

## **Naming and Renaming: Confronting Canada's Past**

Brenda Macdougall

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On 13 July 2018, I was one of five scholars asked to present thoughts on the topic, "What's in a Name? The Debate over Public Commemorations in Canada," for the Historical Thinking Summer Institute, 2018, held at the Canadian Museum of History. [1] The organizers asked us to frame our remarks around current public debates regarding the renaming of institutions (Ryerson), buildings (Langevin Block), and/or the removal of statues commemorating men like Sir John A. Macdonald or Sir William Cornwallis. [2] As I considered how to address the issue, I couldn't help but reflect on the context of where I work and how my role as the Academic Delegate for Indigenous Engagement within the Provost's office might be a vehicle for ensuring that, as an institution, we address this legacy at the University of Ottawa by developing policies and programs that support Indigenous faculty, students, and staff.

The Oblates of Mary Immaculate founded the university in 1848 as a Catholic institution promoting bilingualism. The Oblates were a missionary order well represented within the history of missionization in Indigenous communities and, more specifically, within the history of residential schools, as it took charge of the largest number of residential schools in Canada. [3] So while a secular institution today, uOttawa has an undeniable relationship to the history of residential schools and Indigenous education. Not many on uOttawa's campuses are conscious of this history because, while it's certainly not hidden, it's nevertheless not a part of any public discourse. The first official conversation I'd ever had about this institutional history was in the fall of 2018, when the recently appointed provost asked my thoughts on how we might address the school's legacy in a proactive, rather than reactionary, manner. My thoughts as I presented them first at the summer institute, and now here, were framed by my belief that uOttawa can, and should, do better simply because it should, regardless of the current climate. [4]

Debates about whether public spaces should be named for historical figures are shaped by discussions about the character of men such as Ryerson, Langevin, and especially Macdonald, and whether their relationships to residential schools trump their other achievements. Last August, when the Elementary Teacher's Federation of Ontario voted to have Macdonald's name removed from all public schools in the province, the ensuing public debate focused on whether his legacy was the creation of a stable federal government or his role in the genocide of Indigenous people. As with other debates of this type, positions are polarized. One camp calls for immediate removal of statuary, renaming, and/or destruction of plaques, pictures, or images of any kind. The opposing side decries the possible erasure of history, characterizing their opponents as politically correct historical revisionists "who miss the mark" by misrepresenting the nation and potentially damaging its reputation. [5] Canadians are not alone in these debates. Across the US, with the rise of domestic terrorism fueled by white supremacy, there are lively discussions about Confederate monuments and other honorifics conferred on slave owners, slave traders, and secessionists. One such discussion occurred at Yale University, which in 2017 finally decided to rename Calhoun College, a residential college/dormitory named for nineteenth century alumnus, John C. Calhoun. [6]

A senator from South Carolina and former vice president, Calhoun's historical legacy is principally as the intellectual architect of southern secession and his defense of slavery as a "positive good." [7] The building that became Calhoun College was so named in 1930s when the university decided to commemorate Calhoun for his political, military, and intellectual achievements, which, the university argued, made him an "eminent Yale man." His pro-slavery beliefs, racial theorizing, and immense slaveholdings were not weighted equally against his intellectual contributions to American constitutional law and political traditions. Indeed, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of his opinions on race were not regarded as especially controversial. [8]

Fast forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when a white supremacist murdered nine African-Americans at a church in Charleston, SC, in the summer of 2015, an event that led Yale to confront its continued commemoration of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century white supremacist. [9] In the immediate aftermath of the killings, Yale's president, Peter Salovey, announced to the incoming freshman class that the name of Calhoun College would be preserved and hopefully serve as an historical reminder of how deep racism ran in America, suggesting they were all "better off retaining before us the name and the evocative, and sometimes brooding presence of Yale graduate John C. Calhoun." [10] The response was swift. Salovey's hopeful perspective was not shared by many in the incoming class, their parents, or others across campus. Finally, in 2017, after a two-year consultative process and extensive research of how other campuses dealt with these types of issues, Yale decided to retire the name of Calhoun. [11]

But the issue isn't necessarily about Calhoun the man, but rather should be focused on the values he promoted and represented. Collectively, we need to determine, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the values we want to venerate, memorialize, and remember. The issue of renaming is about change and the debate about renaming often centres on distinct human conditions—those who fear change, not because they love or respect what they have but because they don't like uncertainty, and those who embrace change and are ready to create new memories and understandings of the past. I appreciated the thoroughness of Yale's research into the history of naming and renaming on its campus and their thoughtful engagement of the entire university in a campus-wide discussion, not of Calhoun specifically, but about how and why buildings, monuments, centres, programs or other aspects to the physical and intellectual spaces are named and the role that historical legacy should play in those decisions. They collectively determined that naming, or renaming, should only be undertaken based on consideration about whether the fundamental values associated with the namesake are in conflict with the University's mission and core values. [12]

