

[Final Submitted Draft]

Title

The Importance of History to the Erasing History Defence¹

Name

Daniel Abrahams

Affiliation

University of Glasgow

Email

d.abrahams.1@research.gla.ac.uk

Abstract

In this paper I argue that that the primary goal of statues honouring public figures is to create and shape a collective identity. The way that these statues further the goal of identity is not by holding up the subjects of the statues as admirable but rather by asserting that the subjects were in some way objectively important and central to some group surrounding the statue. I will look at the defences for keeping statues of and awards named after John A. Macdonald, and show that the primary concern is not with defending the character of Macdonald but rather that removing him is “erasing history.” These defences are not about defending Macdonald as a person but rather defending a conception of the Canadian identity that requires Macdonald play a central role. Against these defences of Macdonald, I show that the “objective history” case for him and other such similar figures fails. In the particular case of Macdonald it fails because he was actually just not that important for Canadian history. In the general case of negative public figures, I provide a short defence of how group identities are not static and not unchangeably rooted in a single historically-based articulation.

Introduction

The recent past has seen a number of high profile debates over statues of historical figures. This began with the Rhodes Must Fall movement in Cape Town and later Oxford to remove statues of Cecil Rhodes. There have also been movements across the United States to remove Confederate statues, with the fight over University of North Carolina’s Silent Sam (representing the unknown confederate soldier) being the most current. In this paper, I will focus on the Canadian counterpart to these debates, which surround the country’s first Prime Minister, John A. Macdonald. Specifically, I want to engage a certain sort of defence offered for keeping statues of Macdonald. These are defences that centre the idea that removing the statues (or other honourifics, like his name from a school or history prize) would constitute “erasing history.” These defences are interesting because, at least on their face, simply putting forward that people like Macdonald are bad people — they are not to be admired or emulated — is not very forceful. They may be bad, the history defender might readily admit, but they are still historically important. The argument I advance will

provide two things: a good way of understanding this “erasing history” defence and a strategy for response.

I choose Macdonald as a subject for three reasons. The first is because I am simply more familiar with the history of Macdonald than I am with Rhodes, or the American Confederacy. The second is because Canada, through its position as both colony and colonial power, is well-positioned to draw out the peculiarities of nationalist histories. This feature will prove significant in the section on argumentative directions. The third reason is I expect most readers to have fewer pre-existing intellectual commitments with respect to Macdonald. Readers of this journal are less likely to be Canadian and less likely to have opinions on Canadian history. This makes Macdonald preferable as a more neutral subject.

I plan to use the “erasing history” defence as a stalking horse. This defence features prominently as a reason for not removing monuments to morally bad people and is especially common in lay discourse. Accordingly, the “erasing history” defence is a good way to engage the question of whether or not (and to what degree) the admirability or honourability of a commemorative statue’s subject matters. The principal aim of this paper will be to reposition the “erasing history” defence in an interesting and meaningful way and, in doing so, to elucidate the relationship between commemorative monuments and history. To be clear, when I develop the “erasing history” defence, I do not mean to be reconstructing the arguments people are actually giving. The “erasing history” defence is part of political discourse, and political discourse contains many confused, dissembling, or otherwise misleading utterances. Rather, I build the “erasing history” defence for the purposes of bringing out the strongest possible claim that history can have for the preservation of a commemorative monument. This claim, I will show, holds that the admirability of a commemorative statue’s subject is irrelevant, and the subject is honourable only insofar as they are honoured for historical significance.

Engaging the “erasing history” defence as something to take seriously will contribute to the philosophical discussion surrounding the preservation of monuments. Recent pieces by Travis Timmerman, as well as Dan Demetriou and Ajume Wingo have engaged reasons to keep or remove monuments to racist people or events.¹ While they focus mostly on reasons concerning harm, respect, and slippery slopes, they do acknowledge the “erasing history” defence. However, they treat it briefly, simply, and literally, treating the defence as a concern with the literal preservation of knowledge of the past. (Timmerman goes so far as to dismiss the concern by writing that any information on a monument’s plaque could easily be accessed on Wikipedia.²) By constructing the “erasing history” defence into something substantial I will contribute a clearer understanding of how history matters to a monument’s subject. By focusing on monuments as specifically public monuments, I also bring forward the importance of the public location of such monuments.

My argument will proceed as follows. First, I will set out the Canadian case surrounding John A. Macdonald. This is going to include the current cases surrounding honouring Macdonald and a brief survey of Canadian history as to why honouring him is a problem. Second, I will put together the “erasing history” defence and work it into a theory of public history and national identity. Third, I will look at how to respond to the “erasing history” defence in a way that takes seriously the value of history.

A Statue, a School, and a Prize

I now offer a brief overview of the politics and history that have led to the current re-evaluation of John A. Macdonald. He was Canada's first Prime Minister, which means that his name and likeness can be found throughout the country. His role in Canadian history has become publicly scrutinized recently as a result of the Indigenous Idle No More campaign. While Idle No More emerged in 2012 out of the narrow context of the Attawapiskat First Nation housing crisis, it quickly took on the scope of promoting the sovereignty of Indigenous nations with respect to the Canadian state. One of the movement's successes is a number of public commitments to Reconciliation, a programme of restitution for the genocide committed against Indigenous peoples. Macdonald is an important figure in the history of this genocide, as a substantial part of it occurred under his stewardship. Not only was Macdonald Prime Minister from 1867 to 1873 and 1878 to 1891, but he was also the Minister for the Interior and the Minister for Indian Affairs, meaning that he was directly responsible for the government's actions in dealing with Indigenous nations.

