THE SIX DEATHS OF SIR JOHN A. MACDONALD

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In 2015, when Canadians were mostly happy to observe (quietly) the 200th anniversary of Sir John A. Macdonald, there were 10 statues dedicated to him.[1] Today, there are two, but they can't be seen. One is on Parliament Hill, behind the Library of Parliament, but with all the construction going on, it cannot be readily observed. The other (and in my view, the best one) sits at the southern tip of Queen's Park in Toronto, and it is also screened from public view.

The statues have been killed off, in large cities and in small communities, from Victoria to Charlottetown. The rage against Macdonald and what a few people think he stood for easily reached a 5 on the hurricane scales for hot air, and the only statues that have been able to withstand it are the ones under the constant guard of parliamentary precinct police.

A worthy history will someday be written of this sudden demise but, while the wait is good, a few observations seem in order to help classify the murderous tools.

DEATH BY INNUENDO

The assault on Macdonald's reputation was galvanized by the publication of James Daschuk's *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* in 2013. No book in Canadian history has ever had such an impact.

There actually was little that was new in Daschuk's book, as it was almost entirely drawn from secondary

1 From East to West: Charlottetown, Montreal, Kingston, Toronto, Hamilton, Picton, Ottawa (2), Baden (Wilmot County, Ont.), Regina and Victoria.

sources that had amply documented the health conditions in Indigenous peoples in the plains in the last half of the nineteenth century. It had the merit of a *longue durée* approach, reaching back to the early 1300s to speculate about the health of the Indigenous peoples who lived in the northern part of the hemisphere. It was never an easy life as communities were struck by waves of disease and starvation, but, according to Daschuk, that was nothing compared to what happened after the government of Canada took possession of Rupert's Land in 1869. He never used the word "genocide" in the book and Daschuk provided no figures that would justify the term, but many readers looking to nail the first prime minister pointed to Daschuk's vague allegations to label Macdonald's policies as nothing less. *Clearing the Plains* provided all the innuendo necessary to mount a campaign of hate against Canada's first prime minister.

The Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, published two years later, had remarkably little to say specifically about Macdonald. It had to point to his government's 1883 legislation that created Indian Residential Schools, but it also fully described the origins of using schools to assimilate Indigenous kids dating back to some of the earliest contacts. Regardless, it left no doubt that the villain in the story was Macdonald. In the opening paragraph of its preface, it presented Macdonald not as a mere prime minister but as the leader of "the culture of the legally dominant Euro-Christian Canadian society." That dubious claim made Macdonald the lightning rod for every condemnation of Canada and the notion was cemented that if he had not been "the leader," everything would have turned out all right. And yet Macdonald was mentioned only once in the 535-page *Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. The 1,025-page *History, Part 1: Origins to 1939* cited Macdonald 14 times. Remarkably, he is never cited as expressing the wish to see the Indigenous population physically harmed (he had no qualms in showing that he wished it to be assimilated, however).

The revelations in late May 2021 that there were 215 unmarked graves near the Kamloops Residential School (located on the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation) had the most devastating impact on the Macdonald statues. Over that summer, all the remaining monuments were removed, based on the association between Macdonald and the schools. It was innuendo in full force. No "hidden" graves have actually been identified.

DEATH BY MEDIA

And yet, to this day, the CBC website still features a story that "the remains of 215 children were found buried" at Kamloops. I'll leave it to others to comment on social media's role in spreading misunderstanding of Macdonald, but the mainstream media has been remarkably negligent in questioning extraordinary claims. The choice of words and the way the "revelations" in Kamloops and, later, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, have been presented left no doubt that the villain was Macdonald.

DEATH BY STARCHAMBER

Many mayors and city councils were now terrified to be associated with Sir John A. Macdonald. In Victoria, B.C., it was the mayor who led the charge in 2018 to remove the statue that had been erected in 1982 and eventually City Council voted 7–4 to remove it. The general wave of statue busting

that swept North America in the summer of 2020 claimed more Macdonalds. In June 2020, by a vote of 4-2, the councillors of the Township of Wilmot removed the recently sculpted Macdonald statue that stood in front of township offices in Baden, Ont., near Kitchener.

The monument to Macdonald and Sir George-Etienne Cartier that greeted arrivals to the Ottawa airport was also removed by the managers of the terminal because it was an "emotional trigger" for Indigenous peoples and quietly hauled into storage in August 2020. It may one day appear in the Canadian Museum of History.

The May 2021 "revelations" in Kamloops convinced more city governments. In Kingston, where Macdonald lived most of his life (when not in Ottawa), the city council put it to a vote and only one of the 13 councillors voted to keep the statue. That iconic monument, which had been erected at City Park in 1895, was taken down later that summer. The city council of Charlottetown — the P.E.I. capital that has long prospered on spinning the tale about the Charlottetown meeting of 1864 (that was given all its significance by Macdonald) — voted unanimously to remove its statue of Macdonald, also in light of the Kamloops findings. In none of the cases were hearings held or public debate on the question heard. The decisions were all made internally.