Although it hasn't always been the case, the current Canadian national debate about names and renaming comes in the wake of the TRC's 94 calls to action and our need to address the roles of figures like Ryerson, Langevin, and Macdonald in the history of residential schools and, consequently, cultural genocide, and the role of men like Cornwallis and others in actual, physical genocide. There are obviously those who oppose this discussion of renaming on principle—to even discuss it is regarded as an attack on the history of Canada and, in turn, calls into question the identity of its citizens. Similarly, there are those who would rename because of the defiant symbolism of the act, but without really giving consideration to the value that names of all sorts might represent in the body politic.

The basis of all conversations about naming and renaming for the purposes of commemoration rests on the notion of history and how we understand and accept how history defines us. But let's pause on this for a minute and confront some honest truths. Canada renames things all the time and renaming comes at a cost not of history or historical legacy, but rather people's personal memories and sense of belonging. And let's be clear, Canada is one long renaming project. Every location in this country had an Indigenous name in an Indigenous language, and colonial authorities, deeming those names irrelevant, renamed them in their own language and cultural perspective or appropriated and bastardized the original names in a manner that obliterated the Indigenous perspectives and sense of place.

This trend began to reverse in the 1980s and 1990s when the Arctic underwent a significant renaming project, as colonial names were replaced with Inuktitut toponymy. Frobisher Bay became Iqaluit, Coppermine became Kugluktuk, and Eskimo Point became Arviat. Focusing on Iqaluit specifically, consider the act of changing a place from a

colonial name back to an Indigenous name. The word Iqaluit means “place of fish” in Inuktitut and the place it was attached to was a summer fishing camp near a body of water that was named Frobisher Bay after explorer, Martin Frobisher. The settlement of Frobisher Bay, located at the mouth of the Sylvia Grinnell River, only came into being in 1955, when it was selected as the centre of operations for Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line construction and as a result became home to Canadian and American military personnel. Within a few years, Frobisher Bay became an administrative centre for Canadian colonial institutions, populated by doctors, nurses, teachers, administrators, police officers, clerks and support staff from southern Canada who were recruited to deliver services and uphold Canadian law in this part of the Arctic.

By the 1980s, life in the Arctic was changing as the Cold War drew to a close and Inuit advocated to have their land rights and sovereignty recognized. In 1987, the change from Frobisher Bay to Iqaluit was undertaken and approved under the leadership of the Government of the Northwest Territories (Nunavut wouldn't exist for another twelve years) after a community poll about the town's name. This simple, singular event of replacing the name of a colonial era explorer with a name that resonated with Inuit traditions and perspectives represented a profound change in Canada's attitude. It is a representation of how Canada's mental landscape—arguably the profoundest of colonial landscapes—began to change by the end of the twentieth century. For the Inuit, this act of restoration signaled support for their sovereignty as embodied in their culture, language, and traditions. It was recognition that all Indigenous people had the right to name their homelands in ways that resonated with them first, and Canadians second.

But this clearly didn't happen without controversy. In the months leading up to, and immediately following, adoption of Iqaluit as a place name, letters decrying the change were sent to Canadian newspapers across the country. All of a sudden, people, largely those in the south and with no horse in this race, had opinions to express. Some criticizing the change were, indeed, former residents of the village, those outsiders from the south who had lived and worked there for periods of time. They feared that a name in Inuktitut would somehow undermine their sense of self by erasing the collective memory of their time in the Arctic. Others saw this act of renaming as a threat to Canadian Arctic sovereignty and jeopardize national security. A retired Canadian Navy captain, for instance, argued that the renaming of hundreds (or even thousands) of Arctic locations was a signal that the nation was ceding its rights to the North and weakening Ottawa's authority internationally. He was particularly “dismayed at the sanctioning of this assault on the history of the Arctic” and what he called “our collective Northern heritage.”<sup>[13]</sup> In short, he was personally offended that the Inuit were removing “white” names from the map of Canada. But what was overlooked here was that the name of Frobisher was not stricken from the map or erased from the history of the Arctic. There is still a body of water called Frobisher Bay; it's only the town site that is now Iqaluit. And let's be even clearer, even more places retained their colonial names—Baffin Island, Cape Dorset, Churchill, Clyde River, Davis Inlet, Gjoja Haven, King William Island, Repulse Bay—than were renamed. As significantly, thirty-one years later, few Canadians even know about the Arctic renaming project. New memories have been created and appropriate symbols fashioned because the things, people, and events we want to memorialize or honour naturally shift over time.

