The recent past has seen a number of high profile debates over statues of historical figures. There has been 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, the fight over University of North Carolina’s Silent Sam (representing the unknown confederate soldier) being the most current and prominent. In this paper I will focus on the Canadian counterpart to these debates, which surround the country’s first Prime Minister, sir John A MacDonald. Specifically, I want to engage a certain sort of defence offered for keeping statues of MacDonald. These are defences that centre on the idea that removing the statues (or other honourifics, like his name from a school or history prize) would constitute “erasing history.” And I find these defences 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. If my argument goes correctly, I hope my talk will provide two things: a good way of understanding this “erasing history” defence, and a strategy for response.

My thesis for this paper is threefold. My primary thesis is that the function of what I will call honourific statues is to shape a collective (often national) identity. My secondary thesis is that the way that these statues work to shape that identity is not by holding up their subjects as admirable, and only hold their subjects to be honourable in a very limited way. Rather, these statues present their subjects as objectively important to some group surrounding the statue, and this importance gives the statue’s subject a role in defining that surrounding group. My tertiary thesis is that the best way to advocate for the removal of these statues in light of the “erasing history” defence is to foreground either an ameliorative nationalism or a counter-nationalism.

To support my theses I will have to answer the following four questions: (1) how do public statues relate to history?; (2) how do public statues relate to the public?; (3) how to think of national identity; and (4) what is the relation between public history and national identity? Accordingly, 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 to some. Second, I will put together the “erasing history” defence, and work it into a theory of public history and national identity. Third, I will give a strategy for responding to the “erasing history” claim.

A Statue, A School, and a Prize

I now offer a *very* brief overview of why we are talking about Sir John A MacDonald. He was Canada’s first Prime Minister, which means that one finds his name and likeness throughout the country. His role in Canadian history has become publicly scrutinized recently in the wake of the Indigenous Idle No More campaign in 2012. One of the successes of the Idle No More campaign was a number of public commitments to Reconciliation, a program of restitution for the genocide committed against Indigenous peoples. One part of Reconciliation is the acknowledgement of the role of the Canadian state in the genocide of Indigenous peoples, and MacDonald features prominently in this story. Well-known is his role in putting down the Red River Rebellion in now-Manitoba. MacDonald formed the Royal Canadian Mounted Police — AKA the Mounties — to attack Métis who were trying to establish their own sovereign government. This is the story of Louis Rièl and Gabriel Dumont. More centrally to MacDonald’s legacy, however, and newer to the public conscience, is his role in establishing the Residential School system. The Residential Schools were boarding schools, largely church-run, for Indigenous children. Children were taken from their families by force and taken to the schools where they had their heads shaved, were given new names (or sometimes just numbers), and given what was called a Christian upbringing. The purpose of all this was to, in the famous words of contemporaneous American Richard Pratt, to “[k]ill the Indian, and save the man.”

All this is to say that a serious approach to Reconciliation requires a serious reckoning of John A MacDonald.

The Victoria City Council decided that Reconciliation meant that they should remove the statue of John A MacDonald from out front of City Hall. The Canadian Historical Association removed MacDonald’s name from its award for the new best scholarly book in Canadian history. The Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario made an official request to rename all Ontario primary schools currently named after MacDonald. All of these moves were made in accordance with the programme of Reconciliation. And all of them faced a common rejoinder: that they were erasing history. These accusations came from not just protestors, but newspaper editorials, politicians, and historians. Very few of the people quoted defended MacDonald as a “great” Canadian, with the exception of former foreign affairs minister John Baird. The battleground over these statues and names, then, does not seem to be the character of MacDonald but his importance. There is an objective history, and he is a part of it. What I want to do, then, is give an account of public honourifics which explains why this is the case. What is it about public honourifcs 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 rquires answering four questions concerning the relation between statues, history, the public, and national identity. To do that I am going to have to avail myself of a couple of resources. To establish the relationship between history and national identity I am going to use Benedict Anderson’s account of nationalism and national identity. This will give us a story about national identity centred on history. To tie this to public honourifics, I will reach for Alan Gordon’s theorizing on public history and public memory. Gordon, as a Canadian historian, is far less well known than Anderson but he has written and written well on the contest over public history in Fin de Siècle Montreal. Gordon’s account of public memory and public history will allow for an explanation of how public honourifics interact with Anderson’s history-centred national identity.

Anderson describes the nation as an “imagined political community,” limited and sovereign. To say that it is limited is to say that it has boundaries. At the very least these boundaries exist relative to other nations, and often these boundaries will be territorial. Lines on the map that distinguish one nation state from another. Nations are sovereign as they have a claim to collective self-determination. Historically speaking, this sovereignty was particularly relevant as a claim against religious authority. As Anderson gives his account of national identity, the idea of nation somewhat supplanted religion as the dominant imagined community.

