when they might not have been in an extreme position of hunger or starvation, and I dare say there have been instances of imposition; but as far as I can learn, the officers have exercised due supervision over the food supply. … it is by being rigid, even stingy, in the distribution of food and require absolute proof of starvation before distributing it.*[15]

Two years later, Macdonald defended his officials from charges that spending on Indian relief were growing without proper oversight:

> *In the case of apprehended famine, the matter is to be dealt with on the spot; but the whole matter is to be dealt with by Mr. Dewdney, who has charge of the whole reserves. When the Indians are starving they have been helped, but they have been reduced to one-half and one-quarter rations; but when they fall into a state of destitution we cannot allow them to die for want of food. … I have reason to believe that the agents as a whole, and I am sure it is the case with the Commissioner, are doing all they can, by refusing food until the Indians are on the brink of starvation to reduce the expense.*[16]

Before the end of 1882, the last of the holdout Chiefs, Mistahi-maskwa or Big Bear, put his mark on Treaty Six in exchange for food for his starving people. Earlier, a police physician reported "it would indeed be difficult to exaggerate their extreme wretchedness and need."[17] J.R. Miller summarized the experience of Big Bear and the other holdouts as "effectively starved into signing."[18] In withholding food until the hungry signed on to treaty and took up their appointed reserves, the government perhaps cruelly but certainly efficiently eliminated any perceived threat to railway construction posed by a concentration of indigenous people in the Cypress Hills. Thousands may have been forced into treaty and onto reserves from hunger, but for many the situation worsened when they took up their reserves. Food intended for the hungry rotted in storehouses because of the meager portions dolled out by government officials. Worse yet, any perceived resistance or even questioning of authority among the reserve population could result in the withholding of rations for entire communities for as long as eight days.[19] Later, Macdonald shrugged off criticism of ration distribution, including charges of collusion between department officials and food suppliers to dole out spoiled food. "It cannot be considered a fraud on the Indians because they were living on government charity… and as the old adage says, beggars should not be choosers."[20]

Macdonald's "success" in dealing with the indigenous people of the West as railway construction proceeded toward the Pacific was that he swiftly and permanently subjugated the original inhabitants

of the region, opening the land for the CPR and the flood of immigrants that came in its wake. After 1885, to use Gwyn's image, aboriginal people were "invisible."[21] In the aftermath of the short-lived insurrection in Saskatchewan, the Dominion came down especially hard on the First Nations population of the region. Just three weeks after the Last Spike ceremony marking the completion of the CPR, the hanging of eight indigenous men at Battleford, the largest execution in Canadian history, signaled that marginalization of the reserve population was complete. To Edgar Dewdney's the hangings were to be "a public spectacle." To the prime minister, the killings "ought to convince the Red Man that the White Man governs."[22] Soon, the intimidation was institutionalized with a series of draconian policies that have become so entrenched that they continue to haunt us as a nation today. Traditional religious practices like the Sun Dance and the Potlatch in British Columbia were outlawed until 1951, when the most oppressive aspects of the *Indian Act* were rescinded. The notorious "pass system" in place from 1885 until 1951, described by J.R. Miller as "extralegal", incarcerated Treaty Indians to their reserves, undermining mobility, economic opportunity and even the quest for food.[23] Indigenous institutions of governance were a special target for Canadian authorities such as Indian Commissioner Hayter Reed, who wrote: "The policy of destroying the tribal or communist system is assailed in every possible way."[24] What meager progress made during the arduous conversion to reserve farming was destroyed with the implementation of the "peasant farming" system where commercial production was converted to subsistence agriculture which institutionalized poverty and food insecurity on reserves through the use of permit system, requiring written authorization of an Indian department employee to sell any produce grown on reserve.[25] According to Miller, "Officially, the rationale for this lunacy was 'science'" or what passed for it in the late 19th century."[26] In recent years, we have come to understand the implications of Macdonald's most enduring legacy, the establishment of a nation-wide system of residential schools. The schools operated for more than 100 years with perhaps 150,000 children taken from their homes and placed into institutions whose stated goal was the destruction of indigenous language and identity. The violence experienced by generations of children, whose well-being was the responsibility of the government of Canada, is our greatest shame as a nation.