Macdonald's impact on Indigenous peoples preceded the formation of Canada by a decade through his involvement with Upper Canada's (now Ontario) Gradual Civilization Act (GCA) of 1857.³ Through that law, Upper Canada granted itself control of Indigenous sovereign territory. The GCA was the first of what is euphemistically called "enfranchisement legislation" for Indigenous peoples, whereby the state makes access to civil and citizenship rights conditional on surrendering the control of land and governance to the (proto)Canadian state.⁴ The goal of the act, as the name suggests, was a "gradual civilization" of Indigenous peoples through the replacement of Indigenous governments and cultures with European counterparts.⁵ The GCA served as the model for future legislation from Macdonald governments, and its motivations informed its biggest atrocities.

One of the major atrocities of Macdonald's governance, although it extended beyond his governance, was the establishment of the residential schools system in 1871.⁶ Residential schools worked by taking Indigenous children from their homes and attempting to "civilize" them through a strict Christian upbringing, mostly administered by religious functionaries.⁷ The schools also sought to eliminate Indigenous culture by stripping students of their names and prohibiting them from speaking their own languages. Abhorrent even within their stated goals, the schools were also sites of high levels of sexual abuse.⁸ The Canadian government formally apologized for the residential schools system in 2008. In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established following the 2008 apology, acknowledged the residential schools system as genocidal.⁹

A second major atrocity of Macdonald's governance was the policy of westward expansion, which held as a central feature the seizing of land from Indigenous nations.¹⁰ Pointedly, the government took control of the land through a network of policies that worked to enforce conditions of famine. Bison, which formed the basis of the plains diet and economy, were hunted to extinction.¹¹ Individual nations were cordoned into reserves where the government sought to "civilize" them by having them practice agriculture.¹² Furthermore, it was the position of the government that the various Indigenous nations were insufficiently developed for modern agriculture, so they enforced a medieval system of sub-subsistence

farming called “peasant farming.”¹³ Since peasant farming was insufficient for subsistence, the government kept complete control of the provision of food and medicine. While controlling necessary food and medicine, it was the goal of the government to spend as little as possible. In the words of Macdonald: “[W]e are doing all we can, by refusing food until the Indians are on the verge of starvation, to reduce the expense.”¹⁴ The food the government did provide was frequently food that had been rejected from settler towns for being rotten or mouldy.¹⁵ The effect was the massive destruction of Indigenous nations through enclosure, famine, and disease.

This is not an exhaustive account of Macdonald’s record, but it is enough to contextualize the re-evaluation of Macdonald. Both atrocities which I have mentioned here did not just happen under Macdonald’s purview, but are central to Macdonald’s main political project. He is elevated as historically significant for his role in building the Canadian nation, but the nation-building project was a genocidal one.¹⁶ For a number of groups, this reappraisal has led them to decide to remove commemorations honouring Macdonald. The city of Victoria decided to remove a statue commemorating Macdonald from out front of City Hall.¹⁷ The Canadian Historical Association removed Macdonald’s name from its award for the best new scholarly book in Canadian history.¹⁸ The Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario made an official request to rename all Ontario primary schools currently named after Macdonald.¹⁹ All of these moves were made in accordance with the programme of Reconciliation.

All of the removals I have mentioned were met with a common complaint: that they constituted “erasing history.” The complaint was repeated by a diverse group of people, ranging from politicians to newspaper editorialists to historians.²⁰ Most of these defences did not defend Macdonald as a great person. Rather, he was defended as objectively important, the “father of confederation.” Consider the following passage from editorialist Jon Ivison:

There is no doubt Macdonald held views on the Chinese and the Indigenous population that are repugnant by today’s standards. He bears responsibility for the Indian Act and for residential schools, and there is no way to sanitize his response to criticism in the House of Commons that his government was wasting money feeding the Cree. His agents would withhold food “until the Indians were on the verge of starvation to reduce the expense,” he said.

But his principal legacy is his foundational role in this country’s Confederation. It was not for nothing that Richard Gwyn called his peerless Macdonald biography *The Man Who Made Us*.²¹

Ivison wholly accedes to the judgement against what Macdonald did: he was the primary architect of a genocidal project. Despite this, however, Ivison defends Macdonald on the grounds of historical significance. Macdonald may have done evil, but he made history, and there is no requirement that only good people make history.

What I want to do, then, is to give an account of the “erasing history” defence that explains what makes it so attractive when discussing commemorative monuments such as those of Macdonald. What is it about these monuments that makes the question of “objective history” so central?

