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MEMOIR

ALEXANDER HENRY THE YOUNGER & THE BUFFALO 3 *Barry Gough*

REPUTATIONS

NOT GUILTY 9 *Patrice Dutil*

GREAT REPUBLIC

HYPERDEMOCRACY AND THE 'ANTI-POLIS' 19 *William D. Gairdner*

WAR & WEAPONRY

THE THIRD EYE 25 *Maria A. Robson*

A FRIEND OF SORTS 32 *J.L. Granatstein*

QUEBEC

QUEBECERS' RED OCTOBER 39 *Éric Bédard*

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

A CANADIAN PATRIOT KING 43 *James W. J. Bowden*

CONSERVATISM & THE STATE 58 *Graeme Garrard*

MEN & IDEAS

CLOUD OF UNKNOWING 68 *John Pepall*

HOSER SAVANT 73 *Fraser Sutherland*

A HALL OF HALLS 76 *Christopher O. Blum*

MULTICULTURE & ANTI-CULTURE 79 *Peter Copeland*

INTO A WIDER WORLD 85 *Asa Mc Kercher*

SPECIAL SECTION: 'MONARCH & VICEROY'

THE CROWN: A PRIMER 90 *Geoffroy Boulanger*

GOVERNOR-GENERALSHIP IN CRISIS 94 *D. Michael Jackson*

SUPREME OPPORTUNITY LOST 96 *Paul Benoit*

COLUMN

END OF THE LINE 99 *Kevin Myers*

INSIDE BACK COVER

'TWISTERS' REMEMBERED 105 *Donal Lowry*



REPUTATIONS

Not Guilty

45 deaths over four years, however tragic, do not constitute 'genocide' by any reasonable standard

— writes **PATRICE DUTIL**

The violent spectacle in Montreal in late August was revolting enough; it became all the more dispiriting when accounts revealed that the police had stood by watching and waiting as demonstrators erected a tent around the statue to conceal their hammers, ropes, and power-tools. After some time, the officers kept watching while activists climbed down and pulled the cables that brought Sir John A. Macdonald's likeness face down to the pavement.

One wonders if authorities would have been as generous with their time if any other public monument in Montreal was similarly assaulted. The helpless police stood there, looking on, clearly following orders from on high, most likely from the Mayor, Valérie Plante. The taxpayers will pay for the restoration. *Ça va de soi!*

How did this handsome 125-year-old statue become the object of such unharnessed hatred? Even in the most damning days of separatism and nationalist historical revisionism, the monument that sits at the centre of Place du Canada has never been so savaged (the head did come off in the mid-1990s,

but the statue was left intact).

No one was detained or arrested for the recent vandalism, so the opportunity to question them on their motives has been lost. Not that it mattered, because the attack was clearly part of a continental phenomenon in the pandemic summer of 2020. Through June and July, cities in the United States were rocked by protests ignited by the gruesome killing of an unarmed man by Minneapolis police officers. In the South, a *kulturkampf* of sorts played itself out with renewed demands to remove civil war statues and monuments. The rationale ran something like this: the white supremacy purportedly displayed by police across the United States was empowered by the ongoing public display, high and mighty, of marbled, bronzed and stone representations of malignant white male figures from history. If they came down, the reasoning ran, so would the legitimacy given to the ongoing anti-black racism that has forever blighted the American scene. At least that was what those who seem to thrive on stoking racial antagonism would have us believe.

DOZENS OF GENERIC monuments to Confederate soldiers were destroyed. The likes of Secessionist leaders such as Robert E. Lee in Montgomery or the Albert Pike Memorial in Washington were also pulled down. Then the list of targeted monuments was extended to explorers like Christopher Columbus (in Richmond, Va. and St. Paul, Minn.) and Juan de Oñate (who led explorations in the South-

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Not Guilty

western United States and became the first governor of what is today New Mexico). Even priests were not spared: the monument to the Franciscan St. Junipero Serra, a Spanish missionary in California canonized by Pope Francis in 2015, was also chained and thrown to the pavement.

