

Haunted by Sir John A. Macdonald in Sandy Hill

Exhibition Text with Citations

Introduction

Sir John A. Macdonald – Canada's first Prime Minister and one of the Fathers of Confederation – is Sandy Hill's most famous resident. This canalside neighbourhood is saturated with memories of the bygone politician, for better or for worse. No longer the unquestioned heroic leader and unifier depicted in textbooks, Macdonald, along with his policies and their legacies, has come under increasing public scrutiny. A complicated and controversial figure to which both the great project of nation building and "Canada's National Crime,"¹ referring to the residential school system, are attributed; reinterpreting Macdonald is no simple task. In considering how Macdonald haunts Sandy Hill, his residence for nearly two decades in the late 19th century, this virtual exhibition contributes to that effort. It does so by disentangling strands of memory through which we come to know this larger-than-life figure – as a man, as a politician, and as an icon. Join us on a tour of places and objects that speak to the many facets of Macdonald: who he was, what he did, and what he symbolizes in the present.

Stop 1 - St. Alban's Church

Born in 1815 in Glasgow, Scotland, John Alexander Macdonald moved to Kingston, Upper Canada, with his family when he was five years old.² Known as a charismatic and quick-witted businessman, lawyer, and politician, Macdonald's all-consuming commitment to his work was driven not only by his vision for Canada, but by compounded tragedies, which will be revealed over the course of the tour.³ It is at St. Alban's Church where we meet Macdonald's ghost and begin our reflection on his life in Sandy Hill.

The Sandy Hill of 1865, or St. Georges Ward as it was then called, was a very different place than it appears today. Dominated by the Besserer Estate, Sandy Hill–Ottawa's first suburb–was sparsely populated. A fashionable neighbourhood for Ottawa's elite, Victorian mansions sprang up in the late 1800s.⁴

"Sir John Macdonald is dead."⁵ On June 6, 1891, *The Globe* article reported the death of Sir John A. Macdonald at his Ottawa residence. Celebrated by Canadians as the chief architect of Confederation and founder of the Dominion of Canada, Macdonald was grieved by thousands during his funeral procession on the streets of Ottawa.⁶

¹ John S. Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986*, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2017).

² J. K. Johnson and Tabitha Marshall, "Sir John A. Macdonald," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, November 28, 2017 (Historica Canada: 2021): <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/sir-john-alexander-macdonald>.

³ "Sir John A. Macdonald," *Sandy Hill History* (Ottawa: History of Sandy Hill, 2021): <https://www.ash-acsc.ca/history/sir-john-a-macdonald/>.

⁴ "Sandy Hill: Historical Background," *Places & Events of Historical Interest, Sandy Hill History* (Ottawa: History of Sandy Hill, 2021): <https://www.ash-acsc.ca/history/places-events/>.

⁵ "When Life's Work Is Done - the Passing of Sir John A." Accessed April 27, 2021. <http://uelac.org/events/Death-of-Sir-John-A-Macdonald.pdf>

⁶ J. Pennington Macpherson, *Essay in Life of the Right Hon. Sir John A. Macdonald: G.C.B., D.C.L.* (Oxon.), LL.D., Q.C., P.C. (St. John, N.B.: Earle Pub. House, 1891): 463.

Beginning at Parliament, the solemn procession wound through the streets to Sandy Hill, leading to St. Alban the Martyr Anglican Church.⁷ A memorial service took place here on June 9th, 1891. The Church, built in 1867, was attended by Macdonald weekly – at the urging of his very religious (second) wife – during his years living in Sandy Hill.⁸ St. Alban's was a hub for the political elite of the day, where Macdonald's personal life and public life met.

Stop 2 - 63 Daly Ave.

