

Sir John A. Macdonald Fact Sheet

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Racism and Oppression Committed by Sir John A. Macdonald

- Cleared the prairies through the deliberate starvation and detention of the Indigenous peoples in order to make way for European settlement and the construction of the railroad.
- Executed Métis leader Louis Riel (1885).
- Macdonald's Indian agents explicitly withheld food in order to drive bands onto reserves and out of the way of the railroad. A Liberal MP at the time called it "a policy of submission shaped by a policy of starvation." (Daschuk, 2013)
- Macdonald authorized the pass system, which required First Nations to obtain permission from their Indian agent to leave their reserve. His government also criminalized powwows and potlaches. Both policies would persist well into the 20th century. (Hooper, 2018)
- Macdonald was a key in the implementation of the Residential School Policy that took 150,000 Indigenous children from their families to suffer cultural genocide. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015)
- Macdonald created the North West Mounted Police-- the precursor of the RCMP which incarcerates more Indigenous people per capita than any other racial group in Canada. As Métis academic and activist Howard Adams (1975) wrote, "It is not just a coincidence that the Mounted Police were established during the development of Indian reserves to ensure the 'success' of the treaty negotiations with the Indians and 'help' relocate Indians and halfbreeds to their reserves and colonies...The Mounties were not ambassadors of goodwill or uniformed men sent to protect Indians; they were the colonizer's occupational forces and hence the oppressors of Indians and Métis."
- Macdonald was a leader in the creation of British North America Act (1867). Included in section 91 is item #24 which legislates federal jurisdiction over "Indians, and Lands reserved for the Indians" ([source link](#)). This action of unilaterally creating federal jurisdiction over Indigenous Peoples goes against treaties negotiated between Indigenous Nations and the Crown, who negotiated being in nation-to-nation relations with each other, not one nation controlling and subjugating others.
- As the Joint-Premier of the Province of Canada (before Canadian confederation), Macdonald was a leader in the creation of the [Gradual Civilization Act](#) (1857) which transformed into the Indian Act in 1876. The Gradual Civilization Act aimed to enfranchise First Nations men into settler society (i.e., Province of Canada) and in the process turn lands of Indigenous nations into private property which could be taxed by settler governments. In this Act, Indigenous women and children (under 21) were attached to the men in their lives (a settler ideology and practice of heteropatriarchy imposed through this legislation).

Quotes by Sir John A. MacDonald

- "I have reason to believe that the agents as a whole ... are doing all they can, by refusing food until the Indians are on the verge of starvation, to reduce the expense," Macdonald to the House of Commons in 1882.
- "When the school is on the reserve, the child lives with his parents who are savages; he is surrounded by savages. He is simply a savage who can read and write," Macdonald to the House of Commons.

- “All these poor people know is that Canada has bought the country from the Hudson's Bay Company and that they are handed over like a flock of sheep to us.” Macdonald about the purchase of “Rupert’s Land” from the Hudson’s Bay Company
- “The great aim of our legislation has been to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the other inhabitants of the Dominion as speedily as they are fit to change” (Macdonald, 1887).
- “The executions of the Indians ought to convince the Red Man that the White Man governs” (Macdonald, 1885).
- “Celebrating the potlatch is a misdemeanor. This Indian festival is debauchery of the worst kind, and the departmental officers and all clergymen unite in affirming that it is absolutely necessary to put this practice down” (Macdonald, 1894).
- “We have been pampering and coaxing the Indians...we must take a new course, we must vindicate the position of the white man, we must teach the Indians what law is” (Macdonald, 1885).