Us and Our Past

As I set out in the introduction, addressing the “erasing history” claim requires explicating the relationship between public history, public commemoration, collective identity, and the public in general. To do that I am going to have to avail myself of some resources. To establish the relationship between history and collective identity I am going to use Benedict Anderson’s account of nationalism and national identity.²² The Andersonian approach is particularly apt for engaging the case of Macdonald for two reasons. The first reason is that Macdonald is a national figure and is standardly considered part of Canadian history. The second reason is that the most common overarching narrative of Canadian history is that of “from colony to nation,”²³ so the Andersonian approach fits well with a core concern of how Canadian history is practiced. I should note that I do not mean that Anderson’s approach is the only way of understanding national identity, just that I am invoking him to show the role of history in national identity.²⁴ The other major resource I will use is Alan Gordon’s work on public memory and public history. This will provide a way of understanding how history and commemoration interact with the public, and so become public history and public memory. The Andersonian approach will be used to understand the importance of history to identity, and through that the force of the “erasing history” claim. Gordon’s account of public history and public memory will be used to show how the “erasing history” concern applies particularly to public commemorative monuments. The result will be a sensible way to understand the “erasing history” defence as applied to commemorative statues.

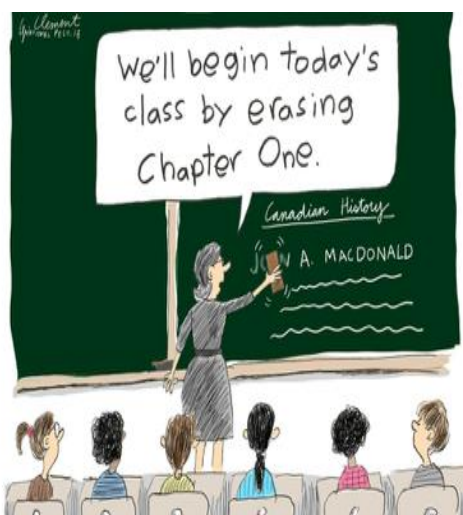
Anderson describes the nation as an “imagined political community,” limited and sovereign.²⁵ To say that it is limited is to say that it has boundaries.²⁶ These boundaries are what separate nations from other nations. These may be politically agreed-upon geographical boundaries as in the case of nation states. As I will draw out presently, these boundaries may also be historical boundaries: past events which are taken to mark out a nation’s history and its trajectory through time. Nations are sovereign as they are commonly understood have a claim to collective self-determination.²⁷ This feature is not relevant to any present argument, but worth keeping in mind to understand the possible stakes of the “erasing history” defence.

The nation is an imagined community. “Imagined” because particular members of a nation imagine what Anderson describes as a communion with unknown and unmet fellow members.²⁸ This is an imagined sameness or, at least, similarity. That the similarities are imagined means that what is important is not that the nation-defining similarities exist, but that individual nation-members believe that these similarities exist. The community is horizontal, which is to say that all members are theoretically equal as members.²⁹ If one is a Canadian then one is a Canadian, and the only theoretical contrast is to the non-Canadian. The communion is based on a similarity of historical lineage and common references. Anderson invokes Ernest Renan’s idea that “l’essence d’une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup de choses en commun, et aussi que tous aient oublié bien des choses.”³⁰ (The essence of a nation is that all the individuals have much in common, and have also forgotten many things.) Anderson gives this the gloss that the imagined similarities create the group. In creating the group based on these imagined similarities, the differences which would divide the putative nation into subgroups are forgotten.³¹ This means that the imagined similarities come to define the group, and the things that are not held in common

— that do not define the group — become elided. Altogether, everyone who holds these imagined similarities in common is an equal part of a group, and to be part of that group is to imagine oneself similar to all others on these grounds.

It is important to note that different nation-members can have different conceptions of nation-membership. The theory of national identity given so far only holds that a particular subject imagines themselves to be similar to other nation members, it does not hold that each subject imagines themselves as similar to other nation-members *for the same reasons*. The defining features of a nation, including its historical boundaries, are contested territory. As Anderson notes, nations “emerged” in political contexts that had existing political elites, and those elites would try to turn nationalism to support or otherwise justify their power.³² Given that nations are theoretically horizontal, nationhood can be useful to a political project that seeks to create a point of alliance between the political elite and the laity, without the political elite sacrificing any real power. This helps to explain why conflicts over history, especially national history, can be so contentious. These conflicts are not just over agreeing upon the existence of some events in the past, but also, through those events, the nature of the group.

Historical events are significant imagined similarities of a national community. Since nations persist through time, and since individual nation-members imagine themselves as similar to other imagined nation-members, an imagined historical lineage is central to this nation-defining imagined communion.³³ These imagined historical points are what defines the nation by establishing its historical boundaries. Events in history mark the nation’s starting point (which marks it off from what came before) and its defining events (which chart its progress through time and establish its continuity with the present). How some events become definitional and others not is another instance of Renan’s remembering and forgetting. If an event is remembered then it is held in common, and if it is held in common it is definitional. If it is not held in common then it is not definitional. A worthwhile note here is that these historical events, imagined as they are, do not have to have actually occurred. It is a common phenomenon that people imagining a nation extend it backwards through history, seeking legitimacy in an ancient past. Anderson jokes about how Switzerland was founded in 1291 in 1891, its founding date chosen to celebrate its 600th Anniversary.³⁴



This provides the first plank of understanding what is happening with the erasing history claim. The identity of “Canadian,” as a nationality, depends on some historical lineage. John A. Macdonald plays an important role in at least one conception of the Canadian identity. Consider the cartoon (left), which refers to Macdonald as “Chapter One.”³⁵ He is the start of Canadian history, and so one of the definitional boundaries of Canadianness. He is what separates “Canada” from whatever came before. Removing Macdonald “erases him from history” inasmuch as it would strip him out of

that Canada-defining narrative. Macdonald may still exist as a historical figure, but he has been erased from the particular and significant historical narrative that defines Canada.