The word 'dwelling' can refer to a place to live or the act of lingering. Here, at 63 Daly Avenue, we explore the site of Macdonald's first residence in Sandy Hill through the lens of his personal life. Explore the personality of the first Prime Minister and meet his supportive and politically-involved second wife, Lady Agnes Macdonald. The Daly Ave. residence has since been demolished but from 1865-1870, Canada's first Prime Minister called this address home. Although no known photograph remains of Macdonald's first house in Sandy Hill, an anecdote concerning drains, stench, and flies, suggest it was far from idyllic.⁹ It was while living here that Macdonald, along with many of his colleagues and neighbours, helped lay the foundations of a new federal democracy. The house is no longer standing, but does the lingering presence of Macdonald still dwell here? Does this site continue to hold historical value?

Always well-dressed, Macdonald maintained an appearance of cleanliness and an air of refinement – potentially as a means of drawing attention away from his unimposing speaking voice.¹⁰ He kept himself clean-shaven, even while most of his colleagues sported full beards, showing off his collar and tie to full advantage. A frequent subject of political cartoons, Macdonald's appearance was famous – especially his rather large nose. Of the barber attending to Macdonald in a barber shop, one member of Parliament recalled saying "I suppose, Sir John, that he is the only man in Canada who can take you by the nose with such impunity?" Whereupon Macdonald replied, with a wide grin, "Yes, and he has his hands full."¹¹

In his early career, Macdonald drank heavily, as evidenced in letters, literature, and period cartoons such as this 1885 *Is This Spree Going to Last?* cartoon.¹² How then, might we interpret his liquor bill for £67 worth of alcohol, the equivalent of around \$12,200 CAD today? It would seem to suggest prodigious personal consumption. Yet, a man of his times, Macdonald was by no means alone in his habits. Excessive drinking was well-documented and came to be regarded as a social ill, giving rise to temperance movements in the early 20th century.¹³ Known as what we today would call a binge-drinker, the rigours and stresses of his political life, together with personal tragedy,

⁷ Macpherson, Essay in *Life of the Right Hon. Sir John A. Macdonald*, 462-463.

⁸ "St Alban the Martyr Anglican Church," *Sandy Hill History*, (Ottawa: History of Sandy Hill, 2021): <https://www.ash-acsc.ca/history/st-alban-the-martyr-anglican-church/>.

⁹ "Sir John A. Macdonald," *Sandy Hill History*.

¹⁰ E. B. Biggar, *Anecdotal Life of Sir John Macdonald* (Montreal: J. Lovell, 1891): 61.

¹¹ Biggar, *Anecdotal Life of Sir John Macdonald*, 229.

¹² Julia Skelly. "The Politics of Drunkenness: John Henry Walker, John A. Macdonald, and Graphic Satire." *RACAR*, vol. 40, no. 1, *l'Association d'art des universités du Canada / Universities Art Association of Canada*, 2015, pp. 71–84.

¹³ Martin, Ged. "John A. Macdonald and the Bottle." *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2006, pp. 162-185,222. ProQuest.

may have intensified his bouts of drunkenness. In 1848, Macdonald lost his first born son, John Alexander Macdonald Jr.; he was just 13 months old.¹⁴ Nine years later, in 1857, he lost his first wife, Isabella Clark, who succumbed to a chronic illness.¹⁵ The only child of Macdonald and his second wife was born in 1869 with hydrocephalus, fluid on the brain. Mary, affectionately nicknamed “Baboo” by her father, was confined to a chair for her entire life.¹⁶

Sir John A. Macdonald's second wife, Lady Agnes Macdonald, was keenly involved in the social and political climate of Sandy Hill.¹⁷ Although she could neither vote nor hold office, she contributed to her husband's goals with determination: hosting Macdonald's constituents at dinner parties, anonymously writing political commentary of her own, and establishing herself in the community through social events and charity work. This photograph shows Lady Macdonald in her element: on her right is the Governor General John Campell, The Marquis of Lorne, on her left is the Princess Louise, daughter of Queen Victoria.

