

What Canadians Don't Know about Sir John A. Macdonald's Relationship with Canada's Indigenous Peoples The Myth of Cultural Genocide

Part I. Research by Brian Porter, History Teacher, Brockville

- Macdonald's letter to Dr. Peter Jones, Mississauga Ojibwa chief of New Credit, August 31, 1886

The object I had in extending the privilege of the franchise to the Indians was to place them on a footing of equality with their white brethren. I considered that it was unjust to the original owners of the soil to be prevented from aiding in the election of men who would represent their interests in Parliament. The Franchise Act has now been in force for a year, and the Indians must see that their treaty rights have not been in the slightest degree affected since it became law. You may answer our Indian friends from me, as Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, that the Franchise Act does not in any way affect or injure the rights secured to them by treaty or by the laws relating to the Red men of the Dominion. They may vote with perfect security. I hope to see some day the Indian race represented by one of themselves on the floor of the House of Commons.

- He appointed Richard Hardisty, the first Metis in the Senate in 1888.
- His granddaughter Daisy went to Miss Harmon's Boarding School in Ottawa, run by Abby Maria Harmon, a Metis very proud of her Cree and French descent.
- Macdonald had good relationships with many Indigenous leaders, as the testimonials below will show. His blind-spot was the West, which he was only able to visit once one year after the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885.
- He recommended Thomas Green, a Mohawk land surveyor and graduate of McGill, to join the Dominion Land Survey in 1886.
- In 1886, John A. Macdonald invited nine prominent chiefs who remained loyal during the Northwest Rebellion of 1885 to travel to Central Canada. The Prime Minister wanted these important leaders of the 15,000 or

so Prairie First Nations to visit southern Ontario and Quebec and see some Indigenous success stories.

- The federal government sponsored two separate visits: The first consisted of five Blackfoot speakers from Alberta; the second (photograph below) included three Cree chiefs and one Saulteux (Ojibwe) from Saskatchewan. Rev. John McDougall independently organized a third group of three “loyal chiefs,” two Cree and one Stoney Nakoda from Alberta.



Macdonald invites chiefs to his home in Ottawa, 1886

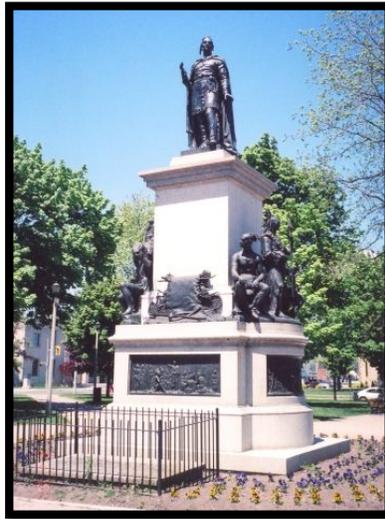
- Macdonald invited Three Bulls and other chiefs from the Plains to Earnscliffe, his home in Ottawa. They asked for help starting farms and a market for their produce. <https://www.canadashistory.ca/explore/first-nations-inuit-metis/chiefs-journey>



Five chiefs historic visit to Ottawa City Hall, 1886

- The chiefs visited the Mohawk Reserve at Grand River and Brantford to witness the unveiling of the impressive statue to Joseph Brant the Mohawk leader who was an ally of the British during the American Revolution. “...late nineteenth-century Canadian politicians saw the eastern Canadian reserves as a laboratory and training ground for the ‘civilization’ of the First Nations in the Northwest.” They saw the Mohawk Residential/Industrial School run by the Anglican Church—founded in 1828—as an opportunity for their children.

<https://todayinottawashistory.wordpress.com/2017/01/07/crowfoot-chief-diplomat-peace-maker/>



Statue of Joseph Brant, Brantford, Unveiled, 1886

- A Peigan Chief, requested that his son and brother be educated at the Mohawk Institute. Cree Chief Pakan was quoted as saying, “My object in going east was to get more schools for my people. Schools are what we want, to educate our children, who are thirsting for knowledge.”
- The Chiefs were guests of honour in Brantford for the unveiling of a bronze statue of Joseph Brant, hero in the Revolutionary War.
- Macdonald was not the “architect” of residential schools. Residential schools were established by Catholic and Protestant religious denominations in New France and New England during the seventeenth century long before Macdonald was born.
- By 1957 the Federal government was very concerned about the lack of control over these church-run schools. There was no uniformity of

standards in quality of management and staff, quantity and quality of food and clothing and general upkeep of facilities. They did not take over “full management of the system from the churches” until 1969 and began to shut the system down.

