How will Sir John A. be remembered in his third century?

Professor Patrice Dutil writes that while many communities and individuals have risen to the occasion of Macdonald’s bicentennial, more needs to be done. He offers several interesting ideas for how to secure the position of the man and his times in the Canadian imagination.

Patrice Dutil

The 200th anniversary of Sir John A. Macdonald’s birth has come and gone. What will Canada make of it?

Macdonald – whose death in 1891 occasioned the largest outpouring of grief in Canadian history and no less than five monuments within four years – has seen his reputation fall on hard times since.

Sure, his portrait has been a feature of the ten dollar bill since 1971 (though the current picture bears little resemblance to the man) and, more recently, Richard Gwyn’s highly readable two-volume biography showed that Canada’s first prime minister had not been entirely forgotten. The experience of the 200th anniversary indicated that there is a light of hope for his memory as he enters his third century.

Here is what is encouraging. A smart policy entrepreneur, for instance, launched a think tank in Ottawa and dedicated it to the memory of Macdonald (and Laurier). A number of books have appeared to discuss Macdonald. Patricia Phenix’s Private Demons: The Tragic Personal Life of John A. Macdonald offered a more intimate look at the man. Ged Martin, the Ireland-based scholar who has penned most thoughtful essays on Macdonald assembled his interpretations in a nifty short biography, John A. Macdonald: Canada’s First Prime Minister, and a probing study of Macdonald in his milieu, Favourite Son? John A. Macdonald and the Voters of Kingston 1841-1891. An important selection of Macdonald’s speeches was assembled by Sarah K. Gibson and Arthur Milnes (Canada Transformed: The Speeches of Sir John A. Macdonald) and a probing collection of essays by historians, co-edited by Roger Hall and I, Macdonald at 200: New Reflections and Legacies came out in time for the anniversary.

Even novelists have taken a crack at Macdonald. Roy MacSkimming published Macdonald, Richard Rohmer wrote Sir John A.’s Crusade and Seward’s Magnificent Folly, set in Highclere Castle, the set of Downton Abbey. Roderick Benns wrote The Legends of Lake on the Mountain, a novel for young readers that presents an adventure of a teenage John A. Macdonald.

Dinners were offered in various parts of Canada. The most important one was held in Toronto, with over 450 guests, but others attracted important audiences in Orillia, Ontario (which has been holding these events for decades), the Manitoba Historical Society (which has organized annual Macdonald dinners since the early 1960s) and Hamilton. Not least, Kingston, Ontario was the site of a week-long festival of Macdonald-related events. In Picton, Ontario, a new statue of Macdonald was commissioned by citizens from artist Ruth Abernethy.

Media coverage of the 200th anniversary was fairly good. Among the national papers, the National Post distinguished itself with many essays. According to a recent poll done by Ipsos-Reid for Historica Canada, one in four Canadians still could not identify Sir John A. Macdonald as the first prime minister of the country. This was not a bad result, considering that a similar poll conducted in 2008 showed that 42% of Canadians had no idea who Macdonald was.

The notable absence in the festivities, surely, was Official Ottawa. The Monarchist League has done its bit and MLI is planning to do Macdonald proud at a February soiree, but the federal Canadian Heritage department funded the Kingston Festival and little else. Plans are now afoot to fund Macdonald-related projects, but they are happening more in the context of the upcoming 150th anniversary of Confederation. (The Ipsos-Reid poll found that 28% of Canadians don’t know the year of Confederation and 44% don’t know Canada turns 150 in 2017.)

In striking contrast (even considering scale) has been the
decade-long work of the Lincoln Bicentennial of 2009 or, just to
give another example, what has taken place in France this summer
to honour the 100th anniversary of the murder of Jean Jaurès, the
leader of the Socialist party and of pacifism. By those standards,
were it not for the efforts of the community, Macdonald’s memory
would have been by-passed on this solemn occasion.

Mission accomplished? No. The 200th anniversary presented
a unique opportunity to address many of the myths that have
grown around Macdonald’s memory, but the work has only
begun. More people have to give time, effort and funding to
ensuring that Canada’s most significant historical figure and
his great contribution — Confederation — is rightfully given
his due. At the federal level, funding must be boosted to make
historic sites more accessible (during winters, particularly for
school children, and on weekends). Demands must be made that
the CBC-SRC, which is charged with a public mission, must do
more for history. In contrast with its counterparts such as the
BBC, PBS or France 2, the CBC-SRC accords nearly none of its
budget to historical projects. This situation is intolerable. At the
provincial level, governments must do much more to improve
the teaching of history. Currently, only four provinces require
high school students to take a Canadian history course in order
to graduate (Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba and Nova Scotia). It is,
quite simply, unbelievable.

The future of Sir John A. Macdonald will depend on what
the community makes of his memory. Here are some suggestions.

• Governments and the community fund a Sir John A.
  Macdonald Centre for the Study of the Nineteenth Century.
  This would be done efficiently and inexpensively by an alliance
  of scholars and amateurs. The idea would be to use Macdonald
  as a lens for his time. Wilfred Laurier did say that the story of
  Macdonald was the story of Canada, after all. This centre would
  be tasked with the organization of colloquia, materials in all media
  and, above all, transcribing the Macdonald papers so that they
  could be used by scholars, teachers and students across the country.

• Name streets in honour of Sir John A. Macdonald. Until
  very recently, there were only two streets named to remember
  Canada’s first prime minister: in Kingston and Saskatoon. Ottawa
  finally added its name to the roster a few years ago with the Sir
  John A. Macdonald Parkway, after previously requiring that
  Macdonald share billing with George-Étienne Cartier. There are
  “Macdonald” streets across Canada. Why not rename them “Sir
  John A. Macdonald”? Municipalities with no Macdonald venues
  should make the effort to change the situation. In Toronto, I have
  publicly argued that Avenue Road (surely one of the stupidest
  names ever attributed to an important artery) be renamed in
  honor of Sir John A. Macdonald. City Council referred the idea
to staff, where it was promptly, and quietly, drowned.

• Prime Ministers, Premiers, Mayors and all elected officials
  should make an effort to recall historic events, Macdonald and
  people of the “Confederation Generation” in their allocutions
  and messages. They set the example, and by routinely ignoring
  events, ideas or the resolve of past generations, they simply show
  that it is perfectly acceptable to be amnesiac about Canada.

Macdonald’s 200th birthday has shown that individual
writers, scholars, and artists in the community can rise to the
situation in organizing events and saluting heroes. Governments
at all levels, however, must play their parts in helping individu-
als and communal forces reach more members of the public.
Macdonald, who was a careful reader of history, might finally be
“at rest” in his grave, as his tombstone proclaims.

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