“[The] fixed idea of a united empire was his guiding star and inspiration. I, who can speak with something like authority on this point, declare that I do not think any man's mind could be more fully possessed of an overwhelmingly strong principle than was this man's mind of this principle.”¹⁸

Stop 3 - The Caddy

Macdonald's second Sandy Hill residence, where he lived from 1871-1875, was nicknamed "The Caddy". A spacious red-brick house complete with a vegetable garden and chickens in the heart of the suburban neighbourhood, the house is, unfortunately, long gone.¹⁹ Macdonald's first of two terms as Prime Minister (1867-73, 1878-1891) ended in scandal while living at the Caddy. Here, we delve into the events and policies of Macdonald's political life – and the opinions others had on them. Macdonald worked towards a vision of a domesticated Canada, a country whose wildness he set out to tame. Policies of pacification and aggressive assimilation of Indigenous Peoples were a part of this vision, resulting in Indian residential schools among other projects.

This railway signalling lantern is one small fragment of a larger, difficult, history. The National Policy proposed by Sir John A. in 1878 bolstered the completion of the transcontinental railway that cut through Canada from the Pacific coast to Halifax. Macdonald was eager to complete this project, which would redeem his reputation that had been tarnished from an earlier Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) scandal.²⁰ Despite its aim to unify Canada from coast to coast, the CPR project was contentious and has been

¹⁴ Johnson and Marshall, “Sir John A. Macdonald,” The Canadian Encyclopedia.

¹⁵ Johnson and Marshall, “Sir John A. Macdonald,” The Canadian Encyclopedia.

¹⁶ “The Story of Mary Macdonald,” Community Stories (Digital Museums Canada, 2019): <https://www.communitystories.ca/v2/les-rochers/story/story-mary-macdonald/>.

¹⁷ Robin Sutherland, “Lady Agnes Macdonald,” The Canadian Encyclopedia (Historica Canada, August 13, 2015): <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/lady-agnes-macdonald>.

¹⁸ Sutherland, “Lady Agnes Macdonald.”

¹⁹ “Sir John A. Macdonald,” Sandy Hill History.

²⁰ Omer Lavallé and Tabitha Marshall, “Canadian Pacific Railway,” The Canadian Encyclopedia, Historica, March 6, 2008. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/canadian-pacific-railway>.

criticized from multiple perspectives.²¹ Not only did it displace Indigenous Peoples, who were shunted into a treaty-making process,²² it was constructed in dangerous working conditions, resulting in significant loss of life of its mostly Chinese migrant work-force.²³ Route changes intended to entice American partners was also a sore spot among Canadians.²⁴

Macdonald was accused of accepting bribes from financier Sir Hugh Allan over the CPR contract, and was eventually forced to resign in 1873. He strongly denied the allegations, however he admitted to lapses in memory from drinking.²⁵

Racist sentiment was commonplace and widely accepted among Macdonald and his peers. A belief in the racial superiority of caucasians was central to the development of Macdonald's vision of Canada.²⁶ Racialized policies, exclusion, and assimilation tactics greatly affected Indigenous populations and migrants of colour, like the Chinese migrant workers who helped build the CPR but were prohibited from immigrating.²⁷ In his own words, uttered in the House of Commons in 1885 to oppose legislation that would allow East Asians to vote federally, Macdonald's views are revealed "if [the Chinese] came in great numbers and settled on the Pacific coast they might control the vote of that whole Province, and they would send Chinese representative[s] to sit here, who would represent Chinese eccentricities, Chinese immorality, Asiatic principles altogether opposite to our wishes; [...] the eccentricities which are abhorrent to the Aryan race and Aryan principles, on this House."²⁸ The policy denying federal voting rights to East Asian migrants, within The Electoral Franchise Act of 1885, was passed.

Today, views such as these are often associated with racism. But is it fair to judge a 19th century figure on 21st century values? Is it possible to celebrate some of his accomplishments and condemn others or are his actions and their legacies too enmeshed to be disentangled?

Celebrating the centennial anniversary of Confederation, this commemorative biscuit tin combines many images and symbols of Canadian nationalism. Its lid shows a picturesque Parliament Hill, inscribed with the words "Heart of the Nation." The front and back scenes depict, respectively, the Fathers of Confederation, and Jacques Cartier's 1534 arrival and subsequent claim of Indigenous land in the name of the King of France. Two portraits of former prime ministers, both credited with adding new land to Canada's dominion, occupy either side of the tin: Sir John A. Macdonald and Sir Wilfred Laurier.