Then, a few monuments erected to heroes of democracy were removed. Figures of George Washington were torn down in Los Angeles and Portland. Also in Portland Thomas Jefferson, another slave-owner who penned the more memorable lines of the American Declaration of Independence and became a two-term president, was taken down. Even those monuments to presidents who ardently fought the slave owners — Lincoln and Grant — have been spoiled. A number of Teddy Roosevelt statues have also come down.

Macdonald's fate in Montreal, but also in Kingston (where Queen's University removed his name from its law school building) and in Toronto, may be seen within this continental, and even global context of war against monuments of dead white males. In the small Ontario towns of Picton and Baden, Macdonald has been put on trial by sub-committees composed of know-nothings determined to destroy his reputation in addition to removing monuments.

The soil for such desecrations was well tilled for the past thirty years, both in what has been written by academics and in school programs (see my article in *THE DORCHESTER REVIEW*, Spring-Summer 2020) but sharpened by two particular publications. The first was James Daschuk's *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* and the second, the *Final Report of the Commission on Residential Schools* headed by Senator Murray Sinclair. Neither book was particularly revealing in terms of Canada's first prime minister, but both of them have been used to demonize him as a symbol for

an allegedly deeply-flawed and racist Canadian project. In order to put Macdonald back together, not just as a piece of public art but as an important figure in Canada's formative phases, a good first step would be to review these much-celebrated works.

Daschuk's relatively short work (187 pages of text) had all the effect of a well-placed bomb when it came out in 2013 as it electrified many in the historical and Indigenous community who were already starting to make a fetish of Macdonald. Daschuk, then an assistant professor of Kinesiology and Health Studies at the University of Regina, published the essence of his Ph.D. thesis in History relatively late in life, after over twenty years of work. Well promoted by its publisher, the volume made a number of dramatic arguments.*

*Forty-five deaths,
however tragic,
do not constitute
'genocide' — and
far more people
died in the factories
and sweatshops
of Toronto and
Montreal*

Though much focused on understanding the evolution of indigenous health in Western Canada, Daschuk had a broader project in mind that injected his work with a relevance most history books do not typically enjoy. He opened his introduction by contrasting Canada's generally high ranking on the United Nations Human Development Index with the conditions of Indigenous people in this country according to the measures of the Assembly of First Nations. "Canadians have come to expect the highest-quality medical care as their national right," he wrote, "but indigenous people routinely suffer from poverty, violence, sickness and premature death" (xi). Although he then focuses on strictly healthcare matters, his obfuscating purpose was clear. Daschuk knew well the disparities in Canadian society and the violence known to many communities across

* The book was reviewed by Dr. Kenneth Coates in *THE DORCHESTER REVIEW*, Spring-Summer 2014.

Not Guilty

the country that transcend race, and he surely knows that there are also a number of wealthy First Nations. But his purpose was polemical: to create a false binary between the Indigenous nations and the rest of Canadians.

Clearing the Plains was not really clearing new territory. It was written almost entirely by drawing on secondary sources, with a few chapters making good use of the Hudson's Bay Company archives. The chapters that focus on Macdonald are mostly based on the published literature, with a few letters drawn from the Macdonald Papers and annual reports of the Department of Indian Affairs — Macdonald's own department (which evidently lived up to his demands for accountability). Daschuk also used small collections of personal papers that had already been well explored.

The claim that people starved on the prairies was hardly news. The book's own jacket-flap features an 1888 J.W. Bengough cartoon that featured Macdonald (skinny and big-nosed in his signature pose) chatting up a fat-cat businessman. Standing behind them are darkened and emaciated plains people. To make sure there was no confusion, Bengough even added in the background of his scene a "Starved by a 'Christian' Gov'" placard. In fact, Bengough published many of these in *Grip*, his satirical weekly, and reading Canadians were well aware of the plight of the Indigenous people in the Northwest. In his own day, Macdonald was chided (criticized would be too strong a word) for "starving" the people of the prairies. Most often he was criticized (apt in this case) for doing *too much* to help them.