As overseer of Indian Affairs in its formative and most important decade, Macdonald's "success" in the portfolio was the elimination of the indigenous population of the prairies as a perceived threat to the establishment of a white agrarian society in the region, but also putting in place mechanisms that were so coercive that the reserve population was essentially "invisible" to our ancestors in mainstream society. As the head of the Indian Department, Macdonald was not driven by a misguided sense of benevolence. Rather the Canadian attack on indigenous communities, institutions and individuals was undertaken to provide the settler population with the absolute minimum hindrance to its development. Recent serious and measured scholarship has begun to interpret the state-sponsored attack on indigenous communities as a form of genocide.[27]

Two hundred years on, Macdonald's legacy should rightfully be debated. If, as Richard Gwyn asserted, "We are today one of the most successful nations on the globe. Virtually every comparative international survey puts us in — or knocking at the door of — the top ten in quality of life, governance, and of living peaceably,"[28] then how do we reconcile the fact that in 2014 similar indicators used for Indigenous Canadians place them at 73rd, on par with living conditions of Romania? Can our idea of the fundamental decency of Canadian society withstand that kind of inequity, especially when concentrated along racial lines? The part of Canada described by Gwyn with such pride was built at the expense of the health, well-being and even the lives of the original inhabitants of the country. The sooner we collectively acknowledge this, the sooner we can shed the burden of "success" of Macdonald's Indian policy and move forward together as a truly mature society.

NOTES

1 Old Macdonald : Sir John A. was a racist, a colonialist, and a drunk. Why are we celebrating him ? *The Walrus*, Jan.-Feb. 2015 http://thewalrus.ca/old-macdonald/.

2 Canada's First Scapegoat. *The Walrus*.

3 Donald Smith, Pers. Comm., Oct.19, 2013 (e-mail).

4 J.R. Miller, "Macdonald as Minister of Indian Affairs : The Shaping of Canadian Indian Policy." In Patrice Dutil and Roger Hall, eds. *Macdonald at 200 : New Reflections and Legacies* (Toronto : Dundurn, 2014): 311.

5 James Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains : Disease, Politics of Starvation and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* Regina : University of Regina Press, 2013.

6 "Canada's First Scapegoat."

7 Quoted in J.R. Miller, "Macdonald as Minister of Indian Affairs : The Shaping of Canadian Indian Policy": 323. For a view that the subjugation of the indigenous population was a essential if unstated component of the national policy, see Joyce Green, "Towards a Détente with History : Confronting Canada's Colonial Legacy." *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 12(1995): 85-105.

8 Miller, "Macdonald as Minister of Indian Affairs : The Shaping of Canadian Indian Policy": 324.

9 Patrice Dutil and Roger Hall, "Introduction : A Macdonald for Our Times." In Patrice Dutil and Roger Hall, eds. *Macdonald at 200 : New Reflections and Legacies*: 16.

10 Donald Smith, "Macdonald's Relationship with Aboriginal Peoples." Dans Patrice Dutil et Roger Hall, eds. *Macdonald at 200 : New Reflections and Legacies*: 76.

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

12 Quoted in Miller, "Macdonald as Minister of Indian Affairs : The Shaping of Canadian Indian Policy": 324.

13 https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/fra/1100100028710/1100100028783.

14 Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains*: 114.

15 Debates of the House of Commons, May 4 1880: 1942.

16 Debates of the House of Commons, April 27, 1882: 1186.

17 Hugh Dempsey, *Big Bear : The End of Freedom* (Vancouver : Douglas and McIntyre, 1984): 109.

18 Miller, "Macdonald as Minister of Indian Affairs : The Shaping of Canadian Indian Policy": 330.

[19] For examples, see the *Saskatchewan Herald*, Feb.23, 1884 and May 31, 1884.

[20] Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains*: 140.

[21] "Canada's First Scapegoat."

[22] Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains*: 156-157.

[23] Miller, "Macdonald as Minister of Indian Affairs : The Shaping of Canadian Indian Policy": 331.

[24] Miller, "Macdonald as Minister of Indian Affairs : The Shaping of Canadian Indian Policy": 329.

[25] See Sarah Carter, *Lost Harvests : Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy* (Montreal : McGill-Queen's University Press 1990) and "Two Acres and A Cow : 'Peasant' Farming for the Indians of the Northwest, 1889-1897." *Canadian Historical Review* 70 (1989): 27-52.

[26] Miller, "Macdonald as Minister of Indian Affairs : The Shaping of Canadian Indian Policy": 334.

[27] Alex Woolford, Jeff Benvenuto, and Alexander Laban Hinton, Eds. *Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America* (Durham : Duke University Press, 2014).

[28] Gwyn, "Canada's First Scapegoat."