Anderson helps us understand the force of the “erasing history” claim. The charge the claim makes is that some piece of history is being removed from the history that defines the community. I now turn to the particular role played by commemorative monuments and other commemorations. In the introduction, I wrote that I needed to discuss history, identity, commemoration, and the public. I have discussed history and identity, now I must bring in commemoration and the public.

For historical events to be commonly imagined, or imagined to be commonly imagined, there has to be a way in which they are accessed by the community at large. Oftentimes this accessibility will be brought about through some form of mass distribution, like printed literature or public education.³⁶ Another way that this accessibility may occur is through a common, public reference point. A public statue — in the middle of a town square, for example — is experienced by everyone who passes through the square. Importantly, any individual person who has experienced the statue may imagine other people, unknown and unmet, experiencing that same statue. A number of public statues will be commemorative, which is to say that these statues commemorate some historical event or person. This means that that historical event or person will be the common reference. The individual nation-member, engaging a commemorative statue, may imagine their relation to that past event and so might in turn take that imagined relationship to the past to be common.

To engage with public commemorations, I want to employ a pair of resources from the work of Alan Gordon. Gordon, writing about public history in turn-of-the-century Montreal, offers accounts of public history and public memory. History is the active process of reconstructing the past, not just detailing particular events but describing their causal relationship to each other. Objects like books or statues present particular conceptions of history — accounts of past events and why those events happened as they did.³⁷ Public history comprises the objects which present conceptions of history that are available to the public.³⁸ Members of the public engage these objects — mostly statues and commemorative plaques — to reconstruct a version of past events.³⁹ So, for example, in reading a commemorative plaque announcing that some building was the church for the parish where John A. Macdonald was born, I reconstruct a version of the past like “Macdonald was born here, then he moved away.”

Public memory is what conceptions of history are available through public history.⁴⁰ While it does not directly analogize to individual memory, public memory is considered to be specifically *memory* because it is the conceptions of the past that are transferred from generation to generation.⁴¹ This means that a city’s public memory will be the conceptions of the past which are available through the commemorative statues and plaques which are enshrined in its streets, parks, and squares.⁴² It can be considered to be what the public, as a whole, remembers. As Gordon writes, “Public memory, then, works to turn public history into a shared experience in the interest of broadly and loosely defined political goals.”⁴³ This is to say that public history is how conceptions of the past are created, and public memory is what conceptions of the past are made available and supported by public history.

The concepts of public memory and public history help complete the understanding of the “erasing history” claim. Using Gordon’s language, commemorative statues are understood as sites of public memory. Commemorative titles, like Macdonald’s name on a school or a history prize, also work as sites of public memory. In the case of the Macdonald commemorations, this is an imagined belief in a shared historical lineage defined, in part, by John A. Macdonald. The public location of the Macdonald commemorations is important since that public location creates a relationship between history and territory. The Macdonald statue in Victoria is not just anywhere in Victoria but specifically at City Hall. Similarly, opposition to removing the statue opposed not just destroying the statue but also merely moving it elsewhere.⁴⁴ By its location, the statue is advancing the claim that there is some essential relationship between Macdonald and the city of Victoria, and this historical relationship is definitional to what Victoria is. The Canadian Historical Association’s John A. Macdonald award for best new scholarly book implies a claim by Macdonald on the practice or domain of Canadian history. Since Macdonald is the subject of these histories — in contrast to him being a rich patron who might fund the award — having the award named after Macdonald gives him a pride of place within the subject-matter of Canadian history. And for the Ontario schools, each school named after Macdonald implies some essential connection between him and the school.

Since these commemorations make a claim over some territory, they may be understood as making that claim on the behalf of whoever created the commemoration. That is, whoever decided that the statue should be so-erected or the history prize so-named. These people may be described as “the heritage elite,” a not necessarily organized cohort of people who are socially and legally situated to determine what is officially recognized as public history.⁴⁵ Writing of the late nineteenth Century, Gordon lists lawyers, notaries, politicians, archivists, teachers, and librarians as members.⁴⁶ A similar list today might include journalists and amateur researchers. Altogether, monuments and other commemorations may be thought of as claims the heritage elite make on public memory by way of creating things like monuments which offer a conception of public history. These claims are made, but not necessarily accepted. They may be contested by people who are within the territory claimed by the commemoration. Objections may be substantive, as they are in the case of Macdonald or Rhodes or Silent Sam, where people object to what is being commemorated. These statues may be contested through outright removal or vandalism, such as a number of cases in which a Macdonald statue’s hands have been covered in red paint. Contests might also be just over control of public history, as I believe is the case with the traffic cone on the head of the statue of the Duke of Wellington in Glasgow: someone one day, probably drunk, just placed a traffic cone on the statue’s head. This became a tradition, with the cone being replaced whenever it was removed, and people mobilized to stop the city from trying to make placing a cone on it more difficult.⁴⁷ In late 2018, a statue of Charles Rennie Mackintosh was unveiled in Glasgow, and within two weeks someone put a cone on it.⁴⁸ It is a joke, of course. But despite being a joke it is also about power and control over public history.