The Liberal Party was also well aware of the issue. The Alexander Mackenzie government (1873-1878) introduced and passed the *Indian Act* in 1876, negotiated four "Numbered Treaties," and was in office when the consequences of the collapse of the buffalo hunt began to be felt: Sitting Bull decided to leave the United States and move with 5,000 people north of the border the following year. (Evidently, he had not heard of the devastating impact of the *Indian Act*.)

The Liberals showed a callous disregard for the indigenous people of the Northwest (their government did nothing to prevent the death of exposure and famine of 75 Indigenous people in the winter of 1878 — a tragic event Daschuk overlooks because his prey is Macdonald). Under the leadership of Edward Blake, the former Ontario premier who had the distinction of putting a bounty on Louis Riel's head in 1870, the Liberals continued their hypocrisy, haranguing the Macdonald government for spending too much money on the starved, and yet criticizing the government for not doing enough to avoid the insurrections of 1885.

Issues related to Indigenous peoples were raised fifteen times in the parliamentary session that followed Macdonald's return to power in the fall of 1878. The first item was actually a government bill to amend the *Mounted Police Force Act* in order to hire more Métis and Indigenous peoples as interpreters and scouts because "they were accustomed to the ways and manners of the different Indian tribes, acquainted with their language and movements, to act as scouts and deal with the Indians. The government desired the aid of such a force which, moving among the different tribes, could learn their feelings, prejudices and complaints" (Hansard, Feb. 28, 1879, p. 89). The Liberals were sceptical, but insisted that something be done to induce the Indigenous "to engage in industrial pursuits," because "serious complications would arise when their present means of subsistence failed." (p. 127)

The Liberals noted in passing that past efforts "to elevate them [Indians] from barbarism" had failed and that unless the government "induced the Indians to remain fixed in the soil, end the tribal system and the influence of the chiefs as early as possible, and gave each individual a right to separate property in the soil and induced the Indians to engage in agricultural pursuits." Otherwise, "serious troubles would be witnessed in the North West" (p. 128)

Macdonald agreed. He bragged that the Canadian system was better than the American way, because the Indigenous people "felt secure, and could easily be managed."

Not Guilty

Canada's system was more honest — even though the Government “had defrauded the Indians time and again under the Liberals, giving them inferior grain and oxen.”

Some might argue that the reality of the hardships on the prairies have just now been (re)discovered but that is not because historians did not cover it. George Stanley's works on the Métis and the Prairie peoples dating back to the 1930s fully acknowledged that people in the Northwest went hungry. The first modern article to talk about Indigenous repression on the prairies was published in the *Canadian Historical Review* in 1982 and was followed by dozens of articles and books on various aspects of what was later called colonial genocide in Canada. Daschuk was also standing on the shoulders of writers like Sarah Carter and especially Maureen Lux, who have explored the world of disease on the prairies without drawing any of the popular attention *Clearing the Plains* received, despite being just as readable and publicly accessible. Their claims, however, were more restrained.

The first six chapters (the first 100 pages) of *Clearing the Plains* focus on the life and health of plains people until Macdonald was returned to power in 1878. The final three chapters focus on the years to 1891, when Macdonald died. The picture is not easy. Like all Indigenous people from the North Pole to the tips of Patagonia, Canada's first peoples were eventually subjected in various turns to exposure to European viruses and bacteria. Those waves swept across the continent, often decimating substantial portions of the population as trade routes expanded from Mi'kmaq territories to those of the Algonquins and Iroquois, the Anishinaabe, Cree, Sioux, and finally to the populations that dotted the Pacific Coast. (Tuberculosis finally caught up with the Inuit after the polar invasion of Allied soldiers during the Second World War.) The onslaught of TB in the west, Daschuk acknowledges, “caught the dominion government off guard” (p. xx) and, combined with episodes of famine, had a hard impact on the First Nations. It is not clear what Daschuk believed the government of Canada

could do about TB, as adequate treatment was not discovered until 1943 and was first successfully tested in 1949. To Daschuk it did not matter: Macdonald was guilty. Even though he acknowledges that various epidemics took the west by storm in the 1870s and 1880s to the point where the reserve population in Saskatchewan was at a “low-point” by the early 1890s, it was Macdonald's fault. For him, disease was the “direct result of economic and cultural suppression ... that began in the 1880s ... [and] haunts us still” (p. 186).

