

A legacy not entirely golden

The co-authors of Residential Schools want to put Sir John A. Macdonald's role in forced assimilation and the institution of residential schools within a truer, broader framework, writes Heather Conn.



Sir John A. Macdonald's initiation of residential schools often overlooked

image of this crusty politician, my ancestor, and expand our vision of Canadian history.

In Residential Schools: With the Words and Images of Survivors (Indigenous Education Press and Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre 2014), award-winning author Larry Loyie challenges our widely accepted version of how Macdonald shaped this nation.

Under the heading "John A. Macdonald: Friend or Foe?" he and co-authors Constance Brissenden and Wayne K. Spear write: "His dream of a nation stretching from sea to sea had one major obstacle... Aboriginal people were in the way."

Our first prime minister and his Canadian government gained complete control over the nation's aboriginal people, thanks to the British North America Act of 1867 and the Indian Act of 1876.

But the reserve system, which put aboriginals under strict government control in designated areas, was not enough to reassure early would-be settlers that it was safe to put down roots in Canada's undeveloped west. Macdonald reasoned that aboriginals needed to adjust their beliefs and behaviours to the European way of life, starting in childhood.

Centuries of official accounts of residential schools "should more rightly call 'father' one whom our history books share the same blood as some- Post portrait reminds me that I feels embarrassed. His Canada stamps, another part of me sombre face on our current However, when I gaze at his my home office.

used, that sits in the corner of circular table, which he once wrote: "I am fond of an heirloom to the so-called 'Father of Canada.'" I am fond of an heirloom to the so-called "Father of Canada." Part of me feels proud to be related on my mother's side of way. Part of me feels proud to be related on my mother's side of way. Part of me feels proud to be related on my mother's side of way. Part of me feels proud to be related on my mother's side of way.

Hence, he endorsed the forced assimilation of aboriginal children, initiating the system of "Indian" boarding schools. This policy was identified as "aggressive civilization" in an 1879 report to the Canadian government. The first official residential schools in Canada opened in 1892, a year after Macdonald ended his final term in office. But the model was The Mohawk Indian Industrial School, also known as the Mohawk Institute in Brantford, Ont., opened in 1828, financed by a Protestant missionary society. With ant missionary society. With Macdonald endorsed this military model of assimilation. Under his legacy, more than 150,000 aboriginal children attended an estimated 144 residential schools from the late 1800s to as late as 1996. They suffered verbal, physical, emotional and psychological abuse at many of these schools. The co-authors of Residential Schools are determined to put Macdonald's role within a truer, broader framework. They hope that their book, identified on the cover as "A National History," will be used as a textbook across Canada. As a whole, it provides a coast-to-coast look at the long-term impact of colonialization and assimilation

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and traditions. I'm not surprised that aboriginal-rights advocates recently demanded the removal of Macdonald's statue in Hamilton; to our nation's aboriginals, he is a symbol of genocide. About two dozen people staged a protest Jan. 11 in front of the statue, disrupting a local society's celebration of Macdonald's bicentennial birthday.

Just as Columbus Day in the U.S. ignores aboriginal culture and presence by celebrating European colonialization, Canada's official bicentennial celebrations for Macdonald's birth-day disregarded more than a century of abusive treatment launched by our first prime minister's policies. "The hidden history of residential schools must be known to ensure the human rights of all Canadian children," says Loyie.

It is vital that in the telling of history, whether it's of a nation or a family, we are honest about the influence, in all its forms, of a prominent figure. Otherwise, we present only a whitewashed version of the past, which does a disservice to us all.

Heather Conn, MFA, is an author of two history books and a former oral historian. A history graduate from the University of British Columbia, she works as a freelance writer, editor, writing coach, and communications consultant.