- Over all of this time the majority of Indigenous children did not attend residential schools. In 1944-45 for example there were 28,429 school-age Indigenous children in all of Canada. 8865 were in residential school (31.1%), 7,573 attended day school, 42.2 % did not attend any school.
- His government increased spending on Indian Affairs by 41% over three years. Increases in 1879-80 from \$489,327 to \$694,512, in 1881-82 to \$1,183,414, the third largest government expense after debt and infrastructure.
- Macdonald wanted Native children to have better lives and believed that industrial/residential schools would be the way to accomplish that goal. There is no question that his language was harsh (White Man, Savage) but he was dealing with unprecedented starvation and the crisis of identity resulting from the collapse of the hunt.
- He provided a relief programme for the starving peoples of the Plains and a way forward through industrial schools.
- One of the problems he faced was the difficulty in finding qualified instructors willing to live and work in the West under rudimentary conditions and many logistical problems. Government officials in charge of the programmes often ended up with inexperienced, incompetent Indian agents in a difficult situation, along with an economic depression in the 1870's and again later in '80's.
- Macdonald addressed Parliament during the famine on the Plains:

We cannot as Christians, and as men with hearts in our bosoms, allow the vagabond Indian to die before us ... We must prevent them from starving in consequence of the extinction of the buffalo and their not yet (having) betaken themselves to raising crops.

Macdonald and Indigenous Leaders:

- In 1878 Chief Archibald Cuthbertson and five other Mohawk Chiefs at Tyendinaga prepared an address to John A. Macdonald congratulating him on his recent victory. In part, it reads:

We cannot refrain from telling you the peculiar pleasure we experienced on hearing that you had become the head of the Department on the Interior and consequently Superintendent General of Indian Affairs as we have long been aware of the great interest you have always taken and shown for our people in this Dominion.

- A number of Aboriginal people in Ontario recognized his contribution to their situation, particularly after his electoral Franchise Act of 1885, which gave the federal vote to all male adult Indians in eastern Canada who met the property requirements.
- Some indigenous leaders wrote to thank Macdonald for his efforts on behalf of their people. In June 1885 Dr. Peter Jones, (Kahkewaquonaby) a Chief of the Mississaugas of the Credit, wrote to congratulate Macdonald.

My Dear Sir John, I should have written to you some time ago to thank you for making the Indian a *person* in the Franchise Bill. Other affairs, however, have prevented me from performing my duty I now thank you on the part of the memory of my father (Rev. Peter Jones) and on the part of myself, as for many years we advocated and urged this step as the one most likely to elevate the aborigines to the position more approaching the independence of the whites.
(repealed by Laurier in 1898)

- Chief Charles Big Canoe (Keché Chemon) and band Councillor James Ashquabe of the Georgina Island Ojibwas on Lake Simcoe wrote to thank the Prime Minister

...[for his] earnest efforts to promote the welfare of the Indian people throughout the whole Dominion We appreciate your difficulties in dealing with our less civilized brother in the North West who has not had the advantages we in Ontario have had ... we thank you most cordially for the gift of the franchise.

- Chief Mitchell Chubb and band councilors Peter Crowe, Joshua Blaker, Allan Salt, E. Comego and band secretary George Blaker of the Alnwick band on Rice Lake sent a memorial to endorse the extension of the franchise in 1885.

...the Chief and council, assembled, offer on our own behalf, and on behalf of our band our heartfelt thanks to him our great Chief and tell him that we shall always gratefully remember his goodness and Justice and the Honor and dignity [Macdonald] has conferred upon us and that we shall teach our young men to follow in our footsteps in remembering his great character and cherishing the memory of his good words and noble deeds.

