WHAT WE'VE BEEN TAUGHT IN OUR HISTORY BOOKS IS NOT REAL

ALBERT DUMONT

Albert "South Wind" Dumont is an Algonquin spiritual adviser, storyteller and activist from Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg. The traditional, unceded territory of the Algonquin people includes the National Capital Region, and Dumont is currently the City of Ottawa's English-language Poet Laureate. He has authored several poetry collections — including *With the Wind and Men of Dust* (2012) and *Sitting By The Rapids* (2018) — co-written and performed the play Bloodline (2022) and published many essays and articles. He is spearheading a campaign in Ottawa to pressure the National Capital Commission to rename the Sir John A. Macdonald Parkway.

The following is an edited transcript of an interview with Albert Dumont conducted in July by journalist and Carleton University professor Randy Boswell, guest editor of this volume.

Q. What are your thoughts about the contemporary debate happening around statues, place names and other commemorative landmarks in Canada, including how it intersects with the reconciliation project and your own experiences in the Ottawa area? Is this an important part of reconciliation?

A. Reconciliation to me is being open-minded and sensible about historical facts involving Indigenous Peoples and, in the end, feeling at peace and wishing all people well. But first we need to reflect on Canada's creation story. Canadians call the architects who constructed the first laws and policies that formed the foundation this country the "Fathers of Confederation". These so-called Fathers of Confederation also put together the *Indian Act*. They were all white men; women had nothing to do with it. White women themselves were being oppressed at that time in Canadian history. Nobody of colour had anything to do with the *Indian Act*. What is more oppressive, more against humanity, than the *Indian Act*? Yet a lot of these men who created the *Indian Act* have statues erected in their honour. To me this is deplorable. When children in Residential Schools died, I don't think Sir John A. — "kill the Indian in the child" — Macdonald shed a tear for them. People today say: "Get over it." But that's because all of the dead youngsters were Indigenous

children. If they had been white children, the White People of this country would want something done about it. They'd want justice. To have compassion or empathy, you need to see the world through the eyes of the people who have been oppressed for many generations. It hurts my heart every time I see a statue of John A. Macdonald. I know there are a lot of people who adore Canada's first prime minister. They think he should be forever honoured by Canadians. That's not how I see it. It really offended me when they took a roadway alongside the Great River of the Anishinabe Algonquins and called it the John A. Macdonald Parkway.

[Ed. Note: The former Ottawa River Parkway in Ottawa was renamed the Sir John A. Macdonald Parkway by the federal Conservative government in August 2012.]

Some of those who resist changes to the commemorative landscape say it's "erasing history." What are your thoughts about that?

It's a simple question to answer for me because it's false. It's a lie. The history as it's written, what we've been taught in our history books and classrooms, is not real. It's a history that should be erased because of the fact that it's one-sided — the big lie, as they say. These people who are portrayed as heroes, they should be erased... Whenever we think about Canada's history, we see what is responsible for pushing the worldview Canadians have that the Indigenous people at the time of contact with Europeans were useless and stone-age, and if not for the settlers we would have died miserable deaths.

How important do you think historians and others who educate people about the past are in changing this mindset? When it comes to reconciliation, do you feel it's possible to weave together the narratives of different people who now live in this country to create a full, truer story?

Definitely it could happen. It needs to start with the generation now starting school — Grade 1 or even kindergarten... Historians cannot record history just to suit whoever is paying them their wages. They need to be broad-minded about it and state the facts about the great wealth of this land and how the Fathers of Confederation recognized it. Their thoughts were, "We need to get into that bank vault." But they also knew that in order to rape and pillage the riches of the land they had to first oppress the country's original inhabitants. The settler communities and their elected officials even went so far as attempting genocide upon the Indigenous Peoples. They (settler communities) were driven by greed. Students need to be taught about it in their classrooms.