Daschuk concluded his book with some careful judgments. Over the broad sweep of the years covered in his volume, disease had delivered debilitating blows time and again to the indigenous communities of the northwest, starting with those that had regular contact with white traders. As Indigenous peoples themselves started making use of the horses that had been imported into the territory, bacteria and viruses spread further and faster. By the 1780s, the Cree who lived in the territory known to us as Saskatchewan were so devastated by a smallpox outbreak that “the existing band structure of the region buckled.” (p. 183) Daschuk concedes that “In many cases, the First Nations that entered into treaties with the crown were inheritors of the plains rather than inhabitants since prehistoric times.”

DASCHUK ALSO ACKNOWLEDGED that the numbered treaties were signed in the 1870s because the Dominion of Canada and those living on the prairie needed each other. The former sought stability and predictability. The Indigenous signers “saw treaties first and foremost as a bridge to a future without bison.” The Cree of Treaty 6 “astutely negotiated for medical aid and famine relief” (p. 183). In fact, the treaty stipulated:

That in the event hereafter of the Indians comprised within this treaty being overtaken 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 extent as Her Chief Superintendent of Indian Affairs shall deem necessary and sufficient to

Not Guilty

relieve the Indians from the calamity that shall have befallen them.

Daschuk never actually writes that the Mackenzie or Macdonald governments failed in their commitments. “When the hunger began,” he writes, “Canada simply did not have the people or the infrastructure to meet the demand for food.” But for Daschuk, things took a turn for the worse when the Conservatives took power in late 1878 and lost patience with the few bands that were still crisscrossing the West, looking for the right place to settle.

For Daschuk it was unforgivable that the Macdonald government refused to chase down the nomadic tribes and supply them with rations. “The strategy was cruel but effective,” he concluded. By 1883, only a few hundred desperate holdouts were still not on reserves and under the control of the Department of Indian Affairs.” (p. 184)

Daschuk does not explain how exactly the Macdonald government could have ensured the delivery of fresh food to the populations in question. There were no railroads in the west and food storage was risky at best. The only way to survive was to grow it.

In 1878, a government agent estimated the population of Métis and other Indigenous peoples at just under 27,000 people. To supply them with meat, as Daschuk himself points out (p. 107), Ottawa would have had to deliver 60 imperial tons of meat *a day*. This was five pounds of meat per day per person, rather a lot of food. Presumably, the agent either calculated for spoilage or to compensate for the sheer inability to deliver during the winter.

In fact, Macdonald reacted strenuously to the plight of the Indigenous peoples. In the last year of its mandate (1877-78), the Mackenzie administration spent \$421,504 on Indian Affairs. Macdonald, arriving at mid-fiscal year, boosted the spending to \$489,327,

a 16% increase. The next year, Macdonald authorized expenditures to \$694,513, a 42% increase; in 1880-81, the funds amounted to \$805,097, adding another 16%. By the time Macdonald called the next election, spending on Indian Affairs had grown to \$1,183,414, a 181% increase over what the Liberals had spent. This was in the worst years of crisis following the collapse of the bison herd.

Genocide? Quite the contrary. Spending in the Department of Indian Affairs increased far more than any other program category *and now constituted the third largest program expense* of the Dominion, after public works (\$2,893,513) and the post office (\$1,980,567). (The largest expense was subsidies to provinces, which amounted to \$3,530,999.)

The financial crash in the fall of 1883 caused the government to rethink its expenses generally as the country slid into depression. But spending on Indian Affairs continued to gallop, reaching \$1,201,301.32 by 1887. Falsely, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission *Report*, vol. 1, p. 123, claims that the Indian Affairs budget was slashed. Expenditures on Indian Affairs continued to *increase* by an average of 8% thereafter. “We are rigid, even stingy,” Macdonald told the Liberals, “we cannot allow them to starve and we cannot make them white men. All we can do is endeavour to induce them to abandon their nomadic habits, and settle down, and cultivate the soil.” A negative interpretation need not be placed on that statement, unless it is done in order to portray Macdonald in the worst possible light.