- Dr. Oronkytekha (Mohawk doctor a.k.a. Peter Martin) wrote to Macdonald on January 5, 1882 to say that he and his wife had decided to name their new-born son John Alexander:

...so that in after years we could tell him after whom he was named and to instruct him to emulate his name sake in love and devotion to his country, which go so far to make a true patriot.

Part II. Research by Gregory A. Piassetzki LLP

There can be no better symbol of truth and reconciliation between Canadians and their fellow Indigenous citizens than Sir John A. Macdonald. Not only was he a Father of Confederation, responsible for the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, that made Canada possible, and Prime Minister for 19 of the first 24 years of Canada's existence, but he was a great supporter and defender of Canada's Native peoples.

Few today seem aware of these facts:

- **Settlement of the West:** The United States opened its West to settlement before negotiating land settlements with its native peoples and before creating a force to prevent conflict among Natives and settlers. As a result, it fought a series of Indian Wars between 1760 and 1870 in which it is estimated that 50,000 Natives and 20,000 European settlers died.
- **In 1871, U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant's Initiates Buffalo Policy:** "A Buffalo Dead Is an Indian Gone." President Grant terminated hundreds of treaties in the U.S. In the Indian Appropriations Act of 1871, without any

input from Native Americans, Congress prohibited any future treaties. This was steadfastly opposed by native Americans.

See: <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2016/05/the-buffalo-killers/482349/>

- **Sir John A was determined to avoid a similar outcome in Canada**, and so, before the great western territories were opened for settlement his government negotiated the first of eleven treaties with all of the Native peoples residing in the West and created the Northwest Mounted Police to ensure that the treaty rights of the Natives were respected. The net result: no Indian Wars and no casualties, a stark contrast to the American experience.
- **Smallpox Vaccination Program:** Sir John A's government carried out a wide-ranging program to vaccinate all Native Canadians against smallpox during the 1870's and 80's. Smallpox was a terrible scourge for Europeans and more so for Native Canadians. The program was expensive and difficult to implement since there were no roads or railways across Western and Northwestern Canada.
- **The program saved thousands of Native lives** (in the 1830's, more than 10,000 Native Canadians died of smallpox in a single year). By 1885 smallpox had been virtually eliminated as a threat to Native Canadians. In 1885, when more than 3,164 Montrealer's (who were wary of vaccination) and 2,600 Canadians outside of Montreal died of smallpox, the Federal Government could report "but very few cases" on the Kahnawake reserve just across the river from Montreal where the Natives had all been vaccinated (cf. *The Making of Modern Medicine* by Michael Bliss).
- **Native Education:** The first 7 of 11 treaties with the Natives of Western Canada required that the government, when requested by the Native leadership, build and staff schools for the education of Native children. As required by these treaties, and at the request of the band leadership, the government built more than 180 day schools, and 20 residential schools, during Sir John A's time as Prime Minister.
- **Schools for Natives Were Optional When Macdonald Was Prime Minister:** Sir John A. Macdonald insisted that school attendance for Native children should be voluntary, while public education for children in Ontario, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia was made compulsory and viewed as "progressive" as it still is today.

- **Macdonald firmly believed that native education would not succeed without parental support.** Over the 24 years from Confederation in 1867, until his death in 1891 (for all but 5 years of which Sir John A was Prime Minister) Native education was voluntary.
- **Indian Affairs published Annual Reports (IAAR's) every year from 1868 on.** The reports are hundreds of pages long and include detailed reports on every reserve and every school including grade by grade attendance.
- **These reports show that, at all times throughout Canada's history, the majority of Natives students attended day schools.** For example, in 1890, the year before Sir John A died, we know that of 14,963 school age children, 1,100 attended a residential school. That is, about 7% of school age children attended a residential school. We also know that 5 times as many (5,649) or 35% of school age children attended a day school.
- **The average Native student attended school for one year: grade one.** This continued during Sir John A's life, and until the 1950's in fact.
- **The use of residential schools peaked in 1930** and went into decline thereafter (too expensive, and as Native settlements grew in population day schools were more viable). Even in 1930, at the peak of residential school use, most Native students attended a day school.
- **We can contrast Native school attendance in Canada with school attendance in the great totalitarian regimes of the 20th century**
- **Despite Sir John A's very progressive approach to native education, building schools where attendance was not compulsory, he is often blamed for events long after his death.**
- **Famine Relief Program:** The collapse of the massive Buffalo herds on the Western Plains of the U.S. and Canada was long anticipated, but nevertheless occurred with shocking speed in the early 1880's. Sir John A. Macdonald immediately implemented the largest relief program in Canadian

