We meet at a special time in the career of Sir John A. Macdonald. He passed away 127 years ago today, but his career has had a telling afterlife. His reputation has been preserved, in no small part because of events like this one, but also through the work of friends who knew him well and of students young and old who have critically examined his work and the significance of his achievements.

As much as we would like to ignore it, that reputation is under threat and the friends of Sir John A. meet today in different circumstances. People used to joke in remembering John A.’s antics especially while “under the influence.” It was funny. It hardly reflected his character, but even then Macdonald was remembered with affection.

Since you met last year, a teacher’s association of this province voted to remove Sir John’s name from schools, pleading that his memory terrorized students and teachers. Its claim received heavy media play but ultimately its case was rejected and condemned roundly. Still, the grievous insult continues to echo and it cannot be neglected. It must meet a convincing response based on logic and facts.

Today, Sir John A. Macdonald’s influence is condemned in many parts for neglecting the indigenous people of Canada during his administration. Many go much further with reckless accusations of genocide, “cultural genocide,” “attempted cultural genocide” and democide. The most heinous crimes imaginable. As if Macdonald could be compared to the worst criminals in the history of man. And based on what? On a few administrative reports partially cited, a line dropped here and there in the heat of parliamentary debate; hearsay.

This is not to deny, and I emphasize, that some indigenous people suffered starvation in the 1870s and 1880s and that over the past century, the residential schools took an enormous toll. We unanimously acknowledge and sincerely regret that hard reality. But the accusations that Sir John was responsible just don’t stand up. I will only observe here that there is absolutely no evidence that Macdonald wished upon the indigenous people of this country the abuse, neglect, intimidation and violence they were subjected to in residential schools in the twentieth century. No government did. The blame for these practices lies elsewhere, in my view: to those who were directly in charge of the students.

Make no mistake: much more work needs to be done to persuade those who doubt the good intentions of the man whose influence did forge this country into being. These are hard times for us who appreciate Sir John’s works; we have a new generation to convince and for us there can be no rest.

It is not clear why “At Rest.” was inscribed on Sir John A.’s tombstone, or who asked for it. There is no doubt that the expression was used elsewhere. It was not the most fashionable Victorian epitaph, but it was not uncommon either.
It was undoubtedly appropriate, however, for those who knew the man who won six elections as prime minister of Canada and who was, undeniably, one of the hardest working individuals of his time. His friends recognized that death was the only instrument in the universe that could put him at rest. He died in harness the way he wanted to, and I invite you to remember him as such: a man who worked hard all his life, a man who had unsurpassed ambitions for his country and who was willing to give far more than lip-service to it. Macdonald acted. His reward was rest; rest here in the city he loved, Kingston.

I want to remember of man who kept pushing an agenda of growth and peace until his body could no longer allow his mind to press him on. A man who was elected, just a few months before his passing, by almost 49 percent of the vote generally and far more than 50 percent of the vote in Quebec, thus handily defeating the local son, Wilfrid Laurier.

How did he keep his popularity? He did it through work, restless work and I want to remember this reality this afternoon. What made him successful? The answer is that he depended on a rigorous routine to accomplish his tasks. In his early years as Prime Minister of Canada he also was minister of justice and effectively the minister responsible for external affairs. The working day got under way with work at home. The prime minister started his day early in bed with a cup of tea, some toast, and a small piece of the previous night’s leftover meat. “Only innocent people eat breakfast!” he declared.

Macdonald had an agreeable study on the ground floor of his home in what was known as “the Quadrilateral.” That is where he did his work. Hewitt Bernard, Macdonald’s deputy minister of justice (and brother-in-law), conveniently lived in the house and could be counted on in the early hours of the day to help in dealing with that department’s heavy affairs.¹

We know about how he worked in his later years because of Joseph Pope, a young Prince Edward Islander who was hired in the early 1880s as his private secretary and who eventually rose to become a deputy minister. Pope painted a detailed portrait of the man at work at that time when Macdonald was living at Earnscliffe, overlooking the Ottawa River. Work again started early at home alone. Pope would arrive around 9:30 a.m. to help tackle “the pile of letters that awaited him.”² No piece of correspondence went unanswered, and this often prompted Macdonald to write letters of his own.

His communications became legendary because Macdonald wanted to know everything. Even the other local hero in these parts, Sir Richard Cartwright, noted that his nemesis “had an immense correspondence, which he preserved with jealous care, and could generally lay his hand on any document he wanted, even after a long lapse of years.”³

¹ Jonathan Swainger, The Canadian Department of Justice and the Completion of Confederation (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000).
³ Richard Cartwright, Reminiscences (Toronto: William Briggs, 1912), 48. See also p. 125.
He kept a vast network of contacts alive with correspondence so that his information was as accurate as it could be, and that took hours. The work also involved the study of proposed bills for their legal quality.

