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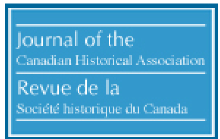

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A Problematic Past and the Promise of Light in *Seen but Not Seen*

JAN NOEL

I expect anyone who is reading this knows how hard it is to narrate history's dialogue between the past and the present. How does one remain true to the past, yet speak in relevant tones to today's audiences? Even *being* a historian involves somehow balancing the *passion* that has drawn us into this not-exactly-rich-in-jobs field with the *dispassion* that is required to render an honest historical account.

Passion is in the air. We've heard about how politicians face constant online harassment and threats, but it also affects veterans of the once tweedy, bespectacled backwater of pre-Confederation history. The Canadian Historical Association has seen disagreements,[1] while the public has made calls to rewrite the Canadian story wholesale, and even to cancel Canada Day. I know several current faculty members who will voice only confidentially their more complex assessment of controversial figures like Egerton Ryerson. "I don't want to be crucified in social media," a colleague told me. And there is understandable indignation from people who have suffered abuse and from their supporters who call for reform.

Fortunately, a highly qualified scholar has stepped into the fray to discuss attitudes of influential Canadians from the 1840s onward. From his 1974 publication on Indigeneity in New France and his 1987 biography of Kahkewaquonaby (Peter Jones) to his award-winning 2013 monograph *Mississauga Portraits: Ojibwe Voices from Nineteenth-Century Canada,* Donald Smith has a wealth of knowledge across cultural divides.[2] On the University of Toronto's Mississauga campus, we taught his searing article "The Dispossession of the Mississaugas." Exploited by government agents, whiskey traders, and lecherous soldiers, the Mississaugas were pushed to the margins by a tidal wave of settlers who ruined the fishery and stole timber from the ever-shrinking Credit River village.[3] When Smith came to my classroom to speak about it, he invited his friends from New Credit to join the discussion. And when his 2021 *Ontario History* article attempted to exonerate Egerton Ryerson — as an ally of Indigenous peoples — he spoke not from on high but spent pages inviting others to continue his research and suggesting untapped sources.[4]

Smith is also aware of other dispossessed groups, such as evicted Highlanders and Famine Irish who arrived among the waves of mass migration after 1815. His co-authored textbook *Origins: Canadian History to Confederation* recounts their plight, along with that of people arriving on the Underground Railroad from the US South.[5] The influx was so massive that the majority Anishinaabe population of 1780 had died or moved to remote areas by the mid-nineteenth century, becoming less than 1 percent of Upper Canada's population and nearly invisible to the newcomers. Having explored the histories of all these groups, Smith is well positioned to referee discussion of people whose views on race, gender, and religion do not match those of today.

Smith points out one belief common to almost all the Canadians he studied in the century after 1840, remarkably still expressed by ethnologists Marius Barbeau and Diamond Jenness in the 1930s: the Indians were a "dying race," making assimilation the only viable course for the few survivors. Prominent Canadians acted on the belief with varying degrees of good and ill will. Regardless of white views, few Indigenous men were willing to give up their status in exchange for the franchise, which Smith reads as clear rejection of assimilation. The twentieth century saw the Indigenous population begin to rebound, particularly in the 1930s with better prevention and treatment of contagious diseases, and better nutrition and hygiene.

Opening his crate of apples, Smith finds a few rotten ones. Foremost was Duncan Campbell Scott, superintendant of the Department of Indian Affairs in the early twentieth century. This long-serving autocrat took every opportunity to augment powers of sometimes-corrupt Indian agents, to criminalize traditional ceremonies and councils, and to facilitate land takeovers. He suppressed any pushback from the group he was supposed to serve, viewing leaders such as Fred Loft as dangerous subversives. Also unwholesome was Judge John Boyd, who ruled against Indigenous title to large tracts of Ontario in the 1885 St. Catharine's Milling and Lumber Co. case with what Smith estimates to be less than two weeks of research and no Indigenous consultation at all. Smith uncovers the fact that Boyd had a son fighting to suppress the Northwest uprising that year, not augmenting his neutrality.

In most of the bunch, Smith finds some redeeming qualities. Smith often turns to social network analysis. What connections did his subjects have with Indigenous people? Duncan Campbell Scott had no close friends there. According to Diamond Jenness, he "disliked them

as a people, and gave a cool reception to the delegations that visited him in Ottawa" (122).

On the grounds of social networks, *Seen but Not Seen* gives Methodist missionary John McDougall high marks. McDougall grew up among Ojibwa and Cree, became fluent in their languages, and married a part-Cree woman; he praised Indigenous religion, defended the Sundance, and opposed removal of children to off-reserve schools. He refuted the *Calgary Herald*'s vicious remarks about Indigenous peoples in the 1880s and spoke out against restrictive reserve conditions. Although he shared the general view of Western settlement as a key to progress, "basically what John McDougall wanted was equality" (66). However, McDougall's assistance to the government in getting what was clearly uninformed consent to Treaties 6 and 7, and later working with the government to downsize reserves, may lead the reader to a less sanguine judgment.

