

Set in stone? Monuments, national identity & Sir John A. Macdonald

Christina Spicer considers the controversy surrounding statues in Canada and what their existence means for relations between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in the country.

National symbols, such as monuments, represent a country's values in public spaces. For this reason, they have become a socio-political battleground. David Kertzer (1988) suggests that the power of national symbols is in their ability to enable unity and solidarity while allowing for a plurality of meanings. That is to say, they provide the idea of unity without actual homogeneity. In Victoria, BC (British Columbia) a statue of Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first Prime Minister, was temporarily removed from outside city hall in 2018 as a gesture of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report (2015) affirmed that reconciliation must go beyond mutually respectful relationships; there is a moral responsibility to make amends for the past. Victoria City Council had been in conversation with the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations regarding the most suitable approach to reconciliation, and, following the statue's removal, the aspects of Canadian history that should be included within Canada's national identity have been the subject of national debate. Debates like these do not just constitute a referendum on national identity but are part of the process of defining and forming it. In analysing the statue's history, context, and significance, Canada's identity evolves.

Monuments present layered meanings, speaking to both the past and present as 'memory system[s] transcribed in stone' - as civic compositions that teach us our national heritage (Boyer 1994, 33-34). Monuments remind a nation of its collective history, act as a cultural expression of identity, and can be used as a tool to legitimise a state. While they tend to have a relatively uniform, straightforward effect in culturally homogenous societies, the same cannot be said for societies which must accommodate a plurality of cultures and identities (Breakfast, Bradshaw and Haines 2018, 3). In North America, monuments have become a topic of contention in discussions of history, memory, identity, and power. American sociologist William Graham Sumner (1940) warned that monuments 'never help history, they obscure it. They protect errors and sanctify prejudices.' Ernest Renan (2013) argued that misrepresenting history is actually essential in creating a nation - due to its potential to be controversial and divisive, historical accuracy becomes a 'necessary' casualty of compromise between differing perspectives in the building of a national identity.

Beyond representing a selective account of history, monuments play a significant role in expressing what is remembered. Halbwachs (1992) distinguishes between history and memory, two different ways of knowing the past. Memory is always constructed and is located in the social environments of the present. Places of memory, including monuments, use the imagery of collective memory to promote commitment to the nation and its narrative. The idea that history and memory are constructed and socially acquired is central to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (2006). His thesis - that nations are imagined political communities and memory is grounded in a mythic past - provides a framework for an analysis of how public imagination is invoked through the installation of monuments. Through the manipulation of history and memory, monuments can delicately orchestrate either a collective remembering or collective amnesia; a crucial aspect of nation-building.

In North America, the rise of multiculturalism and civil nationalism challenge monuments' symbolic unity. In recent years, the symbolism of monuments has been seriously questioned as racial tensions escalate, societal inequalities accumulate, and states continue to struggle to define the nation. These stone figures, which seemed powerless outside colonial ideologies, now have the ability to mobilise the nation in protest.

As the Macdonald statue had stood outside Victoria's City Hall since 1982, its temporary removal sparked debates about the monument's meaning, the representation of Canadian history, and the pursuit of multiculturalism. Macdonald is remembered as one of Canada's founding fathers and one of the country's greatest leaders, serving as Canada's first Prime Minister from 1867–1873, and then again from 1878–1891 (Creighton 1998). However, he is also remembered as the architect of the Indian Residential School System and as a colonial tyrant whose government oversaw the Indian Act (CBC 2018). At the time of the monument's commission, most Canadians were likely unaware of the cultural genocide caused by residential schools; the Canadian government did not offer a formal statement of regret until 2008 (Dorrell 2009, 28). Supporters of both versions of Macdonald's legacy were present during the monument's removal, some holding signs claiming, 'we're not erasing history, we're making history', while others wrapped themselves in provincial and Canadian flags and sang the national anthem (CBC 2018). The monument can easily represent a dichotomy, yet it can also be critically analysed in an effort to achieve reconciliation and nation-building.

The Macdonald statue embodies the tension between two competing perceptions of history: the first illustrating Macdonald as a founder of the nation, and the second portraying him as the villain of the story of Indigenous assimilation. Confirming Sumner's maxim about monuments, the City recognised that the monument has worked to obscure the nation's history and protect the errors of the powerful, and it now has the opportunity to dictate how the history of Victoria, as well as Canada, is presented. The removal of the monument does not simply correct the Canadian perception of history, however. The discourse surrounding the monument serves to inform society of an alternative understanding of history, bringing the monument's relationship to memory to light and providing a more holistic understanding of history. For some Indigenous people, the Macdonald monument is a 'painful reminder of colonial violence each time they enter city hall' (Helps 2018). For the majority of non-Indigenous Canadians who were opposed to the monument's removal, Macdonald activates an aspect of social memory that allows individuals to see themselves as a part of Canadian history (Dangerfield 2018). Using Halbwachs' theory that memory is socially constructed and acquired, the City is in a position to use the monument to reconstruct collective memory and, subsequently, the nation's identity. Removing the monument from the public sphere and controlling 'the depiction of history does not necessarily control public memory' (Benton-Short 2008, 10). Sir John A. Macdonald will continue to be remembered as a positive part of Canadian identity, whether or not his statue stands outside City Hall. Furthermore, looking beyond the material removal of Macdonald's physical presence, the City's authority could use this opportunity to re-invoke the public imagination and reconstruct memory to build a cohesive, multicultural Canadian identity.