²¹ Lavallé and Marshall, "Canadian Pacific Railway."

²² Timothy J. Stanley, "John A. Macdonald's Aryan Canada: Aboriginal Genocide and Chinese Exclusion," Active History, History Department at the University of Saskatchewan and Huron University College, January 7, 2015.

²³ Johnson and Marshall, "Sir John A. Macdonald," The Canadian Encyclopedia.

²⁴ Johnson and Marshall, "Sir John A. Macdonald," The Canadian Encyclopedia.

²⁵ Johnson and Marshall, "Sir John A. Macdonald," The Canadian Encyclopedia.

²⁶ Stanley, "John A. Macdonald's Aryan Canada."

²⁷ Arlene Chan and Andrew McIntosh, "Chinese Head Tax in Canada," The Canadian Encyclopedia, Historica, September 8, 2016,

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/chinese-head-tax-in-canada>.

²⁸ Stanley, "John A. Macdonald's Aryan Canada"

“We must remember that they are the original owners of the soil, of which they have been dispossessed by the covetousness or ambition of our ancestors”²⁹

To the Dominion of Canada, Indigenous Peoples were a problem to be managed as expeditiously as possible. By 1878, with populations of bison – a traditional food source – hunted almost out of extinction, Indigenous communities across the Plains faced starvation. The failure of measures to prevent starvation under Macdonald’s leadership exacerbated the spread of tuberculosis and brought unnecessary death and hardship to many.³⁰

“When the Indians are starving they have been helped, but they have been reduced to one-half and one-quarter rations; but when they fall into a state of destitution we cannot allow them to die for want of food. It is true that Indians so long as they are fed will not work. I have reason to believe that the agents as a whole, and I am sure it is the case with the commissioner, are doing all they can, by refusing food until the Indians are on the verge of starvation to reduce the expense.”³¹

“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 relieve the Indians from the calamity that shall have befallen them.”³²

Stop 4 - Stadacona Hall

Stadacona Hall, which Macdonald occupied from 1878 to 1883, was his third place of residence in Sandy Hill. As the only house that is still standing, his presence has settled here. His political legacy and status as a national icon is nothing if not complicated. He has maintained the power to both unite and divide, to provoke dialogue, and to encourage reflection on what it means to live in Canada. Join us for the last stop of the tour and revisit Sir John A Macdonald’s unsettling legacy.

On June 10th, 1891, after the funeral at St. Alban’s, a decorated CPR funeral train carried the body of Sir John A. Macdonald from Ottawa to Kingston, where he would be buried. A round-trip ticket for the special Funeral Train to honour the late Prime Minister was sold to follow the procession and travel to his funeral. Crowds of incredible numbers of mourners lined the route and thronged to its final destination to say goodbye to Canada’s first Prime Minister.³³

²⁹ Tristan Hopper, “Here Is What Sir John A. Macdonald Did to Indigenous People,” National Post, August 28, 2018, <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/here-is-what-sir-john-a-macdonald-did-to-indigenous-people>.

³⁰ James Daschuk, “Old Tomorrow’s Bicentennial: Don’t Think Motivation, Think Law,” Active History, History Department at the University of Saskatchewan and Huron University College, January 9, 2015, <http://activehistory.ca/2015/01/dont-think-of-macdonalds-motivation-think-about-the-law/>.

³¹ Daschuk, “Old Tomorrow’s Bicentennial.”

³² Daschuk, “Old Tomorrow’s Bicentennial.”

³³ Macpherson, Essay in *Life of the Right Hon. Sir John A. Macdonald*, 463-465.