The heritage elite may not just invent public history by stipulation, but they do have a great deal of power in the matter. Members decide which people or events are deemed historically important. As has been the subject of this paper, which people and events are deemed historically important will be determined by how they support a national identity.

National identities are historically-based, so historical people or events support that identity insofar as they sit within — and therefore define — the identity-defining historical narrative. National identities are often linked to some set of values, and this will inform the decisions of the heritage elite. A conception of national identity will include certain values, and so the conceptions of history chosen to be officially enshrined in public memory will be chosen by whether they embody those certain values. For example, the Canadian citizenship guide was reworked last decade, emphasizing military adventure and de-emphasizing multiculturalism.⁴⁹ The “erasing history” claim does not appeal to these values, at least not directly. But I will show in the next section a recognition of this process, choosing history by values, will be helpful in responding to the “erasing history” claim.

At this point, it is possible to give a proper version of the “erasing history” defence. Removing John A. Macdonald commemorations constitutes erasing history. The commemorations embody a conception of history. This conception of history is essential to a national identity. For this conception to have its role in the national identity, members of the relevant public must imagine it as definitional to the historical lineage that defines the nation. Public commemorations are critical to this imagining since they tie the imagined past to particular territories. Removing the commemorations separates the pieces of the past embodied in the commemorations from the territory. This undermines the national identity by removing a key piece of its defining history.

Note that the construction of this argument puts collective identity at the front. I understand that the key worry is not the preservation of some true history uniquely embodied in commemorations, but the defence of some collective identity the commemoration supports.

Implications, and Argumentative Directions

As the articulation of the “erasing history” defence shows, the admirability of a commemoration’s subject is not at issue. The commemoration’s subject, like Macdonald, is deserving of this commemoration just because they are somehow objectively important to a historical past. If the subject is to be considered honoured, they are only considered to be honourable in the narrow sense that they are being honoured for being historically significant. “History is made by whomever makes it,” the erasing history claimant may hold, “and since there is no requirement to be a good person to make history, Macdonald gets to stay.”

With this in mind, I want to identify two sorts of argumentative strategies for responding to the erasing history defence. These approaches seek to advocate for removal (or some other change) of commemorations by directly engaging the erasing history defence. I leave to the side argumentative strategies that leave the erasing history defence untouched and instead insist that some other set of reasons are weightier than history-centric ones. So, for example, while it may be argued that a monument to Cecil Rhodes in the middle of the University of Cape Town should be removed because it is alienating to the majority-Black student base, I will not engage that sort of argumentation here. Rather, I will focus on two sorts of history-centric approaches. The first approach is one of historical correction, and I will argue that it is inadequate as a strategy for rejecting the erasing history defence. The

second approach comprises a group of approaches centred on promoting a particular conception of a group identity. In my final formulation of the erasing history defence I chose to foreground collective identity, and these surveyed approaches will take a concern with promoting such an identity as central. I will show that these identity-prioritizing approaches have weaknesses, but not enough to warrant discarding them completely.

The historical correction approach targets the commemoration's subject not for being morally bad, but for having their historical importance overstated. If the subject is not so historically significant, then they are not quite so important to the past that defines the collective identity. If they are not so significant to that past, then removing or de-emphasizing their commemoration does not so much constitute historical erasure. Rather, if the erasing history defender is truly interested in preserving a true history, then the commemoration's subject *should* be replaced by a more historically apt figure. Consider again the case of John A. Macdonald. He is held up not just as *a* founding father of Canada, but sometimes as *the* founding father of Canada. The pride of place his commemorations enjoy depend on his historical importance. However, this historical importance can be challenged. Confederation was not solely Macdonald's creation: he was just one of twenty-five people at the Charlottetown conference where confederation was agreed upon. He may have been the country's first Prime Minister, but that required winning an election that was happening because the country was already being brought into existence. The results of an election which was the result of confederation is an inapt reason for anointing someone the sole progenitor of confederation. Holding that Canada began in 1867 may also be challenged. Canadian history has sharp break equivalent to the American or French revolutions. The first elections under the modern parliamentary system happened in 1840. Canada did not sit internationally until the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. It did not obtain legal sovereignty until the 1931 statute of Westminster. And this says nothing about how people identified, whether they viewed Canada as its own place or, as Macdonald did, an outpost of empire whose members were all essentially British.⁵⁰ This is all to say that a historical correction may be offered where Macdonald is not so important to the historical entity of "Canada," and if he is not that important then history-centric thinking would suggest replacing some number of Macdonald honorific commemorations with those of more historically-apt subjects.