The nation is an imagined community. “Imagined,” as particular members of a nation imagine what Anderson describes as a communion with unknown and unmet fellow members. This is an imagined sameness or, at least, similarity. The community is horizontal, which is to say that all members are theoretically equal as members. If one is a Canadian then one is a Canadian, and the only theoretical contrast is to the non-Canadian. The communion (and for us this is the most important part of Anderson’s account) is based on a similarity of historical lineage and common references. He is fond of Ernest Renan’s line “l’essence d’une nation est que tous les indivius aient beaucoup de choses en commun, et aussi que tous aient oublié bien des choses.” They have a lot in common, and have also forgotten a lot. Anderson gives this the gloss that it is the imagined similarities that create the group, and in creating the group based on these imagined similarities, the differences which would divide the putative nation into subgroups are forgotten. 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 — disappear. Altogether, everyone who holds these imagined similarities in common is an equal part of a group, and to be part of the group is to imagine oneself similar to all others on these grounds.

Since nations persist through time, and since individual nation-members imagine themselves as similar with other, imagined nation-members, an imagined historical lineage is central to this nation-defining imagined communion. These imagined historical points are what defines the nation by establishing its historical boundaries. Its starting point, which marks it off from what came before, and its defining events which chart its progress through history 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 it 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, looking for legitimacy in an ancient past. Anderson has a good quip about how Switzerland was founded in 1291 in 1891, its founding date chosen so as to celebrate its 600th Anniversary.

For these historical events to be commonly imagined, they have to be mass distributed. This requires some sort of common language. By Anderson’s history, possibly the single most important thing that allowed the nation to take hold was print capitalism. This allowed for the distribution of a common set of references, which allowed everyone who engaged with that language to imagine themselves as fundamentally similar to everyone else who read that language. Anderson extends this into a broader story about how these languages got adopted into a bureaucracy and so became languages of state, but for current purposes what is important is the role of individuals engaging something mass produced and commonly distributed, which allowed them to imagine that their imaginings are common.

It is important to note that different nation-members can have different conceptions of nation-membership. The theory given so far of national identity only holds that a particular subject imagines themselves to be similar to other unknown and unmet 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, those historical points that determine its origin and historical trajectory, are contested territory. A particular site of conflict is between the laity and the political elite. 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. Given that nations are theoretically horizontal, it is easy to see nationhood as 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 provides the first plank of understanding what’s happening with the erasing history claim. The identity of “Canadian,” as a nationality, depends on some historical lineage. Sir John A MacDonald plays an important role in at least one conception of the Canadian identity. Think of the cartoon which refers to MacDonald as being “chapter 1.” 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.

Anderson helps us understand the force of the “erasing history” claim. Alan Gordon’s account of public history and public memory will provide the language and conceptual framework needed to fill out the rest of the picture. Gordon’s understanding of history is a common one, as an activity centred on recovering the past. Some of these conceptions of the past are embodied in public monuments. By convention, most monuments are either funerary or disjunctive. Disjunctive means they represent something as a historic disjunct — a break from what preceded it. These monuments are considered public history because they are things by which members of the public recover the past. One learns about some historical figure by seeing their statue, or reading a plaque. Public memory, in turn, is how “conceptions of history are enshrined in historic sites and public monuments in the streets, parks, and squares of a city.” Gordon continues, “Public memory, then, works to turn public history into a shared experience in the interest of broadly and loosely defined political goals.” 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. “Loosely defined political goals,” may be understood in the present context as fostering a particular national identity.

The concepts of public memory and public history help complete the understanding of the “erasing history” claim.

Using Gordon’s language, we can refer to monuments and other honourifics as sites of public memory. The “shared experience” that these honourifics bring about is Anderson’s “communion” that underlies national identity. In the case of the MacDonald honourifics, this is an imagined belief in a shared historical lineage defined, in part, by John A MacDonald. The public location of the MacDonald honourifics 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. 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 infers 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 Canadian history. And for the Ontario schools, each school named after MacDonald implies some essential connection between the school and MacDonald. (An awkward proposition when he would consider some significant number of the students at these schools some species other than human.)