Influential people sided with First Nations for various reasons. Emily Carr, whose paintings introduced magnificent Northwest totems to the Canadian public, made friends across the cultural divide, but took no interest whatever in Indigenous rights activism in British Columbia. In his usual fashion, Smith looks for clues in personality and network. He believes Carr was likely drawn to Indigenous peoples because she identified with their outsider status, being herself an isolated and misunderstood artist. Resenting her stern sisters and stern missionaries, she identified with her free-spirited Indigenous friends.

One chapter examines the record of our first prime minister. Is there a case for still celebrating Macdonald despite his ruthless willingness to starve Plains Cree onto reserves, as John Tobias, James Daschuk, and others have documented?[6] Noting the hanging of Louis Riel, the illegal pass system, and patronage appointments of corrupt Indian agents, Smith states flatly: "Sir John A. Macdonald's record with the Indigenous peoples in the Northwest in 1885 was totally reprehensible" (31). As Smith suggests, but I think, might stress more, Macdonald's only defence can be the main accomplishment of his life — bringing together disparate and reluctant provinces to form a nation. When he turns to Macdonald's network, Smith finds Indigenous associates, clients, and protégées. He further notes that Macdonald introduced the franchise *without* renunciation of Indian status (later repealed by Wilfrid Laurier's government).

One naturally comes away from a rich book with a few questions. One problem with networks is how hard it is to pin down the nature of

relationships. When a famous member of a dominant group befriends a member of a stigmatized group, *is* it friendship? Window-dressing? Patron-client relationship? Hard to know. Smith's most successful analysis of such friendship is not in this book but in his 2021 *Ontario History* article which discusses the decades-long friendship between Ryerson and Kahkewaquonaby. It dated from the latter extending a welcome to the young Ryerson when he first arrived at Credit River, through Ryerson's advocacy of Mississauga land and fishing rights in the 1830s, to his proposal that Kahkewaquonaby be principal of the agricultural school sought by Anishinaabe chiefs meeting at Orillia in 1846. The bond continued with the increasingly powerful Ryerson's proposal of his friend as superintendant of the Indian Department of Canada West, followed by Kahkewaquonaby's stay at Ryerson's house during his final illness.

Encyclopedic knowledge — the impressive product of decades of tireless research and retention — often delights but occasionally overwhelms. In addition to sixteen individuals named in chapter headings, at least twenty others drop in unannounced, including Mohawk poet Pauline Johnson, "pretendians" Grey Owl and Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance, and various twentieth-century activists. Fortunately, many are fascinating. The reader who stays focused will appreciate a book that spans a *longue durée* from early Grand and Credit River encampments through Prairie buffalo-hunting, missionary activities, and reserves to the early twentieth-century emergence of a toxic Department of Indian Affairs, and the rise of Indigenous organizations as early as 1916 in British Columbia to oppose the federal government's unilateral altering of reserve boundaries. Smith leaves the breakthroughs of the last half-century — including the groundswell of public interest arising in the twenty-first century — to a future historian who will have more perspective. How profound change will be is a burning question. Smith does briefly recap events in the period after 1970, allowing the book to end on a note — at long last — of government consultation instead of decrees from on high.

The author concludes his book by writing, "We should always keep in mind that in judging the past those responsible were individuals of their own times, and the times were not ours. For me the good news is, over the course of my three-quarters of a century in this country, I now see a growing political, regional, and public awareness of Indigenous Canada — Seen and Now Seen" (273). Smith models the judicious historian who foregoes caricatures and insists upon human

complexity. Like Donald Smith, historians can take an honest look at the problematic past, while pointing also towards the light.

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JAN NOEL wrote *Along a River: The First French Canadian Women* and prizewinning publications on Temperance Crusades, Haudenosaunee women, and Louis-Joseph Papineau. She taught Canadian history for twenty-five years at the University of Toronto.

JAN NOEL a écrit *Along a River : The First French Canadian Women* et des publications primées sur les croisades de tempérance, les femmes haudenosaunee et Louis-Joseph Papineau. Elle a enseigné l'histoire du Canada pendant vingt-cinq ans à l'Université de Toronto.

Endnotes

1 Ira Basen, "The past is present: What role should Canadian historians play in reconciliation? The question has proved surprisingly controversial," *The Globe and Mail,* 13 May 2022

2 Donald B. Smith, *Le Sauvage: The Native People in Quebec Historical Writing on the Heroic Period (1534–1663) of New France* (Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, 1974); and Donald B. Smith, *Mississauga Portraits: Ojibwe Voices from Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

3 Donald B. Smith, "The Dispossession of the Mississauga Indians: A Missing Chapter in the Early History of Upper Canada," in Bruce G. Wilson and J. K. Johnson, eds, *Historical Essays on Upper Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989).

4 Donald B. Smith, "Egerton Ryerson and the Mississauga, 1826 to 1856, an Appeal for Further Study," *Ontario History*, 63, 2 (Autumn 2021): 222-43.

5 R. Douglas Francis, Richard Jones, Donald B. Smith, and Robert A. Wardhaugh, *Origins: Canadian History to Confederation,* seventh edition (Toronto: Nelson, 2012).

6 See John L. Tobias, "Canada's Subjugation of the Plains Cree, 1879–1885," *Canadian Historical Review*, 64, 4 (December 1983): 519–548; and James Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Indigenous Life* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2013).