Sir John ‘Aryan’ Macdonald Revisited: A Reply to Unreasonable Critics

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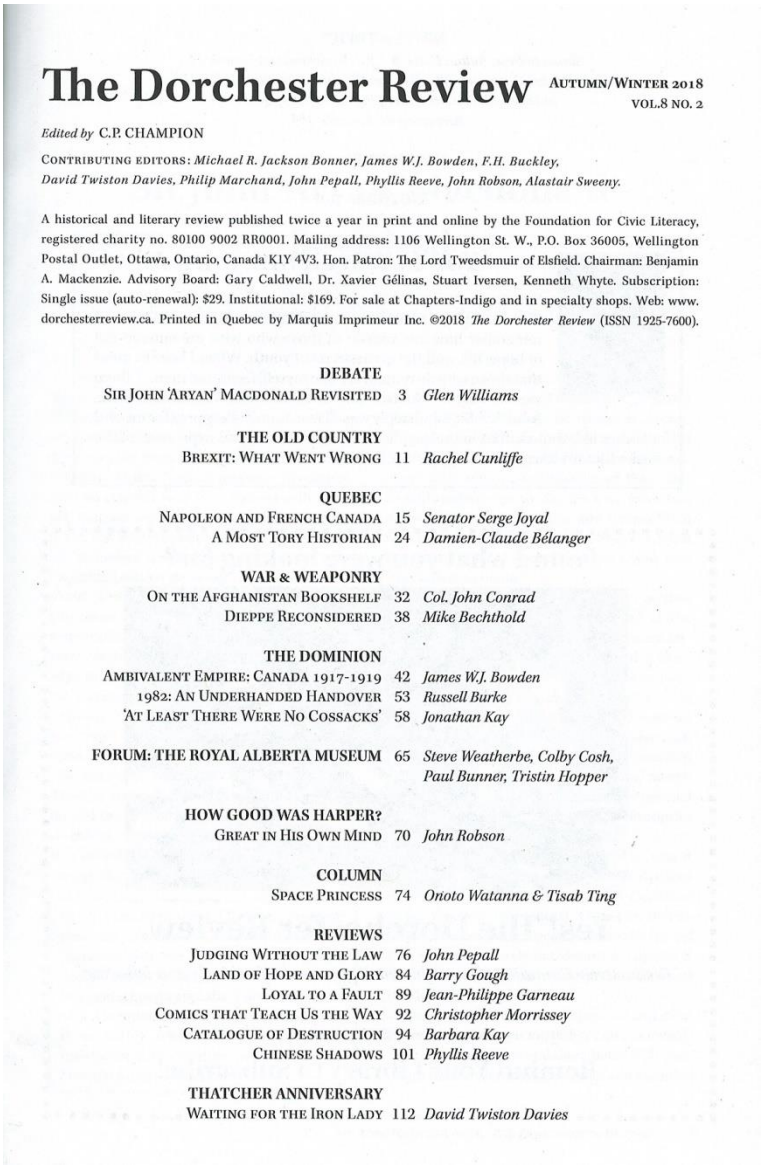

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Is Sir John A. Macdonald’s historical reputation now permanently tarnished? Last summer (2018) another Macdonald statue was carted away, this time from the steps of Victoria’s City Hall, where it had stood as a “painful reminder of colonialism.” So claimed local First Nations activists — and that was enough for civic authorities to act. It did not help Macdonald’s case that some of his defenders misfired. Garth Stevenson, a distinguished retired professor of politics, tweeted about “some snivelling aboriginals who probably never did a day’s work in their lives” being responsible. He soon apologized for his “intemperate and offensive language,”

but Brock University's senate, dripping in self-regarding sanctimony, hastened to strip him of his "emeritus professor" status.[1]

As the culture wars show no sign of abating, now might be a good time to revisit and expand upon C.P. Champion's "Sir John 'Aryan' Macdonald" published here in 2015.[2] He picked up on Timothy Stanley's extravagant claims that Macdonald exalted the 'Aryan' race like Hitler and Goebbels and was, in Stanley's words, "the father of biologically defined white supremacy as an organizing principle of the [Canadian] state."[3]

Browsing virtually in Macdonald's personal library (the list of books he owned is online), Champion found "a fashionable tome entitled *General Sketch of European History* by E.A. Freeman," and speculated that Macdonald's references to Aryans may have had more to do with linguistics and culture rather than biology and biological determinism -- since Freeman explicitly denied that the Aryan race "was based on blood."