history to that point (and for 50 years thereafter until the Great Depression) that was supporting 30,000 Native Canadians at its peak.

- **His prompt action of famine relief without a doubt saved thousands of Native lives.** He received more than a little criticism from the Opposition for being too generous,
- **In Parliament, in 1885, Macdonald was also criticized for the continuing expense** in providing land, agricultural tools, agricultural education and general education for Natives and the slow progress in moving Natives from a hunter gatherer culture into the modern world.
- **He responded with great compassion** and foresight: “There is only one way - patience, patience, patience. ... You must treat them, and our children, and our grand-children, and our great grand-children must treat them in the same way...”

Part III. Research by David Warrick Ph.D.

- **Macdonald was well aware of the important contributions of the Six Nations allies during the American Revolutionary War 1775-1883.** He spent much of his youth in his family home along the shores of the Bay of Quinte a short distance from the Mohawk Loyalist territory of Tyendinaga. He learned from the United Empire Loyalists how their Indigenous allies helped settlers adapt to the harsh environment following their arduous journey from New York to Adolphustown in 1783-4. Without the help of the Mohawk, likely many UEL would have died of starvation in those early years of settlement in Upper Canada.
- **In 1839, a 24-year-old criminal lawyer in Kingston named John A. Macdonald defended Brandt Brandt, a Mohawk** accused of murdering fellow Mohawk John Marrikell. Macdonald defended the accused, and John Culbertson, grandson of John Deserontyon, founder of the Tyendinaga Mohawk settlement on the Bay of Quinte acted as translator for the trial. "Macdonald's defense was described as 'ingenious' by the *Chronicle & Gazette* – Macdonald argued that because it was dark, and everyone was drinking, there was no way to know for sure who dealt the fatal blow to John Marrikell. Brandt was convicted of manslaughter but only imprisoned for six months.” “Sir John A. Macdonald's Influence on the

Development of Canadian Indigenous Policy, 1844-1876.” Master’s Thesis, 2020. University of Victoria. Sarah Taekema.”

<https://dspace.library.uvic.ca/handle/1828/11796?show=full>

- **The Indigenous peoples of the Canadian prairies suffered greatly following the slaughter of the bison herds by fun-seeking hunters in the western plains, mainly in the U.S.** Over 30 million bison were culled in the latter part of the 19th C. It was part of President Ulysses S. Grant’s policy of dealing with the “Indian problem.” See 'Kill Every Buffalo You Can! Every Buffalo Dead Is an Indian gone.’
<https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2016/05/the-buffalo-killers/482349/>
- **Macdonald began to construct industrial schools for Indigenous youth in early eighties following the Davin Report of 1879.** The intent of the government was to provide Indigenous children with practical skills to help them lead productive lives. This was the period of the famine caused by the slaughter of the bison in Canada and United States. Macdonald died about seven years later and during that time, he allowed parents to decide whether to send their children to these schools.
- **Macdonald’s deputy-superintendent of Indian Affairs, Lawrence Vankoughnet, toured the western reserves and wrote to Macdonald, during an economic downturn in the Canadian economy** "Careful consideration after personally visiting localities convinced me that there has been much needless expenditure." The opposition in the House of Commons also criticized the cost of the famine relief.
- **Twenty Canadian prime ministers were in office during the so-called residential school system.** The last Indian residential school, located in Saskatchewan, closed in 1996. On June 11, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper on behalf of the Government of Canada issued a public apology to Aboriginal Peoples acknowledging Canada's role in the Indian Residential Schools system.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission mentions a reason for the lack of administrative oversight of the schools:

...principals resented government attempts to exert control over the way they ran their schools....Government officials were frustrated by the fact they could not control how the per capita grant money was spent. The Canadian government

operated Indian residential schools in partnership with the Christian institutions (viz. Catholic 60%, Anglican 30% and the rest other Protestant denominations).