Rebuttals to Common Arguments

- “Macdonald is a significant part of Canadian history” -
 - **Rebuttal:** There is a difference between ‘significant’ and ‘worthy of honouring’. We must acknowledge Macdonald’s role in establishing a parliamentary democracy steeped in racism and white supremacy that still oppresses Indigenous and other marginalized communities.
- “Renaming public spaces or removing statues is erasing history”
 - **Rebuttal:** We are not erasing history or rewriting it. We are working with the understanding that in light of new evidence and in every new context, it is incumbent on us to lend new meanings to the lessons of the past, the communities we inhabit as Canadian citizens, and the future of our education systems.
- “Macdonald played a significant role in nation building—we would not have Canada without him.”
 - **Rebuttal:** Honouring Macdonald with a building may have made good sense at some point in history but it is now an honour that perpetuates a mythology about Canada’s history that has long been debunked.
- “Macdonald’s views and actions are justified because that’s just how everyone thought back then”
 - **Rebuttal:** Scholarship by leading researchers has demonstrated that, even by the standards of his own day, Macdonald stood out for his racist beliefs. Macdonald’s actions can thus be measured against his own contemporaries and still be found wanting.
- “We should not judge the past based on today’s standards and values”
 - **Rebuttal:** The argument that we cannot judge the past in the case of Macdonald enables Canadian society to avoid the unsettling that comes with the full realization of Canadian history, avoiding recognition of the current realities connected to this history, and avoiding the necessary steps toward reconciliation that are apparent as a result.

Points Indigenous Folks Can Raise

- It is harmful to Indigenous students, staff, and community members to have to occupy a building commemorating an individual whose openly stated goal was to see their annihilation through murder and aggressive assimilation.

- As the victims of Macdonald's genocidal policies, Indigenous voices need to be amplified in this discussion and our perspectives need to be given priority over those of people who have directly benefited and continue to benefit from this genocide.

Points Black Folks Can Raise

- Macdonald was a white supremacist: “If you look around the world you will see that the Aryan races will not wholesomely amalgamate with the Africans or the Asiatics. It is not to be desired that they should come; that we should have a mongrel race, that the Aryan character of the future of British America should be destroyed by a cross or crosses of that kind” (Macdonald, 1885).
- We have an obligation to denounce genocide and take meaningful stepstoward reconciliation.

Points People of Colour/Non-white Settlers Can Raise

- Macdonald was a white supremacist: “If you look around the world you will see that the Aryan races will not wholesomely amalgamate with the Africans or the Asiatics. It is not to be desired that they should come; that we should have a mongrel race, that the Aryan character of the future of British America should be destroyed by a cross or crosses of that kind” (Macdonald, 1885).
- Macdonald’s racist views were not limited to Indigenous people. For example, he a) instituted the Chinese head tax through the Chinese Immigration Act (1885), and b) robbed people of Chinese heritage the right to vote through the Electoral Franchise Act (1885).

Points white Settlers Can Raise

- Harm done to Indigenous people should outweigh discomfort and nostalgia on the part of settlers.
- We need to be aware of how institutional racism, colonialism, and white supremacy have shaped what we teach in schools. History education across the world has to help states and nations heal and learn from violence and genocide.

References and Resources for Further Learning

- Clearing the Plains: Politics, Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* by James Daschuk (2013)
<https://activehistory.ca/2015/01/john-a-Macdonalds-aryan-canada-aboriginal-genocide-and-chinese-exclusion/>
<https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/thebigdebate/2018/08/21/should-statues-of-sir-john-a-Macdonald-be-removed-yes.html>
<https://voiced.ca/project/anti-racist-educator-reads/> [Unsettling Canada Series]
<https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/here-is-what-sir-john-a-Macdonald-did-to-indigenous-people>
Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada by The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015)
Prison of Grass: Canada from a Native Point of View by Howard Adams (1975)
[Trick or Treaty](#) (Alanis Obomsawin, 2014).
John A. Macdonald by Donald Creighton (1998)



"CHRISTIAN STATESMANSHIP."
Sir John: Indians starving? Oh, well, they're not "friends of Dewdney," you know. I'll see that *you* don't come to want, though, Mr. Contractor.
 [Note: Edgar Dewdney was the Lieutenant-Governor of the North West Territories.]

(1888 Cartoon from popular newspaper of *Grip*.)

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