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INTRODUCTION
MACDONALD'S MAKEOVER

John A. Macdonald was, in his own era, a magnet for controversy. Serving as prime minister for nearly 19 tumultuous years, from Canada's infancy at Confederation to its late-Victorian adolescence, guaranteed that the Glasgow-born, Kingston-raised, Ottawa-ensconced political titan would engender a love-hate relationship with the citizens of the country he'd played a central role in creating.

Two centuries after his birth and nearly 125 years since his death, Macdonald is again at the centre of a storm: Was he, in fact, irredeemably racist? Was he corrupt? Or was he merely imperfect, a great visionary with minor flaws worth noting but not dwelling upon? We wonder these things because, being Canadians, we not only take our history seriously, but are especially wary about marking such milestone moments as a 200th birthday without at least pausing to reflect on whether an upbeat, patriotic *celebration* — or a more reflective, subdued *commemoration* — is called for.

The passage of time has quelled certain conflicts that once raged over Riel, the railway, the National Policy and Confederation itself. A hagiographic Macdonald gradually emerged in the public imagination, where the picture of a charming, crafty, harmlessly boozy rogue took hold and hints of darker sins were mostly brushed out of the portrait and left for future scholars to illuminate. But the magnitude of the man's impact on Canada during its formative years, and the greater embrace in recent decades of a probingly critical approach to re-understanding Canadian history, ensured that no clichéd, one-dimensional Sir John A. would survive very far into the 21st century.

The contributors to this volume were asked to assess aspects of Macdonald's life and career in the context of his times, to gauge how his ideas and actions might have been seen by his contemporaries in the lantern light of that age. Wide latitude was granted in the interpretation of the task, and the writers have offered fresh insights

from various vantage points, each one peering back through more than a dozen decades in search of that elusive historical figure standing behind the all-too-familiar mythologized Macdonald. The resulting collection of essays from this array of distinguished thinkers adds much to the deeper, increasingly nuanced perception of Canada's founding prime minister that has emerged at a time when the 200th anniversary of his birth might have produced only a superficial, stamp-worthy icon.

Among our essayists is University of Regina historian James Daschuk, whose multi-award-winning 2013 book *Clearing The Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, And The Loss of Aboriginal Life* helped ignite the ongoing public debate over Macdonald's legacy. (University of Ottawa historian Tim Stanley, whose writings on Macdonald's treatment of the Chinese-Canadian community have equally fueled this re-evaluation, published an earlier article on that subject in *Canadian Issues*.)

University of New Brunswick professor Donald Wright, who explores Macdonald through the eyes of The Old Chieftain's renowned biographer Donald Creighton, shows how powerfully our impressions of a distant subject can be distorted by a historian's lens. The publication of Wright's essay coincides with the launch this year of his highly anticipated new book, *Donald Creighton: A Life in History*.

Ryerson University's Patrice Dutil, co-editor of the recently published essay collection *Macdonald at 200: New Reflections and Legacies*, unpacks Macdonald's remarkable electoral record in Quebec, a success shown to have been built on key alliances and the unerring instincts of a master politician well attuned to public opinion in that province.

In her essay, McGill University historian Elsbeth Heaman examines how Macdonald eschewed identity politics and grasped power by rallying propertied Canadians around his national quest for prosperity. And fellow McGill historian Desmond Morton highlights the way Macdonald mastered "the cultivation of gratitude" — the critical political skill of his age — to make sure early Canada's farmers and factory workers understood their financial fortunes were yoked to his on the hustings.

Meanwhile, Macdonald is granted the "grudging admiration" of University of the Fraser Valley historian Barbara Messamore, who credits Canada's first prime minister with unmatched tactical nimbleness but calls him out, too, for a kind of creative flexibility that extended, unfortunately, to ethics and morality.

Former Ontario premier and retired MP Bob Rae, who in January engaged in a bicentennial debate about Macdonald's legacy with Immigration Minister Chris Alexander, argues in his essay that Canadians should resist simplistic absolutes when judging Sir John's place in history, insisting on a characterization that embraces both his leadership in forging a new nation and his tragic failure to find a just and humane accommodation of the country's aboriginal peoples.

Finally, Professor Tom Symons, founding president of Trent University and revered champion of Canadian Studies, acknowledges that critical appraisals abound but pays tribute to Macdonald as Canada's ultimate founder and visionary, placing him among the world's greatest statesmen and nation-builders of the 19th century.

A recent nationwide survey of 1,500 people commissioned by the Association for Canadian Studies found that respondents who were more knowledgeable about Canada's historic treatment of aboriginal peoples were also most likely to exhibit pride in the country. It's a reassuring result. While some defenders of Sir John A. have lamented that his recent 200th birthday bash was impolitely crashed by critics, it isn't likely that having a less flattering image of Macdonald in our minds — one that better reflects his failings and limits — will erode our patriotism or sense of attachment to Canada. Possessing a deeper, more balanced appreciation of the past, including a sharper picture of the country's leading patriarch, is also a point of pride.

Randy Bosewell
Guest Editor, *Canadian Issues*