While there are cases where this approach could be successful, it accepts rather than challenges the erasing history defence. Instead of engaging with the logic of the erasing history defence, it depends on accidents of history that could have easily been otherwise; the authority of history proposed by the erasing history defender is left unchallenged. Accordingly, while the historical correction approach may sanction the removal of a Macdonald commemorative, that is entirely to do with the particular details of the history of Macdonald, and other, equivalent commemoratives might be unaffected. Maybe a country really was singularly founded by Steven Genocide, who was specifically looking for a land to found a society based upon the exploitation of the indigenous populations. Many countries invented to fit colonial rule would fit this description. Accordingly, there are cases where the historical correction approach would leave Macdonald-equivalent commemorations in place and unchanged. If this is an unacceptable outcome, and I suspect a number of readers would hold such an intuition, then that suggests that the historical correction approach worked accidentally in the case of Macdonald. The corrective approach

does not track what is actually important. I believe this ought to be predicted: I foregrounded the preservation of collective identity in my final formulation of the erasing history defence, and so a response that does not similarly engage collective identity directly will be inadequate.

What of strategies that do directly engage identity? The first thing that must happen is that such an engagement must be done in a historically-responsible way. An obvious fear is that putting identity before history will lead to an approach that supports historical fabrication. Such an accusation is often lurking not far below the surface when the erasing history defence is invoked in context. Accordingly, I believe that responsibility to history prescribes two general approaches. The first is one that accepts that the group is primarily defined by its collective history. This approach searches out historical events, and then uses them to identify the trajectory of the group. I will examine this approach in the context of what I will call “ameliorative nationalism,” where the project of ameliorative nationalism is to create a more meritorious conception of an already-existing group. This approach hews closely to the correcting history approach at times, but is differentiated by its prioritization of identity. Where the correcting history approach makes itself a slave to history, the ameliorative approach searches for fitting history in support of an already chosen end. The second general approach is one that seeks to define a group based entirely on present grounds, and then looks backwards for a common history. I will examine this approach in the context of what I will call “counternationalism.” The programme of counternationalism is one of trying to create a collective identity in contrast to the nation. It accepts groups like nations as having a historical character and so, in a sense, being historically defined. However, the counternationalist approach rejects that history is limiting. While what Canada is may be defined by what Canada has been, that exerts no normative pressure on how else people who compose the Canadian people may identify. I will address each approach in turn to show what each may prescribe for altering or removing commemorations.

The approach of ameliorative nationalism accepts the national unit but seeks to find a better history to support it. This approach may be broadly optimistic about nationalism, or perhaps just resigned to it as an inevitability. The ameliorative nationalist approach looks to history to support a particular conception of the national identity. The events that support this identity will be commemorated, and the events that do not support the identity will be de-emphasized. Nationalism’s promise of a single group between equals is what a positive collective identity would be going for, and nationalism tracks meaningful commonalities — common references and experiences which structure the way one understands and navigates the world. This buttresses an argument for replacing the Macdonald commemorations with commemorations that support the new, ethically proper national identity. Statues of Macdonald might be replaced with statues of John Diefenbaker, who introduced the country’s first bill of rights, or Lester Pearson, who removed the Union Jack from Canada’s flag thus symbolically distancing the country from Great Britain.

Ameliorative nationalism has two main difficulties, both related to justifying using the nation as unit at all. The first is that by accepting the nation as group, it reduces to the correcting history approach. So long as the national group is defined historically, ethically noxious past events which define the group can never completely be excised. As such, by keeping with the project of ameliorating the nation, the same problem that existed for the

correcting history approach exists here: whether the national identity can be ameliorated depends entirely on accidents of history. There have to be the historical events to justify maintaining the national identity. This leads to the second difficulty, which is that if one is willing to accept that continuing to use national identity must be justified, then it follows that the national identity will only be used if it conforms to some other existing standards for an ethically-meritorious collective identity. In this case, the approach that is being used is in fact the counternationalist approach, where the ethically meritorious identity is decided upon first, and then its history is explored. It is no longer the case that the national identity is being given primacy — and its history being filled in — but rather that the collective identity is chosen by ethical criteria, and a national identity is accepted insofar as it fits those criteria. In this way, ameliorative nationalism may be thought of as facing a dilemma: if history is given primacy in determining national identity, then the ameliorative approach is reduced to the correcting history approach, whereas if history is not given primacy, then the ameliorative approach reduces to the counternationalist one.

These difficulties are real but not fatal. Ameliorative nationalism keeps its appeal when the nature of the group is more definite, and so the ability to completely reinvent it is limited. Nations, while artificial, have been part of how people have carved up the political world for a few centuries. These divisions have created people with geographically, politically, and culturally distinct ways of engaging and understanding the world. While the boundaries of “Canadian” are extremely fluid, and often arbitrarily set, it is still possible to examine a reasonably distinct group of people who qualify as “Canadian.” So long as such a group is distinguishable, it is sensible to talk about wanting to emphasize the ethically meritorious elements of this group, and cast off its ethically deleterious elements. The Canadian identity may be unavoidable, and so long as it is unavoidable, its members have a stake in ensuring its ethical merit. This is particularly acute in the case of historical commemoration. Commemorative statues or other honourifics are being erected in the territory of Canada. Take the Canadian Historical Association prize as an example: the territory of Canada is set, so ameliorating the conception of the Canadian identity is more apt than substituting a different identity.