For his part, Stanley periodized the politics of racism in Canada with Macdonald at the fulcrum. Before 1885, Canada's "racist state formation" was characterized by "cultural racism" which built upon "notions of cultural difference" to exclude "indigenous and Black people." In 1885, we "have a key moment in the formation of the racist state in Canada" where "Macdonald introduced biological racism into the Canadian state formation." Cultural and biological racism together functioned to fix in place "the colonial regime of property" controlled by "European colonizers," he claimed.

Stanley's approach is monocausal in that it isolates an idea — racism — as the dynamo powering the formation of the early Canadian state. The late 19th century Canadian debate (and there was a very vigorous one in the federal parliament) over race and identity is important but other variables also shaped the policies of the day.

Macdonald's ideas concerning race and identity and his government's policy choices regarding native Canadians and Canadians of Chinese origin were structurally grounded and bounded by international geostrategic realities and domestic partisan political considerations. Stanley mostly ignores this wider structural context in his quest to single out Macdonald's "biological racism" for blame.

1. Native Canadians

The age of empires neared its zenith in the late 19th century. By 1897, the British Empire was "the most extensive in world history" controlling around a quarter of the world's land surface and population.[4] The harsh reality was that these rival Empires were locked in a grim geostrategic struggle to expand or decay. International political rivalry set the stage for both the "scramble for Africa" and the concurrent incorporation of the former Hudson's Bay Company territories into the Canadian Dominion.

For most in Canada's political class, the big idea that explained British territorial expansion was not Anglo-Saxon biological race supremacy or social Darwinist race war. Rather, they believed that Anglo-Saxon culture had over centuries developed a genius for government.

This meant that the British Empire was, unlike its competitors, based not on brute military power but on bringing peace and security to its subjects while conveying political liberty to all. These assumptions were ethnocentric but, in sharp contrast to biological determinism, left open the possibility that in some future time, as John Stuart Mill put it, the Empire's "barbarian and semi-barbarian" subjects would develop to the point where they could enjoy full political equality and political rights.

The Empire's conquest of indigenous peoples was justified not on the grounds of biological inferiority but because they were lower on the cultural "ladder of civilization." As Sir Wilfrid Laurier explained in 1886, it was not contrary to moral or international law for "British humanity and prudence" to forcibly take "lands roamed over rather than possessed by savage nations," so that "civilized rule" could make them economically productive.

Sir John A. Macdonald swam in these same ethnocentric waters. Their motives were "progressive" for the time: Canada's model of native relations as set out in the *Indian Act* was animated by a liberal, social developmental intent: "Of course, there are restrictions in the *Indian Act*, because the purpose of that *Act* was by slow degrees – but as speedy degrees as possible, as speedily as the old prejudices and habits of the Indians would justify it – they should be freed from these trammels," Macdonald said in 1885. "As quickly as the prejudices of the Indians themselves will allow, the whole effort of legislation respecting them has been to free them from those trammels, and to enable them to go forward and become independent British subjects as if they were white men."

Macdonald, like many of his contemporaries in the political elite, was impatient with the very slow rate of developmental "progress" in eastern Canadian reserves. Some politicians proposed the radical solution of abolishing collective property ownership on the reserves and giving natives more independence from government supervision. Macdonald instead turned his attention to "progressive" reformers in the U.S. who wanted to enlist "science" to socially engineer a rapid and full assimilation of natives into American society.[5]

Early childhood education in residential schools would be "the more scientific mode," he said in 1880, to "civilize an Indian" in the North-West. "When the school is on the reserve the child lives with its parents, who are savages; he is surrounded by savages, and though he may learn to read and write his habits, and training and mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write." "It has been strongly pressed on myself," he said in 1883,

> … that the Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men; so that, after keeping them a number of years away from parental influence until their education is finished, they will be able

> to go back to their band with the habits of mind, the education, and the industry which they have learned at these schools. That is the system which is largely adopted in the United States.