Since these honourifics make a claim over some territory, they may be understood as making that claim on the behalf of whoever created the honourific. Whoever decided that the statue should be so-erected, whoever decided that 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. Writing of the late 19th Century, Gordon lists lawyers, notaries, politicians, archivists, teachers, and librarians as members. (Of note is that not all of these members are equally powerful — a librarian may research and organize information, but it is an official committee who decides whether that information gets enshrined in a monument, and the whole process is subject to politicians’ approval.) Altogether, monuments and other honourifics 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 honourific. Objections may be substantive, as they are in the case of MacDonald, or Rhodes, or Silent Sam. These statues may be contested through outright removal or vandalism, in the number cases of a MacDonald statue having its hands 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 something of a tradition, the cone being replaced whenever it was removed, and people mobilized to stop the city from elevating the statue to make placing a cone on it more difficult. Last month a new statue of Charles Rennie Mackintosh was unveiled in Glasgow, and within two weeks someone put a cone on it. It’s a joke, of course. But despite being a joke it’s 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 talk, 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 historical narrative that defines the national identity.

An addendum that is not central to the current argument, but I believe is a common non-essential feature that helps understand contests over public memory. National identities are often considered to be 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. The historian Ian McKay has some good work about how the Canada Citizenship Guide was reworked last decade, emphasizing military adventure and de-emphasizing multiculturalism. The “erasing history” claim does not appeal to these values, at least not directly. But as we will see 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 we can give the “erasing history” defence in its final version. Removing John A MacDonald honourifcs constitutes erasing history. This works in the following way. The honourifics 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 honourifics are critical to this imagining happening, since they tie the imagined past to particular territories. Removing the honourifics separate the piece of the past embodied in the honourific from the territory. This undermines the national identity by removing a key piece of its defining history.

Note that the reconstruction of this argument puts the public/national identity at the front. I understand that the key worry is not the preservation of some true history uniquely embodied in honouri4fics, but the defence of some public/national identity the honouriffic supports.

A Quick Look at Possible Responses Because I’m Very Out of Time

So I’m pretty short on time here so I will frame this as a conclusion and possible future directions from where a full answer to the “erasing history” defence would come.

If my analysis of the “erasing history” defence is correct, then the admirability of an honourific’s subject is not at issue. The honourific’s subject, like MacDonald, is deserving of this honourific just because they are in some way objectively important to a historical past. The honourific’s subject is also only honourable in the narrow sense that they are being honoured for being historically significant. History is made by whoever makes it, there is no requirement to be a good person to make history, so MacDonald gets to stay. I want to now gesture at three strategies for responding to the “erasing history” defence. The first I find totally inadequate. The second and third have weaknesses, but not enough to merit discarding them.

The first strategy is a sort of historical correction. Take MacDonald, for instance. 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 honourifics enjoy depend on his historical importance. But this historical importance can be challenged. Confederation wasn’t MacDonald’s sole creation — he was just one of twenty-five people at the Charlottetown conference in 1864, where confederation was agreed upon. This is also only if you put Canada’s start date at 1867. Canadian history is a strange thing with nothing equivalent to the American or French revolutions. The first elections under parliamentary supremacy 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, like MacDonald, an outpost of empire whose members were all essentially British. This is all to say that MacDonald wasn’t actually all that historically important.

This approach is inadequate, however. It depends on accidents of history that could have easily been otherwise. 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. This is essentially the history of colonialism. The correcting history approach, while incidentally working in the case of MacDonald, does not provide a strategy that generalizes. If one is looking for a strategy to counter the “erasing history” defence in general, this is not it.

A second strategy is an ameliorative nationalism. This would be a strategy that is optimistic about nationalism and national identities, and seeks to craft one that promotes an ethically meritorious national identity. Anderson advocates for something like this in *Imagined Communities*, arguing that the reactionary nationalisms that led to the two World Wars were perversions of nationalism. 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 honourifics with honourifics that support the new, ethically proper national identity.

I will not here rehearse the problems with nationalism, because time is an issue and I suspect many here share an intuitive distrust of nationalism. If we want to talk more about this we can take it up in the Q&A. I think there is something interesting to say in defence of ameliorative nationalism, but it takes some time.

As a third strategy, there is what I will call counter-nationalism. This strategy seeks to emphasize the social cleavages that national identities occlude. 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. These different groups have different histories, which undercuts the claim that MacDonald should enjoy the historical pride of place that the honourifics afford. If MacDonald does not enjoy that historical pride of place, then he does not have the objective historical importance that the “erasing history” defence requires he has.

I want to focus on one particular problem that this approach has, which is that it says nothing about what should *replace* a removed MacDonald honourific. National identity is displaced, but there is the question of what collective identities should there be, and which should be used for imagining our similarities to those around us. My understanding is that Eric Hobsbawm concludes on such a question in his work on nationalism, so this isn’t too embarrassing of a point to end on.