The counternationalist approach may take two lines. The first is to attempt to substitute an identity in place of the nationalist one. So, for example, Victoria might replace their statue of Macdonald with one of environmentalist David Suzuki, with the idea that Suzuki promotes an ecologist rather than nationalist identity. The other approach is that rather than substituting a single identity, to instead choose an approach that emphasizes social cleavages. If Ernest Renan wrote that nationalism “forgets” that a nation was once composed of diverse groups, counternationalism seeks to bring each of these groups to the fore. An example of this would be Winnipeg naming a park after one of the founders of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Jinnah, a prominent figure in the history of Pakistan, was chosen as the park’s namesake to represent the immigrants from Pakistan in the neighborhood.

Something to note is that the counternationalist approach lends itself particularly well to artistic interventions and recontextualizations. Interventions and recontextualizations leave the original statue in place, but do something to change its meaning. This is apt for counternationalism because an intervention emphasizes a cleavage by displaying the

conflict over the statue: there is the party who erected it and the intervening party. A common sort of intervention is dousing a statue's hands in red paint to suggest that the represented figure has blood on his hands, as has happened to number of Macdonald statues. Recontextualizations, similarly, create a contrast between the original erection of a commemorative statue and its new context. An example of this would be in Wyman Park in Baltimore, where artist Pablo Machioli erected a statue of a pregnant African-American woman, titled *Madre Luz*, in front of a commemorative statue of Confederate generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. *Madre Luz* forcibly recontextualizes the Lee and Jackson commemoration so that the Confederate generals are primarily understood through their role in defending the institution of slavery. To this end, *Madre Luz* is placed in front of the Lee and Jackson commemoration, so that the Lee and Jackson commemoration is engaged through the *Madre Luz* statue.

As with the ameliorative approach, the counternationalist approach faces two difficulties. The first is that it is incomplete, which is to say that it does not provide a guide as to what identity should replace that of the nation. This is not a serious weakness, but one worth noting as it means that the counternationalist approach must be supplemented by (or supplementary to) some other defence of a new collective identity. The other, more serious difficulty is that it is much more difficult to enact from a position of official power. Note that the interventions and recontextualizations mentioned were citizens acting on their own. The character of the interventions and recontextualizations would change if the interveners were officially sanctioned. The red paint thrown on Macdonald, for instance, changes from an accusation to an acknowledgement if done by the state. But, if the government is acknowledging a significant figure's role in genocide (or some other moral atrocity), then an artistic intervention of this sort seems inapt. The government, it seems, is acknowledging wrongdoing but keeping the initial commemoration up. Perhaps this tension is why the city of Baltimore ended up removing the Lee and Jackson statues from Wyman Park.

Altogether, this section has surveyed approaches to responding to the erasing history defence. These are not the only possible responses, but they are the ones that work by engaging the value of history. Ultimately, I believe the best approach might not be to take any one approach as the singular approach, but to view them as complementary. The correcting history approach, while limited as an approach in its own right, is still useful as histories have their own histories, and so commemorative monuments may often commemorate false histories. The ameliorative nationalism approach is suited to addressing the fact that acts of commemoration are often focused on the present, and seek to specifically recapture a past of a presently-existing group. Lastly, the counternationalist approach draws focus to the fluidity of collective identities and that the history that a commemorative statue represents has likely always been contested. Together, these three approaches show that one can accept the erasing history defender's contention that a commemorative statue does not hold its subject to be admirable, but still advocate for the statue to be removed or otherwise altered.

Conclusion

In this paper I have taken on the "erasing history" defence and through that engaged the relationship between monuments, history, and identity. I believe this paper offers two main

contributions to the philosophical debate. The first contribution is that I have shown a way to take the “erasing history” defence seriously. This understanding changes the “erasing history” defence from something which can be casually dismissed to representing a set of priorities concerning history and collective identity. Understanding the importance of identity in the “erasing history” defence reconnects the philosophical discourse with contemporary understandings of heritage.⁵¹ The second contribution is that I have shown engaging the “erasing history” defence provides insight not only into whether or not a monument should be taken down, but also what monuments should be erected and a way to discuss candidate subjects for commemoration.

Acknowledgements

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to Alfred Archer and Ben Matheson, who not only organized the conference from which this paper originated but also set up a support network to help turn the papers from that conference into respectable submissions. Special thanks are also owed to Erin Akerman, Anja Berninger and Ben Colburn for reviewing earlier drafts of this paper.

¹ Travis Timmerman, ‘A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments’ in Bob Fischer (ed.) *Ethics, Left and Right: The Moral Issues that Divide Us* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Forthcoming) 1-10; Dan Demetriou and Ajume Wingo, ‘The Ethics of Racist Monuments’ in David Boonin (ed.) *Palgrave Handbook of Philosophy and Public Policy* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018) 341-355.

² Timmerman op. cit., 5.

³ J. R. Miller, ‘Macdonald as Minister of Indian Affairs: The Shaping of Canadian Indian Policy’ in Patrice Dutil and Roger Hall (eds.) *Macdonald at 200: New Reflections and Legacies* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2015), 311.

⁴ Donald B. Smith, ‘Macdonald’s Relationship with Aboriginal Peoples’ in Patrice Dutil and Roger Hall (eds.) *Macdonald at 200: New Reflections and Legacies* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2015), 68.