On July 1, 1895, a statue of Sir John A. Macdonald was erected on Parliament Hill to commemorate his role as Canada's first Prime Minister. A crowd of 5000 people attended the ceremony.³⁴ In the various addresses, Macdonald was described as "the chieftain, the statesman so loved by the people of Canada,"³⁵ and praised for his loyalty to the Crown and the British Empire.³⁶

In his address at the ceremony, Prime Minister Mackenzie Bowell discussed the significance of this monument: "But having said so much in their honour, let me suppose for a moment what lesson it is that these silent but suggestive monuments should teach us [...] These monuments teach us that the British Empire is one of the greatest secular agents for good that the world has ever seen [...] Again, they teach us that civic freedom is better preserved by British laws, traditions, and institutions than under any system in the world."³⁷

Statues of Sir John A. Macdonald have come into focus recently, amid conflicting arguments about whether monuments of controversial figures should remain in places of honour. A statue of Macdonald in Montreal was brought down during a protest in the summer of 2020. Ottawa's mayor Jim Watson announced that the monument on Parliament Hill would not be taken down. Rather, he encouraged the inclusion of additional plaques outlining both accomplishments and criticisms of the former Prime Minister.³⁸

This portrait of Sir John A. Macdonald was made in celebration of the Canadian Centennial in 1967. The 100th anniversary of Confederation prompted the creation of commemorative objects, many of them in honour of the Fathers of Confederation. This crayon-rendering shows Macdonald surrounded by the Provincial Coats of Arms, and a ribbon identifies him as "Father of Confederation". This stylized depiction contributes to Macdonald's iconic status and centres his legacy as the principal architect of Confederation. Through this work, alongside other commemorative pieces, Sir John A. Macdonald is remembered not only as a historical figure, but also as a symbol of Canada.

The year 1967 marked the 100th anniversary of Confederation, a "year-long party"³⁹ to celebrate the birth of the nation. Notable events included the unveiling of the Centennial Flame on Parliament Hill, an address from Queen Elizabeth, and the Centennial Train carrying a mobile museum of Confederation across Canada.⁴⁰ While much of the Centennial was celebratory, Chief Dan George of the Coast Salish Band of Tsleil-Waututh Nation was also featured in the series of events, addressing the harm caused by

³⁴ "Proceedings at the Unveiling of the Monument to Sir John A. Macdonald," Government Printing Bureau (Ottawa, 1895): 5, <https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/O23012/f2/nlc013258-full.pdf>.

³⁵ Sir Adolph Caron, "Proceedings at the Unveiling of the Monument to Sir John A. Macdonald," 13-14.

³⁶ "Proceedings at the Unveiling of the Monument to Sir John A. Macdonald," Government Printing Bureau, 7-9.

³⁷ Sir Mackenzie Bowell, "Proceedings at the Unveiling of the Monument to Sir John A. Macdonald," 10.

³⁸ Josh Pringle, "Mayor Watson doesn't support calls to remove statues of Sir John A. Macdonald," June 12, 2020, CTV News, <https://ottawa.ctvnews.ca/mayor-watson-doesn-t-support-calls-to-remove-statues-of-sir-john-a-macdonald-1.4981412?cache=%3FclipId%3D104070>.

³⁹ Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. 1967: *Canada's Centennial Year*. n.d.

<https://www.cbc.ca/archives/topic/1967-canadas-centennial-year>.

⁴⁰ Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. 1967: *Canada's Centennial Year*.

Confederation. In his lament, George mourned the devastation to Indigenous cultures and Peoples brought about in the last 100 years.⁴¹

Stop 5 - Lover's Lane

Confronting Macdonald's ghostly image, the man, the politician, and his legacy fuse once again. Canadians have long found the life and achievements of Sir John A. Macdonald to be a source of pride. But his memory and legacy are also sources of pain for many. He has become an emblem of systemic racism and even cultural genocide. Sir John A. Macdonald, and all that he represents, is not an easy figure to grapple with. How do we commemorate such a complex figure?

How do we address a ghost?

⁴¹ Dan George, "Chief Dan George's Lament for Confederation," aired Nov. 27, 1967, on Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, <https://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/chief-dan-georges-lament-for-confederation>.