All things taken into consideration, Macdonald's views on natives were a curious marriage of this kind of liberal social developmentalism and biological determinism. Regarding native Canadians, Macdonald's understanding of social Darwinism seems paper thin, consisting mainly of references to "savage instincts" that could break out in unprovoked violence against the "civilized" population.

Macdonald liked to flamboyantly parade his "race scientist" hat in Commons debates, in order to appear educated and modern — but then he might retreat in the same parliamentary exchange to a more conventional (for his time) "ladder of civilization" ethnocentrism. Like many others inside and outside the Commons, he wasn't always rigorous in his approach to this subject and sometimes incorporated conflicting popular ideas from different sources.

And so, one finds him declaring in 1885, "we cannot change the barbarian, the savage, into a civilized man," and in 1880 "the general rule is that you cannot make the Indian a white man. An Indian once said to myself (sic): 'We are the wild animals; you cannot make an ox of the deer.'" These statements seem consistent with a social Darwinism that declared the impossibility of "civilizing" inferior races because of biologically determined limitations.

But then in the same speech, Macdonald would lose the biological determinist script and go on to say that natives must be weaned "by slow degrees from their nomadic habits" through education until they became farmers or were assimilated into the general population. When asked in 1883 how many generations it would take for natives to abandon their "nomadic … habits" and "get an aptitude for the cultivation of the soil," Macdonald confessed that he did not know: "I am not sufficiently Darwinian to tell that," he said, although "according to the principle of development, that must be of slow growth, not in one generation."

Perhaps the most telling indication that Macdonald saw natives primarily through an *ethnocentric*, rather than a biological determinist lens, was his government's decision to extend the franchise to natives who met the property requirements to vote. Here, Macdonald was following the British principle of *jus soli* which dictated that those born on British soil were full citizens. "Indians are sons of the soil; they are Canadians and British subjects," he told the Commons in 1885, "and therefore, if they have the property qualification, I think they ought to be treated as other British subjects" and be able to vote. Macdonald's government pushed this "Indian franchise" measure through the Commons over fierce Liberal opposition.

Laurier, indeed, subsequently withdrew the franchise from natives three federal elections later — creating a historically significant calamity for native Canadians, perhaps on the scale of residential schools, as it reduced their status from being legitimate subjects of political contestation with democratic rights to objects of bureaucratic administration with an underlying assumption of dependent wardship.

2. Chinese Canadians

When it came to Chinese migrants, Stanley called Macdonald Canada's "father of biologically defined white supremacy." But was Macdonald's racial animus less important than partisan political calculation in determining his government's decision to impose the Chinese head tax and withdraw the federal franchise from British subjects of Chinese origin? Could Macdonald's "race scientist" statements themselves have been politically calculated to gain some regional electoral advantage?

Macdonald was conspicuous in his criticism of the idea that Canada was open to Chinese settlers. He presented himself to the Commons as a "physiologist" who understood "ethnology" that "... all natural history, all ethnology, shows that while the crosses of the Aryan races are successful ... the Aryan races will not wholesomely amalgamate with the Africans or the Asiatics. It is not desired that they should come; that we should have a mongrel race; that the Aryan character of the future of British America should be destroyed by a cross or crosses of that kind ..." Similarly, "I am sufficient of a physiologist to believe that the two races cannot combine, and that no great middle race can arise from the mixture of the Mongolian and the Asian."

This does at first glance seem to resemble Tim Stanley's biological racism. However, a careful review of the wider record makes it seem highly improbable that Macdonald's pseudo-scientific ruminations on miscegenation were all they seemed.[6] As with Macdonald's remarks about native people, for Macdonald the Dominion's wider domestic and geostrategic political environment likely carried more weight in policy-making.

The crown jewel of the new Dominion, for both the Empire and Canada, was British Columbia, incorporated into Canada in 1871. Electorally, the province's Commons seats played an important role in establishing Macdonald's claim to head a national government - the Conservatives swept all six of B.C.'s seats in four successive federal elections between 1878 and 1891.