It was all demanding work. Wilfrid Laurier knew how hard Macdonald worked and he copied much of Sir John’s routine. So did Borden. Mackenzie King, who at times was obsessed with Macdonald, also followed much of the daily routine. Macdonald, as in so many areas of our country, had invented the administrative routine of the prime minister of Canada, making it one of the most powerful government offices in the world.

After a quick lunch, he had a short rest in bed. Canada’s first prime minister may have skipped the “power breakfast,” but he invented the “power nap”. This recharged the man’s batteries and allowed him the energies to roll two days’ worth of work into one.

If he could steal more time to relax, the prime minister would sit for a card game of cards—he liked the game of “patience” (tellingly)—with whomever might be handy. Macdonald said that it “had the same soothing effect upon him as a cigar upon a smoker.”

After lunch, Macdonald headed for Parliament Hill. Crossing the threshold of the East Block, he might have dropped by the office of the minister of finance. In fact, the ground floor of the East Block was entirely devoted to things financial: customs, inland revenue, receiver general, audit, and finance. The close proximity of the offices was undoubtedly a boon for the bureaucracy that had frequent contact with the chief elected officer and made written correspondence between staff unnecessary, much to the frustration of scholars who wish to better understand the machinery of government in this period.

The afternoon was spent with cabinet, in the Privy Council chamber, where proceedings and discussions of tedious details were occasionally relieved by a spontaneous game of cards. At some point in the 1880s when the work was particularly intense, the Clerk of the Privy Council’s office was transformed into an ante-room to the Privy Council chamber, and it became a place where a snack, a drink, and a smoke could be shared.

If the House Commons was not in session, Macdonald was typically at home by 7:00 p.m., in time to play with Mary, his disabled daughter, and then have a dinner that typically consisted of a simple dish and a glass of red wine. The evening was spent with Agnes, reading newspapers and relating topics of the day. “What most impressed those who saw Sir John Macdonald at home, was the faculty he had of divesting himself of the cares of State,” wrote Pope, “one found it hard to realize that he was the same man who, a few hours before, had been harassed by the grave and perplexing problems which waited him on the morrow.”

Macdonald retired to bed early and do some reading. He loved biography, history, and travel. He particularly enjoyed Anthony Trollope’s novels – surely because they typically evoked the dramas of daily life among lawyers, parsons, public servants, and politicians (even prime ministers!).

---

4 Pope, Memoirs, 641.
5 Pope, Memoirs, 641.
Macdonald often returned to Philip Stanhope’s two-volume *Life of William Pitt*, which had been published in 1861–62, no doubt because Stanhope knew intimately the details of statecraft. (Macdonald followed some of his hero’s administrative habits diligently. He was fond of quoting Pitt’s motto: “The first, second and third requisites of a Prime Minister are patience.” According to Pope, “no statesman ever laid this truth more deeply to heart.”)\(^6\)

He was patient, and that patience was educated by hard work. “He was exacting in his demands,” remembered Joseph Pope: “He required all a man’s time. The thought of holidays never entered his mind.” Pope felt these demands were justified:

> To those who caught his spirit and were willing to be on duty all the year round, no life could be more pleasant than constant association with a statesman who ever conveyed the impression to his secretary that he was a coworker with him in a common cause, who rarely gave a direction unaccompanied by an explanation of the reasons for it, who courted suggestions of all kinds, and even invited criticism of his own work. “I want a memorandum on such a subject,” he would say, explaining in a few words what was in his mind. “I wish you would try your hand at it.” If the secretary expressed a doubt as to his ability, he would add, “Never mind what mess you make of it, the worst attempt will give me some useful idea. See what you can do.”\(^8\)

If parliament was in session, Macdonald would dutifully take his seat and attend until late into the evening, sometimes returning home in the small hours of the morning. In 1884, at the height of a new wave of Fenian terrorist menaces, Macdonald returned home to Earnscliffe with a security escort.\(^9\) If the house was not in session, Macdonald hosted “official” dinners and made sure that his backbenchers were invited at least twice during each session of Parliament. Macdonald even tended to arrange the seating at his own table.

The man who carved out a country out of a continent left for Americans, who fought to extend the franchise, who welcomed African Americans, Jews, Irish Catholics, and almost everyone to the country, who founded the first national park, who forged a working political alliance between English and French, who fought to build the transcontinental railway, who argued for the right to vote for women, who legalized labour unions also ensured that people had a chance to sit at his table.

What did he do in cabinet?

We know he had a hand in crafting executive orders (orders-in-council) and he multiplied them with every year of his administration. By the time he died in 1891, there were over 3000 of them produced each year. With these orders in council, Macdonald put his own stamp on government.

---

6 Ibid., 642.
7 Ibid., 653.
8 Ibid., 656.
9 Ibid., 48.
It took enormous efforts. His successors did not follow that habit but Macdonald was convinced that government growth demanded guidance.