Daschuk, however, does not bother to examine the logistics of shipping food to the Northwest or the unpredictability of the climate in the horrible early 1880s. The political and practical realities are not considered, and the considerable efforts made in terms of program innovation (model farms, farming instructors and food rations) are ignored. Mac-

*For Professor
Daschuk it was
unforgiveable that
Macdonald refused
to chase down the
nomadic tribes and
supply them with
rations, albeit
2,500 km away*

Not Guilty

donald's government could have done nothing and spent nothing, in which case they would have deserved the same accusation.

I've done an inventory of deaths recorded in Daschuk's book to see if the claim of a man-made genocide was substantiated. Indeed, most of his figures are conjectures and estimates — something he would readily acknowledge. There is no real count in existence (certainly, the Indigenous communities did not keep a reliable count, and neither did the state for the most part though it is important to note that Macdonald ensured that his department submitted detailed reports every year). The grim reaper's tally in Daschuk's book shows that 16,484 people died from roughly the 1300s to 1896. (Yes, to cite "figures" from the 1300s in North America is speculative indeed.)

The point here is not to dispute the numbers presented in *Clearing the Plains*, but to test the author's claim that the Macdonald government was genocidal. Daschuk specifically documents 1,126 deaths between 1879 and 1883 but none afterwards. He includes 151 deaths by starvation in North Dakota in 1887 (the Americans did not distribute rations), but I am not considering those. By my count, Daschuk points to 65 deaths possibly due to starvation on the Canadian plains from 1879 through to 1883. Twenty of those deaths are reported to have been the likely product of poisoning in the Kanai (Blood) Reserve, so the number is probably closer to 45.

Either way, as tragic as they were, 45 deaths over four years do not constitute genocide by any reasonable standard. Far more people lost their lives in the criminal sweatshops and factories of Toronto and Montreal when workers (sometimes including children) toiled for over seventy hours a week. The Indians of the northwest who died succumbed to disease, most notably tuberculosis. For Macdonald's contemporaries, this was normal: sad, but not unexpected.

Daschuk never used the word "genocide" in his book, though he has lent his name to the charge that Canada, specifically the Macdonald government, had been genocidal. He used the expression in an article in the *Globe and Mail* ("When Canada Used Hunger to

Clear the West," Jul. 19, 2013), concluding that "As the skeletons in our collective closet are exposed to the light ... we will come to understand the uncomfortable truths that modern Canada is founded upon ... ethnic cleansing and genocide ... and push our leaders and ourselves to make a nation we can be proud to call home." Others picked up on the expression, pointing to his book as evidence for something he never claimed to have documented. Without fail, his book has been unanimously celebrated in academic reviews not so much for its real breakthroughs but because it encapsulated the new sentimental political consensus that reigned on campuses. Irony of ironies, in 2014 it won both the Macdonald Prize awarded by the Canadian Historical Association and the Governor General's History Award.

II

Macdonald was also accused of spending *too much* money on the Indigenous peoples in the context of the residential schools, which were the focus of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As the TRC's report coincided with the reception of Daschuk's book, Macdonald suddenly became the lightning rod; the very embodiment of hostility to Indigenous communities.

Commissioned by the Harper government in 2011, the inquiry chaired by Senator Sinclair released its report five years ago. The territory of residential schools had already been tilled by a 481-page history and a separate 218-page report commissioned by the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal People* (1996) as well as by J.R. Miller's massive *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (1996). It was yet another very expensive *prise de conscience* designed to keep the light on a painful aspect of the Canadian experience.

The sweep of Sinclair's recommendations caught public attention, but where the Commission had an undeniable impact was on Macdonald's reputation, even though it hardly mentions his name. For the Sinclair group, the charge was that Macdonald was "present at birth" and therefore guilty of nothing less than genocide or at least cultural genocide.