But with the national railway to complete, the province faced a serious labour shortage — particularly in building the perilous section through the Rocky Mountains. Company owners imported cheap and readily available Chinese labour. At the same time B.C. was the epicentre of populist anti-Asian agitation. Scarcely a year passed in which not one, but several, B.C. MPs railed against the Asians in their midst. The core of these complaints was that Chinese labourers worked for a fraction of the compensation expected by workers of European origin.

Accordingly organized labour sought the exclusion of Asians based in the first instance on economic rather than socio-cultural or "racial" grounds.[7] Irrespective of partisan allegiance, B.C. MPs presented a common front against Asian immigration and even claimed that no one could think to stand for election to the federal parliament from their province "who was not opposed to the free importation of Chinese." These members were fully aware that their political monopoly in the province depended on excluding from the voting franchise British subjects of

Chinese origin. J.A.R. Homer laid it out in stark terms before the Commons in 1885: “In British Columbia there are 30,000 whites and upwards of 15,000 Chinese, who are controlled by some half dozen or ten of their principals. Those principals could be induced, probably, by some political aspiration, to convert some 4,000 or 5,000 of those Chinese into British subjects. If allowed to vote, the entire control of the Province will be in the hands of the Chinese …”

Not a small number of Commons members from the east were scandalized by B.C. demands for Chinese exclusion and denial of the franchise, as they seemed to fly in the face of both British and British North American liberal political principles as well as core Christian beliefs in the oneness of humankind.[8] Canada’s political elite saw itself as the political legatee of a tradition of ethnic and religious tolerance that stretched back to the *Quebec Act* (1774) and was in some respects more progressive than that of the mother country.[9] Macdonald declared in 1890, for example,

> the statement that has been made so often that this is a conquered country is a propos de rien. Whether it was conquered of ceded, we have a constitution now under which all British subjects are in a position of absolute equality, having equal rights of every kind – of language, of religion, of property and of person. There is no paramount race in this country; we are all British subjects, and those who are not English are none the less British subjects on that account.

But Macdonald was caught in a political vice. To secure B.C.’s future in the Dominion, he needed to complete the railway and for this Chinese workers were essential. On the other hand, his entire B.C. caucus and popular opinion in the province were pressing for the complete exclusion of Asians from Canada. What to do? Macdonald’s solution, like any successful politician, was to “satisfice.”

Macdonald acknowledged that there were two legitimate sides to this debate. He asked rhetorically in 1883, “who will decide, when doctors disagree?” His government would take a “middle path,” he said,

> We must keep Chinese labor until white labor is ready to supplant it. As soon as this takes place, then I will go ... strongly ... in favor — perhaps not of exclusion, because it is a very strong measure for a civilized country to exclude the people of a nation with whom you trade, and whom you treat as a civilized nation or a quasi civilized nation; — … there must be some regulation ... but until we can be sure that British Columbia gets a sufficient amount of white labor, I think we ought not to paralyze to a great extent all the enterprises and all the industries of that country for the sake of increasing the wages of the few white operatives who are in that country.

This passage casts light on what lay behind Macdonald’s affected “physiologist” persona. Although he is cast by Stanley as a dogmatic white supremacist and biological determinist, Macdonald here seems temperate, pragmatic, and focussed on the material rather than the ideational world. He refused his B.C. caucus’s demands for Chinese exclusion, suggesting these were based on the special pleading by labour for economic advantage[10] — and, acknowledged that on the “ladder of civilization,” China was a “civilized or quasi civilized nation.”

It seems significant that Macdonald appointed his Conservative ally Joseph-Adolphe Chapleau, a former premier of Quebec, to the Royal Commission in 1884 on Chinese immigration and as the cabinet member responsible for introducing the 1885 head tax in Parliament. Unlike Macdonald, Chapleau had no "race scientist" affectations. Indeed, he characterized race as a socially constructed phenomenon rather than a biological fact — a product of politics that often found expression in "very idle and senseless … prejudices" based in "physical peculiarities." Political opportunists then worked to stoke these prejudices into "race enmities," he believed.