Yet, we have to ask ourselves, why are we so threatened by the act of renaming? The argument that we are “erasing” history doesn't wash. History doesn't happen in a vacuum, it is not a set of “objective” facts that frame a natural or organic story. There is no such thing as an external “true” history. All history—that is, historical meaning—is a reflection of contemporary values, and as such historical knowledge is necessarily in flux. Furthermore, the idea that we can't hold historical figures to contemporary moral/values is just wrong. We select people to honour based on our contemporary or living values, not those held by those figures of the past and their society. To argue this position ignores the reality that there are always conflicting values, present and past. For example, there were vocal opponents of Macdonald's “National Dream,” the belief that the construction of a transcontinental railway would unite Canada geographically from ocean to ocean, and fuel economic prosperity. But it was Macdonald's image of Canada that won out and, in turn, required the creation of an entire infrastructure of law and policy to oppress, marginalize, and control Indigenous people. Despite these oppositional views about the right way to build the nation, Canada has decided not to honour or memorialize those critics and their views. Once something has happened, it is treated as a natural and inevitable outcome, and dissenters are easily forgotten.

Rather than trying to evaluate the actions and intents of the people being commemorated, it's perhaps more useful to look at their principal legacy as markers for modern decision-making regarding memorialization. If we consider Langevin and Macdonald as our contextual example, Macdonald was far more culpable than Langevin in the history of residential schools. Langevin was a middling career politician who was answerable to those with greater power or authority or even force of personality. Conversely, Macdonald was the longest serving prime minister, minister of Indian Affairs, oversaw the creation of the *Indian Act* and Department of Indian Affairs, supported and orchestrated the execution of Riel and eight Plains Indian leaders in 1885 before approving the starvation policies of Edgar Dewdney, and then went after the children for cultural assimilation via education. Macdonald might be an interesting person to chat with, but he's not someone I'd valorize. We all live daily with the legacy of the evil he inflicted on Indigenous people. Colonialism isn't in the past; it's ongoing and we have him to thank for it.

So when and why did Macdonald become such an important historical figure, someone after whom we would name schools, monuments, public spaces, and other things? Like Calhoun, this tradition began more recently in our past than most of us realize. In the 1960s, amidst Quebec's growing demands for distinct society status and eventually its promotion of separatism, the memory of Macdonald took on new national significance. Canada needed a way to unite people and so valorization of Macdonald was a means to that end. Just as he created a national myth of a united nation, he was recreated as the embodiment of that unity. To symbolize this new perspective, a number of public schools, as well as roadways, parks, and, yes, bars were named (or renamed) for him. In doing this, another choice was made. Collectively, we decided to ignore Macdonald's role in the oppression of Indigenous and non-white people within Confederation, for those actions and values compromised the reimagining of Macdonald as a beacon of national unity.

In short, the *when* and *why* matters as much as the *who*.

The Canadian Museum of History faced the issue of which interpretations to privilege when it recently redesigned the Canada History Hall, working hard to balance dynamic historical perspectives based on gender, sexuality, race, and religion with the static, traditional story of Confederation. To do this, they created a number of committees charged with reviewing content and debating the narratives developed via a multi-year consultative process. Thousands of pages of content were developed and edited down to fit the textual requirements. While I don't think anyone left the table fully happy with the outcome, most felt they'd had a say in the when and why, as well as the who. If you walk through Gallery Two, you will see Macdonald's words, unedited or filtered, stenciled on walls in a way that represents the multi-faceted and complicated nature of his historical legacy. The effect is powerful. Whether those words are good or bad, emblematic of white supremacy or just reflective of a typical 19<sup>th</sup>-century bigotry, is left to the visitor who must sort through the meaning of his words as they are guided by a range of images, artifacts, and design choices accompanying the selected quotations. In short, the Museum had a plan to encourage visitors to appreciate history not as something external and in the remote past, but something actively informed by the present.

While I think that the Ontario Elementary Teachers Federation's petition calling to rename all schools bearing the name Macdonald was a bold statement of this relationship to history, they didn't account for other schools or an equally problematic set of issues about why we choose to honour particular people. That shortsightedness leaves them unprepared for the future. As many critics charged, whose name do we remove next? When? Why? Or, put another way, who do we choose in the future to memorialize, why them, and when is it appropriate to do so? If we are to engage in such comprehensive forms of naming and renaming, then we need to not be led by reactionary decision-making, but thoughtful consideration about what we want to memorialize, commemorate, and valorize. In this case, renaming may not always be the right approach. And there are other options. I'll frame my considerations of this issue by returning to the history of the University of Ottawa and its founding by the Oblates.

