

The Real Truthtellers: Canada's Unsung Defenders of Historical Truth

By Jerry Amernic

For the past two years, I have been researching some of Canada's most famous historical figures – men whose legacies have been trashed by activists uninterested in the truth.

These men will likely be familiar to you, even as their statues have been torn down and their names erased from street signs, buildings and other public places. At the top of the list is Canada's first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, now routinely accused of being a racist. Others currently maligned as villains from our past include Egerton Ryerson, largely responsible for Ontario's public education system, Scottish parliamentarian Henry Dundas, Edward Cornwallis, the founder of Halifax, and Sir Matthew Begbie, British Columbia's first judge. All have been pronounced guilty of multiple sins.

While I was examining this tidal wave of cancellations for my new book *SLEEPWOKING*, I came across a dedicated band of researchers who are fighting hard to rescue Canada from the hijackers of our history. They hail from a variety of backgrounds, motivations and political affiliations. But all are driven by an overarching belief that the truth still matters.

Patrice Dutil is a professor at Toronto Metropolitan University, an institution once known as Ryerson University. He is author of the new book *Sir John A. Macdonald and the Apocalyptic Year – 1885* that shows how Macdonald was a great leader and very progressive for his time. Regarding the claim he deliberately starved natives on the Prairies in the 1880s, Dutil's book provides ample evidence that Macdonald actually

spent heavily on food aid in the midst of a severe economic depression, and despite relentless criticism from his political rivals.

Asked why he puts so much effort into correcting the historical record, Dutil says in an interview, "I do it because I prefer the truth to what else is said."

Lynn McDonald is a former NDP MP and professor emerita of the University of Guelph with a long track as a "feminist scholar and social activist", as her Order of Canada award explains. She is the former president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women and co-founder of the Campaign for the Abolition of Solitary Confinement. As an MP in the 1980s she introduced a private member's bill that paved the way for the world's first legislation on smoke-free work places. More recently, she co-founded the group Friends of Egerton Ryerson.

When Ryerson's statue came down in Toronto in 2021 amidst claims that he was an "architect" of Canada's Indian Residential School system, McDonald immersed herself in his life and everything written about him. And found a very different story. "If you look at the facts of Egerton Ryerson...[he] was absolutely squeaky clean," she says, adding that he was also demonstrably "pro-Indigenous."

Jennifer Dundas is a distant relative of Henry Dundas, an 18th-century Scottish parliamentarian lately accused of prolonging the slave trade. She says her first instinct on hearing the accusations was to create an endowment fund to support research into the slave trade and perhaps undo some of the harm done by her ancestor. Then she dug deeper and discovered he was actually a key figure in the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire.

As a former CBC journalist and Crown prosecutor, she set out to correct the record. When Toronto made plans to erase Dundas' name across the city, she lobbied councillors to look

at the facts. Her campaign went nowhere. "My best efforts at seeking the truth of Henry Dundas had absolutely no influence," she laments. Last year, Toronto changed the name of Yonge-Dundas Square to Sankofa Square.

Leo J. Deveau is director of the Halifax Military Heritage Preservation Society, an organization created to correct the shabby treatment given to city-founder Cornwallis, who is now smeared as perpetrator of a genocide. "I was fed up with misinformation and the crowd mentality of those who have a simple view of what they think is history and then malign people like Cornwallis," he says.

In B.C., the reputation of the province's first judge Begbie also lies in tatters; he is now blamed for the hanging of six native chiefs following a murder trial in 1864. But this was trial by jury, and a death sentence was then mandatory for a guilty verdict. Begbie actually had little influence over the outcome. In fact, he was notable for the attention he paid to native issues; he even accepted the concept of aboriginal title. Nevertheless, because of his connection to the hanging, his name has been erased throughout the province; in 2017 a famous statue of him on horseback was removed from the lobby of the Law Society of B.C.'s building.

Sam Sullivan, the former mayor of Vancouver, was so incensed at Begbie's treatment that he produced his own video on the matter. "With a legal system that owes so much to him in a province ... one must wonder if the justice he worked so hard for was done," Sullivan says wryly. He is joined in his campaign by Suzanne Anton, a former B.C. Attorney General whose father wrote a biography of Begbie in 1977. "History should consider Begbie's entire record, which speaks for

itself,” Anton says. “He was a remarkable man.”



This band of truth-tellers has enjoyed some recent success in correcting falsehoods and bringing clarity to the historical record. For example, a statue of Macdonald at Queens Park in Toronto was recently returned to public view due to lobbying efforts by the Canadian Institute for Historical Education, which counts among its members Dutil, Dundas and McDonald. Based on the hard work of these and other individuals and groups, the forces of historical revisionism are slowly being pushed back. Our history, never mind our future, depends on them.

Jerry Amernic is a Toronto-based author. His new book SLEEPWOKING examines the trend of historical revisionism across Canada. The longer and original version of this article first appeared at C2CJournal.ca