Although the barriers separating Chinese and English Canadians were only social and cultural, they were very real as each "race" was convinced of their superiority over the other, Chapleau believed. "They do not want to assimilate with us, and we do not want to assimilate with them." And so,

> regard race antagonism how you will; treat it as a natural instinct or as an unreasonable prejudice; there it is and will not down; and if nothing happened more than outbreaks of violence amongst the whites, a case would be made out for considering the expediency of regulating this immigration.

Politics, Chapleau calculated in hard-headed fashion, was about choice. Many choices in politics reflect "prejudice" of one kind or another. Crude "racial" prejudice, along with wage rivalry, were at the root of the conflict between "whites" and Chinese in B.C., he argued in 1885, but

> are we to ignore feelings and antipathies? Is it not necessary for a Government dealing with questions on its responsibilities, to respect even prejudices? Are we not obliged very often to respect prejudices? Do we not respect them very often in our legislation? I think that this would alone constitute a sufficient reason for any legislation the Government may choose to enact in respect to the Chinese.[11]

Laurier, following the same political expediency when raising the Chinese head tax from $50 to $100 fifteen years later, took care to wash his hands, Pontius Pilate-like, in the water of B.C. public opinion. He described the tax as a

> legitimate concession to the aspirations of the people of British Columbia, who, upon this question, entertain views peculiarly their own, views which are not shared by the people of the east, who are represented by a majority in this House, and who are not prepared to go as far as the people of British Columbia would go in this matter.

The close alignment of Macdonald's thinking with Chapleau's can be seen in an 1887 speech to the Commons in which Macdonald admits that the head tax was an expedient concession to B.C. racial prejudice "which may be right or it may be wrong."

> On the whole, it is not considered advantageous to the country that the Chinese should come and settle in Canada, producing a mongrel race, and interfering very much with white labor in Canada. That may be right, or it may be wrong; it may be a prejudice or otherwise; but the

> prejudice is universal. Whether it be in the United States, in Australia, or in Canada, white labor and Chinese labor will never work harmoniously together, and we shall have the same scenes in Canada, if that immigration is permitted, that we have seen so lamentably exhibited in the United States... I do not think it would be to the advantage of Canada or any other country occupied by Aryans for members of the Mongolian race to become permanent inhabitants of the country. I believe it would introduce a conflict between the working classes which would only result in evil.

3. Conclusion

I do not write in an attempt to "vindicate" or "rehabilitate" Macdonald. What would be the point? After all, Macdonald was extensively chastised by his contemporaries in Parliament for his ostentatiously un-Christian and un-British language and oppressive legislation. Besides, there is no use denying that many of his government's policies were, in the language of his times, "prejudiced" and led directly to the discriminatory mistreatment of generations of Canadians.

On the other side of the ledger, Macdonald did make it possible, over considerable opposition, for natives to establish a claim to equality with other British subjects in Canada by legalizing their votes. Along with other architects of Confederation, he elsewhere promoted the tolerant and inclusive vision of Canada's British subjecthood as an identity constructed around political loyalty rather than language, religion, or any single biological ancestry — a vision that decades later evolved into today's civic nationality and multiculturalism.

Macdonald's ideas on race and identity were, like most of the Canadian political elite of his era, often disorganized and contradictory. Race-thinking in late 19th century Canada was complicated and contested and far from being a settled matter. In Commons debates members sometimes struggled to find internal consistency in regards to whether race was a cultural or biological category. Without investigating the full context, it is too simplistic to reach in haste for emotive epithets like racist, biological determinist, and so on.[12]

Even if Macdonald had anything in his mind like a more systematic dogma of "biological racism" — the case for this is unclear — it took a back seat to political calculation. Geostrategic and partisan considerations always seemed to be on Macdonald's policy-making front burner. The "progressive" education reformers behind the establishment of residential schools in the United States, and the more sophisticated, realist perspective of Joseph-Adolphe Chapleau, were more likely Macdonald's muses than Herbert Spencer and Arthur de Gobineau.

Notes:

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[1] "Victoria to remove statue of Sir John A. Macdonald," *Globe and Mail*, August 8, 2018 and "Former Brock professor censured over 'vulgar' social media posts criticizing Indigenous people," *National Post*, August 21, 2018.