I was doing a forest walk a few years back with teachers. We came to a place at Pink Lake [in Gatineau Park]; the landscape was rocky, topsoil was sparse. Yet in that rocky space stood a big pine tree proud and strong. There was also a cedar tree, a yellow birch, a white birch and a balsam fir in close proximity to the pine. All the trees were growing on this rocky landscape. I said to the teachers, "We know that the roots of these trees cannot go very deep because of the rock. Therefore, the roots of the trees are all reaching out and interlocking their roots with that of their neighbours. A big storm could come through and the trees won't topple over because they're being supported by their neighbours." And that's the way Canada should be: Indigenous roots interlocking with settler roots. Some are pine trees, some are cedar trees, some are birch trees, some

are balsam fir. And that's the community. That's the people of the land. And no storm will knock us down as long as we're honourable, show respect for each other's roots. We can still be our unique selves — a pine tree is not a white birch tree, and vice versa. That kind of wisdom needs to be what we aim for.

Tell me about the campaign you've been leading to rename the Sir John A. Macdonald Parkway in Ottawa, and the success you've already seen in the renaming of the Sir John A. Macdonald Winter Trail along the Ottawa River.

At the time [in 2012], when a debate about renaming the [Ottawa River Parkway] was taking place, I would have been happy with it being called the 'Anishinabe Parkway'. My thoughts at the time were that the Anishinabe had fought alongside of the British military to keep the Americans out of Canada in the War of 1812. There should be some kind of recognition that honours the warriors. Naming the parkway in their honour was something I would've embraced. But [then-Conservative cabinet minister] John Baird was able to convince the NCC to name it the 'Sir John A. Macdonald Parkway'. That was hurtful. I hate to see that sign. I try not to look at it. To me it's deplorable. So I started to get people involved, writing letters, making contacts... From what I understand, the NCC is thinking they are going to make the change... but the next Orange Shirt Day, I'm going lead a march to shut down the Sir John A. Macdonald Parkway for four or five hours — and I'm going to do that once a year until the name changes. It's so serious. In Anishinabe Algonquin territory, it's the biggest offence.

You've already had some success with the Sir John A. Macdonald Winter Trail, a popular cross-country skiing route along the parkway that has been renamed the Kichi Sibi Winter Trail after the Algonquin name for the Ottawa River. How did that come about?

The trail manager heard me speak somewhere or saw something I wrote, and it made him do some thinking. He didn't think there was any sense in naming this trail after Canada's first prime minister because it's offensive to the First Peoples. So they changed the name. They had a ceremony — we smudged and did a talk. There was solidarity and handshakes. They were hoping that changing the name of the trail would result in the NCC changing the name of the Parkway as well.

Do you consider that an example of reconciliation?

It is. It's a big example. These are people of European heritage, coming together and saying, 'Let's do what's right.' They're saying it because they respect Indigenous people. And I felt that respect when we did the ceremony. It is reconciliation. I felt in my heart it was a big step in the right direction. I know it's only a trail. But it's used by a lot of people.

There are hundreds of Indigenous nations from the Pacific to the Atlantic to the Arctic Ocean, each with distinct perspectives. But in general, how do you think contemporary Indigenous Peoples feel about Canada, and about their future within this nation-state? Is that even the right way to frame the future?

Just recently I wrote a blog about the flag. With the Maple Leaf, we see something that symbolizes the hope for reconciliation, respect and honour of all

citizens of this country. I see in our flag the heart of Terry Fox, for instance. Whenever I look at the Canadian flag, I see my younger brother who was in the army for three years and served on the battleship Saskatchewan for three years. He would have put his life on the line for Canada — any time, any place, any mission. But he was killed by a drunk driver when he was 25. So, there is goodness in the flag we have today. It really does represent hope that there will be true reconciliation, that there will be an honourable relationship between your everyday Canadian citizen and your everyday grassroots Indigenous person. There are a lot of people who will say they are Algonquin first or Ojibway first and that's how they want to live their lives. There's nothing wrong with that. I don't know all the words to the national anthem. I definitely have never sang it, and I know I never will. But that doesn't mean to say that I don't respect and honour what the honourable people of this country stand for. Because I'm with them... When I stand up for the national anthem. I'm not standing up for Canada's history — the big lie. I'm standing up for those good people. But I don't think anyone is going to object to my right or my feeling that I should stand with my nation first before I identify as a Canadian.