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## *Seen but Not Seen: A Roundtable Discussion*

### DONALD WRIGHT

Published in 2021, *Seen but Not Seen: Influential Canadians and the First Nations from the 1840s to Today* struck a resonant and timely chord. A year later, it received the 2022 John Wesley Dafoe Book Prize. And it garnered positive reviews, to say the least. Emma Scott and Brittany Luby admired its accessibility; Nelle Oosterom called it “readable,” “balanced,” and “packed with fascinating detail”; Kevin Brushett described it as “a treasure trove of information and analysis”; Elaine Coburn summarized it as “well written, engrossing, and often sobering”; and Kerry Abel added that it ought to be “widely read and deeply savoured.”<sup>1</sup>

In April 2023, the Canadian Historical Association hosted a virtual roundtable featuring Jan Noel (an expert in the early history of Canada at the University of Toronto), Hamar Foster (a law professor with expertise in Aboriginal law at the University of Victoria), and, of course, Donald Smith (a historian of Canadian and Indigenous history at the University of Calgary).<sup>2</sup> The roundtable went off without a hitch: Jan and Hamar were generous in their assessments; Don was gracious in his response; and the Q&A generated a thoughtful conversation about presentism and the writing of history.<sup>3</sup>

To prepare for the roundtable, I reread *Seen but Not Seen*. My first impressions were quickly confirmed. Across nine chapters, Smith argues that while Canadians may have *seen* Indigenous peoples, they did not *see* Indigenous peoples. Instead, they saw what they wanted to see: an undifferentiated and unfortunate people who were both in the way and doomed to disappear, making assimilation the order of the day. John A. Macdonald does not get high marks. “Without question,” Smith writes, “Sir John A. Macdonald’s record with the Indigenous peoples in the North-West in 1885 was totally reprehensible, and his approval of the execution of Louis Riel a colossal error” (31). Nor do John Boyd and Duncan Campbell Scott. The trial judge in the 1885 St. Catharines Milling case, Boyd ruled that Indigenous peoples did not own the land; they “merely occupied it, roamed over it, and supported themselves on it” (107). In his words, he hoped that the North American Indian “may be led to settle down into the industrious and peaceful habits of a civilized people” (109). Meanwhile, Scott oversaw

a relentless program of assimilation as deputy superintendent general of Indian Affairs from 1913 to 1931, tightening the screws on Indigenous peoples at every turn.<sup>4</sup>

There were exceptions, of course. After all, not everyone was a Duncan Campbell Scott. John McDougall was a Methodist missionary who lived with the Stoney Nakoda in southern Alberta from 1873 to 1899. Decent and generous, he defended their hunting rights and their general welfare, especially when it came to unscrupulous Indian agents. But he was also “a prisoner” of his times, with the “same blind spot” as pretty much everyone else: he “did not see how the First Nations in the future could retain their culture and heritage” (65, 67).

Given my own interests in the history of intellectual life in general and of historical writing in particular, I was especially drawn to Smith’s analysis of Diamond Jenness, Kathleen Coburn, Paul Wallace, Stewart W. Wallace, and Lionel Groulx, among others. In his 1928 elementary school textbook, for example, Stewart Wallace referred to Indigenous peoples as “savages of a very low order.” After a complaint from an Indigenous veteran and teacher, Wallace agreed to change the sentence in subsequent editions: “On the whole, it is clear that the original inhabitants of Canada were of a somewhat primitive type” (172). Was it an improvement? Not really. After all, the civilized/primitive binary nurtured the idea of the “disappearing Indian” and legitimated the legal dispossession of Indigenous peoples. For his part, Groulx insisted that Indigenous peoples had spent forever “dans le même état de vie, dans les mêmes routines dégradantes,” or in the same state of existence and in the same degrading habits (183). But not everyone harboured these kinds of prejudices. To this end, I really enjoyed “meeting” Hugh Dempsey, an Alberta archivist, editor, curator, and historian. Married to Pauline Gladstone, the daughter of Indigenous leader James Gladstone, who became Canada’s first Indigenous senator,<sup>5</sup> Dempsey acted as “a bridge between two worlds, communicating invaluable information about the Indigenous world to non-Indigenous Albertans” (255).

In her 1994 presidential address to the Canadian Historical Association, Nikki Strong-Boag offered a capacious definition of history when she reminded us that Canada is diverse and always has been, that its past is difficult, and that a little humility goes a long way. “If it is to be fully told, our history needs many interwoven narratives where none, as has too often been the case in the past, excludes the others.”<sup>6</sup> Donald Smith would agree. In many ways, it confirms his definition

of history as a branch of knowledge that is open, inclusive, plural, and above all, fair.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Emma Scott and Brittany Luby, review of *Seen but Not Seen: Influential Canadians and the First Nations from the 1840s to Today*, *Canadian Historical Review* 103, no. 1 (2022): 157–59; Nelle Oosteron, review of *Seen but Not Seen: Influential Canadians and the First Nations from the 1840s to Today*, *Canada's History* 102, no. 4 (2022): 69; Kevin Brushett, review of *Seen but Not Seen: Influential Canadians and the First Nations from the 1840s to Today*, *Ontario History* 114, no. 1 (2022): 113; Elaine Coburn, "But Blind They Were: The Fallacy of an Empty Continent," *Literary Review of Canada*, June 2021; Kerry Abel, review of *Seen but Not Seen: Influential Canadians and the First Nations from the 1840s to Today*, *Prairie History*, no. 6 (Fall 2021): 58.
- 2 I invited an Indigenous scholar to participate, but at the last minute they were compelled to pull out.
- 3 The roundtable, minus the Q&A, was recorded and is available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6F-bDKu7FDg>.
- 4 On Duncan Campbell Scott's career, see also Constance Backhouse et al., eds. *Royally Wronged: The Royal Society of Canada and Indigenous Peoples* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021).
- 5 See P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Competing Biographies: How James Gladstone Became Canada's First Indigenous Senator," in *People, Politics, and Purpose: Biography and Canadian Political History*, ed. Greg Donaghy and P. Whitney Lackenbauer (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2023).
- 6 Veronica Strong-Boag, "Contested Space: The Politics of Canadian Memory," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 5, no. 1 (1994): 6.