First and foremost, this isn't about condemnation or celebration—it's not an either/or logic. But in order to build a pathway forward in this era of reconciliation, as a university we need to acknowledge the history of the institution not simply as one with Catholic origins, or virtuously rooted in the principle of bilingual education, but as an Oblate-created space supported by the auxiliary labour of the Grey Nuns, which believed in their mission to educate Indigenous children through assimilation. Therefore, the role of those religious orders in the administration and operation of residential schools and especially in training male clergy to work in those schools must be proactively confronted.

The point, however, isn't to change the historical legacy of the institution—the history of the Oblates can't and shouldn't be erased. The University can, however, make it clear that today's secular iteration will strive to do better than its founders by publicly acknowledging its history. Doing this will require a deep dive into the archives to examine the papers of those founders in order to fully explore and then present their role in advancing and supporting Canada's colonial policies. There's an opportunity to borrow from Yale, for instance, and address the roles of Fathers Duhamel and Tabaret, among others, in envisioning Indian education—was this their principal legacy? I don't know if they had expressed such a vision, but they certainly had a role in training priests who took those jobs in the West and North, as well as places closer to home, so we should both understand and address it.

But this means that we need to determine a clearly articulated plan on what “better” can look like. For instance, should we develop:

- Better partnerships with local First Nations, Metis, and Inuit communities and organizations to develop internships and cooperative education opportunities;
- Scholarships specifically for Indigenous students in the Faculty of Education;
- Pre-doctoral fellowships in all disciplines for Indigenous graduate students and treat them as pathways to permanent faculty positions;
- A plan to ensure that the next half-dozen faculty hires target Indigenous candidates doing Indigenous scholarship, including Indigenous librarians and archivists;
- A plan to hire Indigenous staff, including financial experts, human resource personnel, executive assistants, and clerical support;
- A plan to identify buildings, streets, or locations on campus that can either be renamed and/or identified with signage in French, English, and Algonquin; and
- Partnerships with National Heritage organizations to borrow art that can be displayed throughout campus so that Indigenous aesthetics become recognized and normalized on campus

These suggestions are places to begin, not endpoints, nor is this list finite. The purpose is to make it possible for Indigenous people to feel welcome in a post-secondary institution like uOttawa (or any other). Doing this requires the leadership of the president, vice presidents, deans and vice deans to initiate action on these types of ideas. To do this, we must approach the issue of our historical legacy differently, determining what values hope to promote and share with each other in our efforts to commemorate a collective legacy.

[1] The other four presenters were Stéphane G. Lévesque, Professor in the Faculty of Education at uOttawa; Forrest Pass, exhibition development and research officer at the City of Ottawa; James Trepanier, curator for post-Confederation Canada at the Canadian Museum of History; and Sharon Cook, Professor Emeritus, Faculty of Education, uOttawa. The Historical Thinking Institute is an annual event designed for teachers, graduate students, historians, curriculum developers, professional development leaders, and museum educators looking to enhance their understandings and expertise in, and designing resources explicitly focused on, historical thinking. See their webpage for more information: <http://www.canadashistory.ca/education/historical-thinking-summer-institute>.

[2] A year ago, there was a student-led campaign to rename Ryerson, a university named for Egerton Ryerson, a leader of public education who also helped shape the residential school policy. Around the same time, the building housing the Prime Minister's Office, the Langevin Block, named for Sir Hector-Louis Langevin, was renamed the Office of the Prime Minister and the Privy Council. Langevin was a Father of Confederation and MP who argued that day schools were insufficient for assimilating Aboriginal children. For discussions of these particular issues see, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ryerson-university-name-change-1.4191614>; <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/toronto/lets-not-erase-our-history-ryersons-name-and-his-statue-should-stay/article35585884/>; and <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/renaming-langevin-block-isnt-rewriting-history-its-uneathing-it/article35432010/>. Kim Anderson's piece on Shekon Neechie, “Kika'ige Historical Society, is an amazing critique of the issues around Macdonald's legacy and, finally, the City of Halifax has struck a committee to examine the issue of the statue of William Cornwallis and make recommendations on how to proceed. See <https://www.thestar.com/halifax/2018/07/26/twelve-member-committee-named-to-decide-fate-of-halifax-cornwallis-statue.html>.