Not Guilty

The Commission did not mince words: Macdonald had gone to “war” against Indigenous families, the Report says, citing the words he used in 1883 to explain the added expense of educating children away from their communities:

When the school is on the reserve the child lives with its parents, who are savages; he is surrounded by savages, and though he may learn to read and write his habits, and training and mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write. It has been strongly pressed on myself, as the head of the Department, that Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men. (p. 280)

Tough talk, but what was actually done? It is generally accepted that about 150,000 children attended the schools between the opening of the first in 1883 and 1996, when the last one closed. It is also widely agreed that two-thirds of Indigenous school age children never attended them. These are estimates; there were times when a higher proportion of kids attended and long periods when a much smaller number did. Most students only stayed a short time because they were such hostile, fetid places. The high point seems to have in 1931, when 80 residential schools were in operation. The Canadian government started to trim the numbers to gain efficiencies. It was the St-Laurent government in the early 1950s that sought to integrate, where possible, Indigenous students in public school boards run by the provinces.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission produced two volumes on the history of the Indigenous residential schools. The first, which goes to 1939, is a staggering 1,025 pages (vol. 2, which covers the years 1939-2000, weighs in at 859 pages). It does not carry the name of an author, co-author or even contributors. It barely pretends to be an academic document. The first two hundred pages are devoted to residential schools before Canada

was created in 1867. The demonstration that there were all sorts of “residential schools” pre-dating Confederation should convince readers that the problem can hardly be of Macdonald’s devising — but the commission does not recognize this fact. Obviously school was universally held to be the best instrument to inculcate literacy, numeracy, and mainstream values. This was known in the days of Charlemagne (9th century) and in the French, Spanish, English and Portuguese colonies that dotted the Americas from the early 16th century.

Pretensions aside, the TRC’s report does not, technically or literally speaking, constitute “history.” The study makes no attempt to put things in perspective, to show how practices evolved or to compare the Canadian experience with that of other countries. It is, rather, a rather blunt catalogue of findings typical of Royal Commissions, providing a long list of mini-studies of various phenomena with scarcely an academic veneer. Six pages are devoted to school clothing from 1867 to 1939, for example. Each chapter, in turn, lists the worst experiences recounted about the schools. It is as if nothing good ever came out of them.

Here is an example from p. 509, in about the middle of the text. The study declares that:

In the early 1930s, the federal government cut the school per capita grant by 15%. In 1938, the Anglican Indian and Eskimo Residential School Commission pointed out that from 1935 to 1938, the cost of flour had gone up 43%; rolled oats, 8%; tea, 24%; and sugar, 6%. As funding declined and food costs went up, it was the students who paid the price — in more ways than one. By the end of the 1930s, it was discovered that the cook at the Presbyterian school at Kenora was actually selling bread to the students, at the rate of ten cents a loaf. When asked if the children got enough to eat at meals, she responded, “Yes, but they were always hungry.” The agent ordered an end to the practice. The fact that hungry students would be reduced to buying bread to supplement their meals in 1939 underscores the government’s failure to provide schools with the resources needed to feed students adequately throughout this period.

Not Guilty

No explanation is offered as to why it took eight years for the the Anglican Indian and Eskimo Residential School Commission to report the inflation. The text merely *asserts* that it was the students “who paid the price.” It invites multiple questions: to what degree were they paying for their food? Where did these impoverished children get the money? Then we find that one cook in Kenora was selling bread on the side. Was this one isolated incident or was it widespread? Why did the agent end the practice? Did the children actually get their ration of bread afterwards? The passage certainly does underscore “the government’s failure to provide schools with the resources needed to feed students adequately throughout this period.” The same could be said about practically every school board in Canada and just about every convent school and boarding school for non-Indigenous pupils too.

The point here is not to criticize the mandate of the Commission and certainly not to deny that the unfortunate children who attended these schools were subjected to cruel and unacceptable practices. There is equally no denying that the objective of the whole system was to rub out what was “Indian” in these poor kids and make them acceptable little subjects of the white system — while also representing at least some attempt to prepare them for life in a modern world, then entering an intense industrial era. It did work in some instances, in others it did not. What is clear it that resistance among the Indigenous communities was heroic in many instances. Some of the schools undoubtedly insisted that English be spoken exclusively and that Indigenous ways were unworthy of the modern world (though there are plenty of accounts of children speaking their own languages at will). Was this enough to constitute cultural genocide? Surely, the impact of the modern economy and its powers of attraction away from the reserves, to say nothing of the cultural impact

of radio, television and now of the internet, deserves much closer scrutiny.