[2] C.P. Champion, "Sir John 'Aryan' Macdonald," *The Dorchester Review*, Spring/Summer 2015, pp. 85-88. Freeman's pseudo-scientific philology of Aryan languages was familiar enough to some parliamentarians in this era to have provided the background for a major 1890 Commons debate on language policy in the North-West.

[3] Timothy J. Stanley, "John A. Macdonald, 'the Chinese' and Racist State Formation in Canada," *Journal of Race Inquiry*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2016), p. 7.

[4] Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*. New York: Basic Books, 2002. p. 240.

[5] See, K. Tsianina Lomawaima and Jeffrey Ostler, "Reconsidering Richard Henry Pratt: Cultural Genocide and Native Liberation in an Era of Racial Oppression," *Journal of American Indian Education*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Spring 2018). Pratt, the father of U.S. residential schools, promoted the idea of radical cultural assimilation - "kill the Indian in him, and save the man" – because he "saw the violence of assimilation as a necessary alternative to what he considered far worse violence, including genocidal rhetoric ('a good Indian is a dead Indian'…) and the massacres it sanctioned." One can easily imagine how this line of thinking would have appealed to Macdonald's keen sense of British moral superiority regarding Canada's treatment of its native peoples. In 1885, he boastfully contrasted the "peace, quiet, and the order" of the Canadian North-West where "from 1870 until 1885 not one single blow, not one single murder, not one single loss of life has taken place" while "there has been rising after rising in the United States, although they had their whole frontier lined with soldiery, 25,000 men, or nearly so, watching the western frontier and the northern frontier. There they had continued trouble; we heard of Indians being shot down like dogs; we heard of cruelties and outrages committed upon the aborigines."

[6] Macdonald was taunted over his miscegenation rant by J. Mills who suggested that he was favouring the lessons of biological determinist race thinkers over their opponents – "The hon. gentleman has given us a lecture upon the subject. He tells us what races may properly mingle and what races may not. The hon. gentleman has expressed views that are not exactly in accord with the views of Prichard and Latham, though they may be in accord with the views of Morton, Gliddon and Agassiz ... The hon. gentleman says that the African race never can mingle with the Caucasian or Aryan race." And so, Mills continued, "if I were to follow the hon. gentleman's argument to its logical conclusion, we must infer that it is his intention to disfranchise the colored men of this country as well as the Chinese." Macdonald refused to be baited by Mills and dismissed the idea of stripping the vote from African Canadians with a categorical "No."

[7] Glen Williams, "Canada: The Case of the Wealthiest Colony," *This Magazine*, February-March, 1976, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 31-32.

[8] For example, L.H. Davies, later to become Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, was appalled that the "prejudices" of B.C. "whites" were being allowed to "dictate to the whole Dominion a

principle which in itself is vicious, which I am sorry to see incorporated in our law, namely, the exclusion of any one race or color from participating in the political franchises and privileges of the people of this Dominion. My contention is, that a Chinaman who has become a British subject by naturalisation, who resides in the country and has acquired the necessary qualification, has as good a right to be allowed to vote as any other British subject of foreign extraction." As with native Canadians, we are left to imagine how different Canada's 20th century might have been if Asian Canadians had held the right to be represented directly in parliament as full citizens with a vote to punish and reward elected officeholders.

[9] See Donal Lowry, "The crown, empire loyalism and the assimilation of non-British white subjects in the British world: An argument against 'ethnic determinism,'" *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 31:2, 2003. pp. 99, 102-103, 115-116. Lowry observed that "imperial historians have understandably sought in the Quebec Act the remoter origins of the multiracial Empire and Commonwealth."

[10] Wilfred Laurier and W.L.M King were subsequently to come to the same economistic conclusion about B.C. labour during their years as Prime Minister.

[11] Canada, Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration, Honourable Commissioner Chapleau's Report Respecting Chinese Immigration in British Columbia, Ottawa, February 21, 1885, p. xcix.

[12] Stanley was not the first contemporary academic to cherry-pick selectively from Hansard to establish that a former Canadian Prime Minister was a biological determinist. Laurier was given the same treatment by James W. St. G. Walker. See, Williams, *Blood Must Tell: Debating race and identity in the Canadian House of Commons*. Ottawa: willowBX Press, 2014. pp. 43-44.

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