[3] The University of Ottawa began as the College of Bytown in 1848 under the auspices of the Catholic Archdiocese of Ottawa. It became the College of Ottawa in 1861 after being placed under the direction of the Oblates, and was granted university status in 1866. In 1965, the university was reorganized, becoming independent of the religious order and, in effect, a secular university, although one of its central objectives remains “to further, in accordance with *Christian principles*, the intellectual, spiritual, moral, physical and social development of, as well as a community spirit among its undergraduates, graduates and teaching staff, and to promote the betterment of society.” Emphasis added. See the University of Ottawa Act (1965), <https://www.uottawa.ca/administration-and-governance/1965-university-of-ottawa-act>.

[4] What follows are my thoughts and perspectives. They are not necessarily indicative of, or endorsed by, the university. However, they are reflective of the types of conversations that have evolved amongst those of us actively engaged in the processes of Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation at this institution.

[5] Dakshana Bascaramurthy, “Debate Escalates Over Legacy of John A. Macdonald in Ontario Schools.” *The Globe and Mail*, 24 August 2017. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/ontario-elementary-teachers-union-wants-john-a-macdonald-schools-renamed/article36076966/>.

[6] On 1 July 2017, Calhoun College was renamed Grace Hopper College, after Yale alumnus and computer scientist, Grace Murray Hopper. “Yale Changes Calhoun College's Name to Honor Grace Murray Hopper,” *Yale News*, 11 February 2017. <https://news.yale.edu/2017/02/11/yale-change-calhoun-college-s-name-honor-grace-murray-hopper-0>.

[7] Calhoun believed that slavery was not a necessary evil, but rather a positive good that benefited slaves and owners equally. His argument was informed by his beliefs in paternalism and the naturalness of white supremacy over other races. Whites were natural elites, born to enjoy the fruits of lesser races. Furthermore, slaves, unlike the poorest of whites in American, were cared for, protected, and supported throughout their lives by their masters and mistresses. See Lacy K. Ford, Jr., “Republican Ideology in a Slave Society: The Political Economy of John C. Calhoun,” *Journal of Southern History* vol. 54, no. 3 (1988): 405-424; and William W. Freehling, “Spoilsman and Interests in the Thought and Career of John C. Calhoun,” *Journal of American History* vol. 52, no. 1 (1965): 25-42.

[8] Information on the history of Calhoun College can be found in an institutional report, [https://president.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/CEPR\\_FINAL\\_12-2-16.pdf](https://president.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/CEPR_FINAL_12-2-16.pdf).

[9] White supremacist Dylan Roof readily admitted to the killings at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in June 2015.

[10] Salovey's speech to that incoming class can be read here: <https://president.yale.edu/speeches-writings/speeches/launching-difficult-conversation>.

[11] In 2016, an African-American dishwasher who worked in Calhoun College used a broom handle to break a stained glass window depicting Calhoun standing over a kneeling slave because he was, in his own words, “tired of looking at a racist, very degrading” image while he worked. Scott Jaschik, “Yale Worker Breaks Stained Glass Depicting Slaves,” *Inside Higher Ed.*, 12 July 2016. In August 2016, Salovey authorized the Committee to Establish Principles on Renaming to determine whether to remove “a historical name from a building or other prominent structure or space on campus.” He further requested the committee review debates at other institutions and consult widely with experts and stakeholders. The committee was asked to articulate a set of principles to guide Yale in decisions about naming and renaming places on campus, and did not focus on Calhoun specifically although their report had an impact on the name of Calhoun College. That committee tendered its report on 21 November 2016 and is available here:

[https://president.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/CEPR\\_FINAL\\_12-2-16.pdf](https://president.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/CEPR_FINAL_12-2-16.pdf). Background on the committee is available at: <https://president.yale.edu/advisory-groups/presidents-committees/committee-establish-principles-renaming-0>.

[12] So they ask that the namesake's principal legacies (the long lasting impact) be considered because human lives are large and contain a multitude of virtues and vices and understanding that principal legacy requires research and making a scholarly judgment. If that principal legacy is fundamentally at odds with the University's mission, then that name should not be selected or allowed to remain. At the same time, in the decision to rename, the removal of a name should not have the effect of erasing history and changing a name is not synonymous with erasing history. To ensure that there is no erasure, a university can create conspicuous museum-like installations, plaques, and signs as well as public art. See the report, [https://president.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/CEPR\\_FINAL\\_12-2-16.pdf](https://president.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/CEPR_FINAL_12-2-16.pdf).

[13] See Valerie Alia, *Names and Nunavut: Culture and Identity in the Inuit Homeland*. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 67; and Mark Nuttall, *Encyclopedia of the Arctic*. Vols. 1-3 (New York: Routledge, 2005):4.