In fact, it would take almost thirty years—and three years of war—for the government of Canada to match his record and to issue as many executive orders as Macdonald did in his last full year in power.

In addition to discussing policy and crafting orders in council, he sweated the details on the budget estimates and focused his attention on the priorities of his day. This sheds a light on how he dealt with expenses related to Indian affairs. They first appear on government books in the fiscal year 1869-70, with just over $6000. By the time he was defeated in 1873, the budget had risen to almost $64,000 an increase of more than 10 times the original budget.

He increased expenses in the Department of Indian affairs after he was returned to power in 1878 to deal with the hardships of the indigenous people of the prairies which had been utterly neglected by the previous government. He immediately raised the budget set by the Mackenzie administration for the fiscal year 1878-79 to over $421,000. To look after the implementation of this budget, he made himself the Minister responsible for Indian affairs. He continuously increased the budget, and Indian affairs quickly became the third largest expense of the Macdonald government, only outranked by expenses to public works and provincial subsidies. It would remain so until 1887, when it reached $1.2 M, a tripling of the budget in less than eight years at a time when there was no inflation.

That money went for food (though much of it perished), tools and seeds and animals, and to establish model farms so that the Indigenous people of the prairies, many of whom sought refuge on the Canadian prairies for fear of utter extermination in the United States, could learn to settle the land. It is important to remember that the railroad did not yet exist for most of that period. To ship foodstuffs was as expensive as it was useless. In a very poor country that provided no social safety net for any of its citizens, this was also politically risky.

This is the work of a government trying to bring order to chaos on the prairie, but also dealing with Fenian threats, the completion of the transcontinental railway and, not least, the outbreak of a smallpox epidemic that would take over 5000 lives in Quebec in 1885 alone. Did it work? Clearly, it did not, but that is not news. It was well known and debated in the House of Commons. Canadians supported Sir John A. Macdonald.

I’m not hiding the fact that expenses were cut in Indian affairs after 1887, when Canada was beset by a dramatic economic slowdown, but the cuts were in line with the average. Government was small, its scope was very limited and in no way did the state come to the help of individuals in situations of stress, including life and death.

Was it a clash of civilizations? Many people saw it that way, and in many ways it was. But Macdonald had a great deal more sympathy for the prairie Indians than people think. He did not hide the fact that he saw no future for them in their present state. He wanted to see them educated, become farmers, and join the modern economy that, he hoped, promised to blaze a
path across the continent. He was not alone in this hope; the indigenous people insisted on these things in the various numbered treaties that were signed in the 1870s.

For him, and for most Canadians, it was not a message of hate, it was the only way to the future, the only way the prairie Indians could join the Canadian family and make it whole. He tried to help, even if the cooperation was not always there. He could have done nothing to help the Indians who were struggling with hardships and even famine, as they had for generations before, but he tried—he responded to the crisis as best he could. There were no votes in it for him.

Still, it shows how relentlessly he worked, focused on details of programs as well as on the broad questions of policy.

In closing, I want to turn to the epitaph that appears on Sir John’s monument. How can “At Rest” be interpreted today?

You will notice that it’s not just “At Rest”; it is “at Rest.” The period at the end of the phrase is not an accident. Some may see it as a declaration of finality. Macdonald’s critics would like it that way.

I’m more optimistic. It could also signify a span of time, a “period”.

It speaks to his reputation today, which is “at rest”, but only for a period. I’m borrowing from an observation made by Waldemar Januszczak, the British art critic, who made similar remarks about the punctuation on the engravings of the Sans Souci palace in Potsdam, Germany. Januszczak observed that Frederick the Great, the king of Prussia, was at ease with French and that the piece of punctuation could be read in that language. In this sense, the “.” is read in French as “point”. Point also signifies “not”. In other words, if you want to be a truly bilingual Canadian (et pourquoi pas?) you can read this as “at rest, not”.

In this perspective, the epitaph calls us not to rest, because Sir John A’s reputation needs defence—and his creation, Canada, is certainly not at rest. It is like the mighty railroad he set in motion, the train that furiously heads to the future: to a better, happier place for all Canadians, young and old, indigenous people as well as sons and daughters of European settlers from 300 and 400 years ago as well as newcomers from around the world.

There is no finality in Macdonald being “at rest.” He is, in death as he was in life, always at work.

Macdonald, as Pope reminds us, “was a firm believer in the efficacy of time as a solvent of many difficulties which beset his path, and his wisdom in this regard has time and again been exemplified.” With work, inspired by Sir John A and with the patience he pleaded for, our job is to again remind Canadians that his work was good work, and that his record is still worthy of the highest honours and deepest gratitude.

\[10 \text { Ibid., 653.}\]
By convincing our friends and neighbours to consider Macdonald’s life and work in their most informed light and to resist the demonizing myths essayed these days, he will win again the sympathy, understanding and respect he has undoubtedly earned.

Only then will he be at rest.