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To: [Hudson, Janice](#)
Subject: Renaming of McPherson Avenue.
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Good afternoon, Janice.

Please forward this letter to the Civic Naming Committee.

Wilf Popoff

I retired after 35 years as a journalist in Saskatoon and Edmonton, and two decades as a researcher and writer for the Office of the Treaty Commissioner and the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission.

In these latter roles I confirmed to my satisfaction that Canada did not honour the treaties it made with its First Nations, and that the Métis had legitimate grievances that led to the Northwest Rebellion.

However, I do not agree that these historic mistakes can be expunged or reversed by erasing the names from public places of the men deemed responsible, or by implementing other modern modes of iconoclasm.

In fact I believe such approaches to be counterproductive.

The StarPhoenix of March 5, 2021, carried a report calling for the renaming of McPherson Avenue because it venerated David Lewis MacPherson, interior minister under Prime Minister John A. Macdonald.

MacPherson had acceded to a request from John Lake to halt riverbank surveying in Saskatoon that used the long lot system preferred by the Métis, forcing them to move.

What I found disturbing was that the article quoted Cheryl Troupe, a U of S history professor of Indigenous history, that “the process of history is interpreting the past through the lens of today.”

This is absolutely false and advances the fallacy of presentism; I was relieved to see Bill Waiser’s letter disputing the assertion.

In my reading of history I have heeded the words of American historian Lynn Hunt:

“There is a certain irony in the presentism of our current historical understanding: it threatens to put us out of business as historians... [history] becomes the short-term history of various kinds of identity politics defined by present concerns and might therefore be better approached via sociology, political science, or ethnic studies.

“Presentism, at its worst, encourages a kind of moral complacency and self-congratulation. Interpreting the past in terms of present concerns usually leads us to find ourselves morally superior; the Greeks had slavery, even David Hume was a racist, and European women endorsed imperial ventures. Our forebears constantly fail to measure up to our present-day standards.”

And Canada’s Jack Granatstein has said that “the past is not supposed to be twisted completely out of shape to serve present ends. To do so mocks the dead and makes fools of the living; it reduces the past to a mere perspective on the present...”

It is difficult to defend David Lewis MacPherson. He was minister of the interior from Oct. 17, 1883, till August 4, 1885, when he resigned for health reasons. While the burden of his portfolio was the development of the Prairies he never visited them. Historians blame his lack of understanding of the Métis concerns for the Northwest Rebellion that occurred on his watch in the spring of 1885.

However, anyone who has read the post-Confederation history of the nineteenth century understands that our federal government, whether in the care of Conservatives or Liberals, was preoccupied with settling this territory to prevent it from slipping into the clutches of the Americans. The Aboriginal peoples were viewed as an obstacle.

(Indeed, the American threat had intruded in the year of Confederation when the U.S. purchased Alaska from Russia and sought to annex British Columbia to bridge the gap between its two territories. Some residents liked the idea and only Macdonald’s promise of a railway to the colony persuaded it to join Confederation in 1871.)

Although some may now view MacPherson as unsavoury, his attitudes were probably no different than those of other politicians and

bureaucrats of his day.

But why are people picking on MacPherson and calling for the renaming of his avenue? It was, John Lake, after all, who lobbied for the change that pushed out the Métis.

Saskatoon has a statue celebrating him as well as a prosperous crescent, an avenue (Eastlake), a school, a park.

Renaming and erasure have become popular instruments in the cause of reconciliation. And while Canadians are supportive of the objective they do not favour these methods.

A public opinion poll conducted last September by Leger found that 50 per cent of Canadians “oppose removing statues/monuments from public spaces of politicians where it has been demonstrated that they harboured racist views or implemented racist policies.”

Only 31 per cent said they support removing such statues, while 19 per cent either didn’t know or declined to answer.

I believe there is a risk of angering people with some of these misguided efforts and pushing them into the anti-reconciliation camp.

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