Macdonald in 1884 told the House of Commons that he had “every hope that the institution will accomplish the purpose for which it has been established, namely, the education in the ordinary branches of learning and the instruction in industrial pursuits as well as the moral and social elevation of the Indian children who may be privileged to attend it.”

*Macdonald received
letters, reports,
and memoranda.
Nowhere in
the Report is it
acknowledged that
he never insisted
that attendance be
mandatory.*

FROM THE BEGINNING, Macdonald insisted that girls be admitted as well as boys and always resisted the notion that attendance be mandatory (this was done in 1894 but was never successful, obviously). In fact, school attendance was spotty from the very beginning. In the first year, the highest attendance rate was 62% in Manitoba, the Northwest and British Columbia (Nova Scotia recorded the lowest rate at 45%). These are inconvenient

truths. In the Report, Macdonald only shows up as the recipient of letters, reports, and memoranda. Nowhere in this report is it acknowledged that Macdonald never insisted that attendance be mandatory.

Though it actually rarely mentions the government, the commission does not hesitate to ascribe the worst motivations to Macdonald himself. In one passage, the report states that “when the [bison] hunt failed, they had to turn to the government for relief.” The report then observes that the assistance amounted to over \$500,000 in 1882. It insists that “while John A. Macdonald defended the expense, saying it was cheaper to feed the First Nations people than to fight them, the reality was that in the 1880s, the threat of starvation became an instrument of government policy.” In the last instance, it is Daschuk’s work that is cited as proof. The passage goes on to highlight “near-violent” confrontations and that “the impact

Not Guilty

of famine and disease was devastating.” These have been well documented, though it is equally true that most of the Indigenous communities in the northwest were peaceful even during the worst days of crisis in 1885 and wanted nothing to do with Louis Riel’s crazy ideas. The next line indicates that “according to one contemporary estimate” (not cited) the population of the Indigenous peoples on the plains dropped by a third! There are no reliable numbers to support any of these assertions. A Royal Commission willing to level the charge of genocide should justify it by citing proper evidence.

III

Macdonald was pulled off his pedestal in Montreal not because of what he did, but rather for what he is speculated to have done in the West.

Let’s be clear. There is no dispute that Macdonald saw little future for traditional Indigenous ways of life. His Canada was all about the future and ensuring that the land was steady, strong and peaceable, not about romantically preserving a way of life that dated back five hundred generations. This could only be accomplished by settling the nomadic tribes and tying them to the soil. It also meant educating them so that they could assimilate into the mainstream and become “productive” citizens of the country he cherished.

While Macdonald did many times express sorrow for the undeniable hardships — even acknowledging that Indians were starving on the prairies as they transitioned to the “white man’s” civilization — he continuously argued that Canada’s Indigenous peoples be respected as equal subjects of the Queen. In this, he was convinced that his views represented the enlightened, progressive, scientific way of seeing things. He can be judged on his intentions and the merits of his administration for sure, but he must be viewed in the light of his day. After all, who else tried to supply rations from 2,500 km away?

Given the bad press he has received, it is remarkable that Macdonald is still held in

some esteem. In 2017, an Angus Reid survey showed that 55% of respondents were opposed to the removal of Macdonald monuments. The same survey a year later revealed that even more people (70% of respondents) pronounced themselves in favour of the statement that “the name and image of John A. Macdonald should remain in public view.” This poll was conducted a few months after the City of Victoria voted to remove the Macdonald statue in front of city hall (the PM represented the Victoria constituency from 1878 to 1891). Only 10% were categorically opposed to leaving the statue where it was.

Canadians have been convinced of the harm done by the residential schools and while a majority support a day of remembrance (again, according to the 2018 survey by the Angus Reid Institute) most respondents (57%) agreed that “*Canada spends too much time apologizing for residential schools — it’s time to move on.*” Perhaps that should be a lesson to First Nations activists who have pushed the genocidal-schools rhetoric too far at the expense of the truth, alienating rather than persuading people by their extremism.