⁵ Smith op. cit., 68.

⁶ Smith op. cit., 71.

⁷ Miller, op. cit., 325.

⁸ Truth and Reconciliation Canada, *The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Volume 1: Canada’s Residential Schools: The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), 570.

⁹ Truth and Reconciliation Canada, *Summary of The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), 1.

¹⁰ James Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2013), 108-9.

¹¹ Daschuk op. cit., 61.

¹² Daschuk op. cit., 133.

¹³ Daschuk op. cit., 168.

¹⁴ John A. Macdonald quoted in Daschuk op. cit., 123.

¹⁵ Daschuk op. cit., 141.

¹⁶ As I edit this paper, Canada’s National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls has issued its final report, where it describes as genocide current action (and inaction) of the Canadian state that has allowed for widespread gendered violence against Indigenous women and girls.

¹⁷ CBC News, “John A. Macdonald Statue Removed from City Hall,” *CBC News*, August 11, 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/john-a-macdonald-statue-victoria-city-hall-lisa-helps-1.4782065>, last retrieved June 7, 2019.

¹⁸ The Canadian Press, “Historical Association Rebrands Award Name for John A. Macdonald,” *National Post*, May 30, 2018, <https://nationalpost.com/pmn/entertainment-pmn/books-entertainment-pmn/historical-association-rebrands-award-named-for-john-a-macdonald>, last retrieved June 7, 2019.

¹⁹ Shanifa Nasser, “He’s Considered Canada’s Founding Father, but Many Ontario Teachers Want His Name Stripped from Public Schools,” *CBC News*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/john-macdonald-school-1.4259643>, last retrieved June 7, 2019.

²⁰ Examples include but are not limited to: Erin O’Toole quoted in Nasser op. cit.; John Baird quoted in Nasser op. cit.; Christopher Dummitt quoted in Canadian Press op. cit..

²¹ John Ivison, “John Ivison: Even John A. Macdonald Isn’t Safe from A Foolish Revisionism that Never Ends,” *National Post*, August 24, 2017, <https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/john-ivison-even-john-a-macdonald-isnt-safe-from-a-foolish-revisionism-that-never-ends>, last retrieved June 7, 2019.

²² While Anderson’s argument specifically concerns nationalism, I believe that it generalizes easily. The elements which I invoke — imagined similarities, common reference points, and historical boundaries — are not unique to nations, and apply just as much to other elements of common culture like sports and media franchise fandoms.

²³ At many Canadian universities, Anderson’s work is a core part of the Canadian history programme for exactly this reason.

²⁴ There are, of course, other articulations of nationalism that do not use Anderson’s historical approach. Two examples may be found in David Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Yael Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

²⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 2006), 6.

²⁶ Anderson op. cit., 7.

²⁷ Anderson op. cit., 7.

²⁸ Anderson op. cit., 6.

²⁹ Anderson op. cit., 7.

³⁰ Ernest Renan, “Qu’est-ce Qu’une Nation?” in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1947-1961), 892, quoted in Anderson op. cit., 6.

³¹ Anderson op. cit., 6.

³² Anderson op. cit., 201.

³³ Anderson op. cit., 37.

³⁴ Anderson op. cit., 135.

³⁵ Gary Clement, “New History Is as Bad as New Math,” *National Post*, August 16, 2018. Retrieved online at <https://twitter.com/nationalpost/status/1029923430689320960>, last retrieved June 7, 2019.

³⁶ Anderson’s account of the origin of nations gives a pride of place to the printing press and the rise of print capitalism, which allowed for a distributed population to create common imaginings by all reading the same newspapers. Anderson op. cit., 18.

³⁷ Alan Gordon, *Making Public Pasts* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), xv.

³⁸ While Gordon provides a short account of just what counts as “the public,” for this paper it is enough to carry on with an unrefined lay understanding.

³⁹ Gordon op. cit., 7.

⁴⁰ Gordon op. cit., 7.

⁴¹ Gordon op. cit., 7.

⁴² Gordon op. cit., xv.

⁴³ “Loosely defined political goals,” may be understood in the present context as fostering a particular national identity.

⁴⁴ CBC News, op. cit.

⁴⁵ Gordon op. cit., 49.

⁴⁶ Gordon op. cit., 49.

⁴⁷ BBC News, “Plans to End Cone Tradition on Glasgow’s Wellington Statue,” *BBC News*, November 11, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-24901596>, last retrieved June 7, 2019.

⁴⁸ BBC News, “New Charles Rennie Mackintosh Statue Gets Glasgow Cone Treatment,” *BBC News*, December 21, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-46646490>, last retrieved June 7, 2019.

⁴⁹ Ian McKay and Jamie Swift, *Warrior Nation: Rebranding Canada in an Age of Anxiety* (Toronto: Between the Lines Books, 2012), 15-18.

⁵⁰ As Hugh MacLennan identifies in *Two Solitudes*, late 19th- and early 20th-Century French Canadians just as much identified being authentically Canadian with being essentially French. Hugh MacLennan, *Two Solitudes* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1945).

⁵¹ For a contemporary understanding of how heritage is a practice centred around creating connections with the past, see Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006): 83.