Fundamentally, the motivation behind the monument's removal was reconciliation. The City's Witness Reconciliation Program works with the City to respond to the five recommendations highlighted by the TRC, but it also works towards fulfilling the TRC's mandate of informing Canadians about the cultural genocide that occurred within Indian Residential Schools (City of Victoria 2017). Marianne Alto, one of the City's councillors who voted for the monument's removal, commented that it will be 'a symbol of movement towards a future in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous Victorians share a community growing into one of alliance, understanding, acceptance and collaboration' (City of Victoria 2018). However, the City's failure to recognise the monument's influence on collective memory and Canadian identity excludes many non-Indigenous Victorians, arguably creating a deeper divide within society. Macdonald's removal may have furthered efforts for reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and the City, but it neglects a spirit of reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and the broader community. Although many anticipated support from the Chiefs of the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations for the removal of the monument, there remains a lack of consensus across Canada regarding the best approach to reconciliation. A poll conducted in Manitoba found that only 38 percent of the First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Manitobans surveyed believe that the removal of statues commemorating the Canadian leaders that participated in establishing residential schools should be considered a major aspect of reconciliation (CBC 2019). Rather, the results suggested that governments should focus on land claims and other structural sovereignty issues. The poll also asked Indigenous respondents for their thoughts on replacing the names of colonial figures who supported the residential school system in public spaces, yet the majority expressed that the increased public education on the province's history is of greater importance (CBC 2019). A focus on transforming collective memory by working to inform Canadians while fostering healing may thus

achieve the TRC's mandate more efficiently than the materialist removal of a monument.

By exclusively focusing on reconciliation, the 'truth' aspect of the TRC has also been overlooked. Made starkly clear by the nation's need for a TRC, Canada was founded on an element of 'forgetting' the injustices suffered by the Indigenous population. Despite warnings that remembering 'everything could bring a threat to national cohesion and self-image', the TRC attempts to awaken the nation from its 'collective amnesia' and promote a cohesively multicultural alternative identity which acknowledges the aspects of the past that were selectively brushed over and collectively forgotten (Misztal 2003). Removing Macdonald's statue does not bring the truth of Canada's history to the forefront of public consciousness; instead it could encourage a continued 'forgetting' of the horrors committed against Indigenous peoples. By ridding public spaces of problematic statues, society forecloses the discussions of their history, which are vital to the evolution of shared identity. A more inclusive process of reconciliation and re-evaluation of the Canadian identity could be achieved by re-contextualising the monument to educate Victorians about the truth of settler Canada.

As previously mentioned, the removal of Macdonald is temporary. Looking towards the future, what solutions are available for Macdonald? Herwitz (2011, 238) recommends a variety of models for the fate of contentious monuments: (1) the Budapest model, in which all communist monuments are put into a park at the edge of town; (2) the Berlin model, in which the population tears monuments down and keeps pieces as souvenirs; (3) the French model, in which monuments are cleansed of atrocity and placed in palaces of national culture; and (4) the American model, in which monuments are privatised and hired guides explain their contentious history for tourists. There is an opportunity now for Canada to pioneer another option: the 'Canadian model', in which colonial monuments are re-conceptualised and used by the state to communicate a new concept of national identity.

There are two ways in which the City of Victoria can follow the 'Canadian model' to foster reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians and cultivate an inclusive Canadian identity. Firstly, the Macdonald monument can be placed in the Royal BC Museum situated close to the City Hall. Although some museums remain highly colonial, many museums take on the role of cultural mediator in multicultural environments and enact strategies of representation for marginalised or forgotten memories. Curators view museums as social spaces which are 'dialogic, rather than authoritative' (Till 2003). Forty-four percent of Canadians agreed that this could be a good solution, although more than one-third of respondents also believed that the monument should return to its original location (Dangerfield 2018). Alternatively, Sir John A. Macdonald can be returned to the social sphere and re-contextualised through an addition to the display. Placing an Indigenous monument at Macdonald's side to capture an alternative version of what ought to be remembered would provide context for his role in Canadian history, reflecting an inclusive multicultural identity. Phillips and Phillips (2009) contend that this juxtaposition between realities may not yet be an effective solution to illustrate Canadian's complex history, as Canadians have yet to discover whether two perspectives can occupy the same space. However, I believe that the fear of visual contradictions should not impede the depiction and discussion of the complexities of a postcolonial, multicultural society. The addition of new monuments would facilitate an understanding of the country's past by offering a process for expanding and acknowledging the different identities that have helped form history and memory (Benton-Short 2008; Breakfast, Bradshaw and Haines 2018). Although the Macdonald monument no longer represents a singular version of the past, it remains a necessary point of communication, appreciation, and negotiation for groups with different memories of the same events.

The bitter reality about life within postcolonial multicultural societies is that there will always be varied perspectives of history and memory competing for representation in the social sphere. Removing the Sir John A. Macdonald monument has enraged the Canadian right wing, galvanised nationalists, and failed to contribute to reconciliation within broader society, despite its intended purpose of focusing efforts on the reconstruction of collective memory. Charles Taylor (1989), a preeminent Canadian academic, argues that Canadians must 'learn how to live with these multiplicities of identity and yet achieve some kind of common understanding'. The people in Victoria, BC, along with the rest of Canada, must 'work with each other to preserve these historical identities with their differences intact.' The state will always maintain dedicated places of memory as a part of nation-building; the City of Victoria should not subdue the complex reality by removing monuments, but rather highlight Canada's contentious past to build an effective multicultural society.

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