Challenging understandings of the past is the very essence of history and should be welcomed. To a certain degree, it is also healthy that monuments be taken down when it is obvious that they were erected for racist or hateful reasons. But before Canada starts to tear down its few *lieux de mémoire* so that they can be replaced with cold geometric shapes that evoke nothing, it is incumbent for community leaders, in this case leaders of both governments and Indigenous communities, to call for calm and then enforce it.

Macdonald monuments across Canada were erected out of deep and deserved respect for his accomplishments and must be put together again: repaired and remounted. So should his memory as he has much to teach the 21st century. Should this task not be undertaken, work to improve the lot of Canada’s first peoples will continue as it must, but reconciliation will have stalled. Because it will have been starved of truth. It is also time to retire the morality play in which Macdonald is the vile representative of a race of “despoilers and plunderers” who hastened the

Not Guilty

apocalypse of the indigene. His critics would rather have seen him resist the Industrial Revolution, renounce technology, and simply allow Canadian society to drift back to its early beginnings, at peace with the rhythms of unspoilt nature.

Macdonald is indicted of crimes that are as old as man himself: racial prejudice, conquest, settler colonialism, genocide. He was informed by his own sense of history and of its tragedies, namely that peoples are sometimes eliminated in the struggle for life. He knew well how Clan MacDonald had been decimated in the Jacobite uprisings of 1745 and destined to live under the tutelage of the English crown. How could he ignore it when deportations from the Highlands continued well into the late 19th century while Queen Victoria breathed the fresh mountain air at her cherished Balmoral? Readers who have forgotten the anguished struggle of nomadic tribes around the world would do well to read the relevant chapter on the agricultural revolution and the “Unification of Mankind” in Yuval Noah Harari’s runaway bestseller, *Sapiens* (2014).

Macdonald’s critics have no regard for real context or for the accomplishments that explained why tens of thousands attended monument unveilings in Montreal, Toronto, Kingston, and Hamilton. Their gaze purposely ignores that Macdonald captured the democratic will of Canadians from 1867 to his death in 1891, won the hearts and minds of Canadians in six elections (many with

outright majorities of votes cast), how he defended Canada against American expansionism by uniting it coast-to-coast, worked diligently to unite French and English Canadians, brought Protestants and Catholics together, forged a national banking system, recognized trade unions, publicly declared that the Mounted Police should be a diverse organization, welcomed immigrants escaping slavery in the U.S. and religious persecution in Europe, extended the franchise to almost every adult male (including Indigenous males who qualified), demanded that women get the right to vote, and ensured that Canada had a fighting chance in establishing itself as a stable political country against the odds.

Macdonald may have lost his head and been splattered about. But he’s not dead yet. Let’s fix the statues for now, polish them, and protect them while society slowly rediscovers its taste for fearlessly ambitious figures of our past. Sir John never took pride in the plight of the Indigenous peoples on his watch and never campaigned in support of harsh policies. Yet today, in some circles (including in departments of education across the country, it would seem) he has become the symbol of a “racist,” intolerant, “genocidal” state based on “settler colonialism”; these are the universal buzzwords. Thus he carries the burden of imagined policies that were in fact elaborated long after his death. He is of course worthy of the closest scrutiny and I am confident that he will, in time, re-emerge as one of the greatest statesmen of Canada’s proud 19th century. ✎

I am yours, Dear Muses

*Whether I climb my own steep slopes or pass time
In hill-perched Tibur or cool-aired Praeneste
Or Baiae’s cloudless bay,
Dear Muses, I am yours, fatefully yours.*

*Because I love your fountains and your dances,
You saved me when the ranks broke at Philippi,
And when that cursed tree tried
To murder me, and when the sea ran high*

*Off Palinurus’ cape. With you beside me
I’ll undertake great exploration, gladly
Sail the wild Bosphorus, cross
The torrid deserts of the Persian Gulf,*

*Travel among the stranger-hating Britons,
See quivered Scythians camping on the Don’s banks,
Or Concani who gulp
The blood of horses, and return unharmed.*

HORACE, ODES, III (tr. James Michie)