- **In 1953, Ottawa introduced new regulations in “an attempt by Indian Affairs to exert control over the schools.”** The Truth and Reconciliation Commission found “the establishment of a nationwide discipline policy in 1953 did not bring an end to abusive disciplinary practices the policies that existed were poorly enforced and often simply ignored.”
- **Macdonald’s view of race and the law** was best summed up in his speech the House of Commons in 1890, a year before he died:

The statement that has been made so often: that this is a conquered country is *à propos de rien*. Whether it was conquered or ceded, we have a constitution now under which all British subjects [Canadians] are in a position of absolute equality, having equal rights of every kind — of language, of religion, of property and of person. There is no paramount race in this country; there is no conquered race in this country; we are all British subjects [Canadians], and those who are not English are none the less British subjects on that account.

- **Prior to January 1, 1947, there was no legal status for Canadian citizens, only British subjects.** The Canadian Citizenship Act gave legal recognition to the terms ‘Canadian citizen’ and ‘Canadian citizenship’. So today, Macdonald would substitute “Canadian” for “British subject.” <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/operational-bulletins-manuals/canadian-citizenship/overview/history-legislation.html>
- **Macdonald’s nationalism included all Canadians, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous.** Here’s John A. Macdonald in 1861 speaking in St. Thomas, Upper Canada six years before Confederation:

Since I was five years old, I have been in Canada. All my hopes and dreams and my remembrances are Canadian; not only are my principles and prejudices Canadian but what, as a Scotchman, I feel as much as anyone else, my interests are Canadian.

In other words, Sir John A. Macdonald believed that the Canadian Constitution of 1867 was intended to unite all Canadians under one law no matter what race, language, creed, or religion. He was a progressive conservative and leader of the Liberal/Conservative party of Canada.

A Final Word:

Much has been said about Macdonald's so-called head tax on Chinese immigrants.

Here are some notes that may help readers to understand the importance of delving deeper into historical documents to determine what is true and what is false. The misrepresentation of the *Chinese Immigration Act* of 1885 is a case in point.

- Those who quote the “Chinese head tax” distort history. They would do well to investigate what was happening in China before Canada’s *Chinese Immigration Act* was introduced. The Act limited immigration following war, disease and genocide during the Taiping Rebellion, the worst civil war in the world to date.
- The killings left 20 million dead in China from 1850 to 1864. This Chinese rebellion was one of the reasons for relaxed emigration laws in China and the exclusion of Chinese immigrants to the U.S. in 1882.
- In 1885, following the completion of the C.P.R., Canada imposed a poll tax on some immigrants, while excluding others. Chinese immigration actually increased following the introduction of the tax.
- In Mexico, Chinese workers were mistreated and in some cases murdered *en masse*. Conduct a search on “Chinese Immigration to Mexico”
Buchenau, Jurgen (Spring 2001). "Small numbers, great impact: Mexico and its immigrants, 1821–1973". *Journal of American Ethnic History*. **20** (3): 23–50.
<https://lithub.com/the-forgotten-massacre-of-chinese-immigrants-during-the-mexican-revolution/>
- The U.S. government banned Chinese completely in 1882.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Chinese-Exclusion-Act>
- Australia also treated Chinese immigrants harshly with a “White Australia” policy. These are examples of why historical references, in the context of other events, need to be included in Canadian history curricula.

- “*The Chinese Immigration Act* was passed in the Canadian parliament following the *Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration* in 1885 shortly after the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway. The Act exempted some Chinese individuals from the entrance fee, for instance, diplomats, government representatives, tourists, merchants, “men of science” and students.” <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/chinese-head-tax-in-canada>



George Orwell:

- "In a time of deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act."
- "The most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history."

We hope you found these notes useful in your exploration of Canada’s history and the legacy of our first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald.

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