Perhaps the most tragic case was the one in Picton, Ontario. After years of fundraising and awareness-building, a group had convinced the town to erect a monument to honour the site of Macdonald's first court case in time for the bicentennial of his birth. It was vandalized five years later and placed in storage. At one point, the council of Prince Edward County voted to reinstate the statue, and then proposed to place it in a museum. The pro-Macdonald activists have considered the compromises to be insulting and have refused the offer. The handsome monument, a creation of renowned sculptor Ruth Abernethy, will be in hiding for a very long time. (It's worth pointing out that the nearly 130-year-old monument to Egerton Ryerson, the long-time Superintendent of Education in Ontario, was destroyed in Toronto in the summer of 2021 in reaction to the Kamloops event.)

DEATH BY PRINCIPAL

In the summer of 2017, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario adopted a resolution to urge school boards to remove Macdonald's name from schools. Now, across Canada, four schools formerly bearing the name of Sir John A. Macdonald have changed their identities.

The first to move was actually in Nova Scotia. In April 2021, Sir John A. Macdonald High School in Upper Tartallon changed its name to Bay View High School. In Brampton, Ont., an elementary school changed its name from Macdonald to Nibi Emosaawdang, complete with a ceremony led by Indigenous elders, in April 2022. It is not clear that there was an actual vote on the name change, but the Peel District School Board was careful to indicate that consultations with the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Credit River Métis, the Peel Indigenous Network of Employees, the Indigenous Network and the Credit River Métis Council had taken place. The consultation was laudable, but hardly complete, or democratic. It is worth noting the Indigenous population in the Peel Region is estimated at one percent of the population.

In Pickering, it was decided in early 2022 that Sir John A. Macdonald Public School will be replaced with *Biidassige Mandamin* for the 2022-23 academic year. This was approved by the trustees of the Durham District School Board by a vote of 7-1.

And Waterloo Region re-named its Sir John A. Macdonald Secondary School, the area's largest, to Laurel Heights. In all cases, the initiatives were led by the school principals, not by calls from the community.

DEATH BY DISMEMBERMENT

This had happened before in Montreal, but never with such rage. In August 2020, following a rally to defund the police, the anger among demonstrators was so intense that a massive 126-year-old statue of Macdonald was pulled to the ground from its high pedestal and its head rolled off. The police simply watched the act of public vandalism and then moved in.

The Macdonald monument that stands in Gore Park in downtown Hamilton had also been vandalized many times, but the city council has steadfastly chosen to support it. In July 2021, council voted 12-3 to keep the monument where it has been standing since 1893, but democracy could hardly offer much protection. On Aug. 14, 2021, the statue was toppled during an Indigenous Freedom Rally.

DEATH BY A THOUSAND CUTS

The hack can come in one swift blow, but the thousand little excisions in school programs across the country have been just as effective. The teaching of Canadian history is starving and Sir John A. Macdonald has essentially been cut from the curriculum diet. Students are in Grade 7 (and 12 or 13 years old) when they encounter Macdonald for the first and only time in their school years. The message, according to a quick sampling of curriculum guides, is that Confederation happened, then Louis Riel led the insurrection against Canada three years later. Fifteen years after that, Riel was put to death by Macdonald.

Students will not revisit Macdonald again in their academic lives. (It's worth noting here that most provinces do not require a credit in Canadian history to graduate from high school, with the exceptions of Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec, and that high school Canadian history, where it is taught, focuses entirely on the 20th century.)

Who is to blame for this intellectual poverty? Look no further than the premiers, from Left to Right, who fail to invoke history to explain the direction of their province and of Canada and never say a word about the history curriculum.

This is not a trivial change in the political culture. Sir John A. Macdonald is probably the only Canadian that is recognized across the country because his accomplishments were so grand. Beyond his remarkable efforts to create a consensus around the idea of Confederation, he oversaw the linking of territories to the West and the incorporation of British Columbia and Prince Edward Island into the project of Canada. Beyond that, he was elected a member of Parliament six times and led government for almost 20 years. Most of the time, his party won close to half the vote of Canadians. He offered to give the vote to women, gave it to Indigenous men who met the qualifications white men were subjected to, and

increased the number of voters by 40 per cent.

Few can deny that Macdonald deserves respect as the principal architect of a country that is the envy of the world. One can hardly imagine any community in the United States changing the name of George Washington from a school (San Francisco tried in 2020 but faced a firestorm of opposition) or Charles De Gaulle's name being removed from schools in France in order to be trendier. Monuments to their achievements are protected by a general sense of memory and gratitude.

Macdonald was equally a product of democracy who worked to deepen its quality. His contemporaries recognized that. The statues in Montreal, Kingston, Toronto and Hamilton were the result of small donations from thousands of citizens. They were unveiled before audiences of tens of thousands. They were the product of some sort of democratic will.

That popularity has understandably been dulled by time and by the fact that Macdonald has not been taught in school. Yet a Léger public survey conducted for Postmedia in the winter of 2022 showed that support for the first prime minister was surprisingly high (except among young adults) and that respondents were categorically opposed to seeing his name removed from public spaces. No less than 350 people attended a gala in honour of Macdonald at the Royal York Hotel in January 2015, and when the monument to Macdonald was unveiled in Picton on Canada Day 2015, close to 1,000 people were there to witness it.

In contrast, Macdonald's deaths in the 21st century were carried out by whispers, closed meetings and acts of terrorism. Decisions made by elected officials in offices that typically attract little attention will erode faith and trust in those institutions as the governing class seems intent on undermining the sense of belonging of most Canadians. The ghost of Macdonald may haunt politics for much longer, in a way neither he nor most people would want.