

# Ethnic Cleansing, Canadian Style

**A review of *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation and the Loss of Aboriginal Life*, by James Daschuk**

*Andrew Woolford*

**Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation and the Loss of Aboriginal Life**

**James Daschuk**

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his past summer, Ian Mosby published an article in *Histoire Sociale/Social History* in which he

discussed some surprising documents he found while researching Canadian nutrition policy. The documents detailed government-sponsored biomedical and nutritional experimentation on indigenous children at six Canadian residential schools, as well as in Northern Manitoban indigenous communities. Soon after CBC Radio reported on the story, debate about Canada's historic treatment of indigenous peoples was ignited. At that time, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada had entered its final year after four years of hearing survivors' testimony about the violence and degradation suffered in Canadian Indian residential schools. But the thought of malnourished children used as test subjects for vitamin supplements, as well as fortified flour that caused anemia, struck a particular chord with the public. It is in this context that, alongside the revelation that the Canadian Museum for Human Rights will not refer to settler colonialism in this country as genocide (although it will seek to spark discussion about the applicability of this term), scholars and activists provoked a debate about genocide in Canada. This group included former Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Phil Fontaine, who called upon Ottawa to recognize Canada as the sixth official genocide, alongside the Holocaust, Srebrenica, the Armenian genocide, the Rwandan genocide and the Holodomor.

James Daschuk joined this discussion through [an article](#) in *The Globe and Mail* where he outlined findings from his book *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation and the Loss of Aboriginal Life*, including its primary contention that after 1869 starvation and the spread of disease were used deliberately to make room for non-indigenous settlement on the northern plains. In concluding his article, Daschuk writes: "As the skeletons in our collective closet are exposed to the light, through the work of Dr. Mosby and others, perhaps we will come to understand the uncomfortable truths that modern Canada is founded upon—ethnic cleansing and genocide—and push our leaders and ourselves to make a nation we can be proud to call home."

*Clearing the Plains*, however, is not a book that places charges of genocide or ethnic cleansing front and centre. In fact, Daschuk rarely mentions either of these terms in his overview of the intersections of disease, starvation, politics and death on the Canadian plains, although the term "ethnocide" is mentioned in the media release for the book. Daschuk's main objective is instead to "identify the roots of the current health disparity between the indigenous and mainstream populations in western Canada." This gap in health

outcomes is not of recent vintage, according to Daschuk. It has historical roots in the policies and practices of Canada toward indigenous peoples. But it is also part of a complicated history.



IMAGE BY OLIVIA MEW

The loss of traditional indigenous food sources and the introduction of European diseases are two issues that require careful parsing when attempting to reconstruct the massive loss of life among and emergence of unprecedented government controls over indigenous peoples in Canada. For the indigenous peoples of the plains, the loss of long-relied-upon food such as bison and the spread of devastating sicknesses were not simply natural occurrences free from human control, nor were they evidence of inferior indigenous racial stock—a comforting story whites often told themselves to feel absolved of responsibility. However, they also were not in all cases weapons mobilized by European settlers to exact their will. Instead, the roles played by animals, food, disease and hunger shift across time and space, and their effects on specific indigenous groups depended upon numerous social, historical and economic conditions.

With respect to disease, in some circumstances, the interactions between humans and pathogens were quite haphazard. The first five chapters of *Clearing the Plains* discuss disease and health in this region from as early as 200 BCE—long before the arrival of Europeans—up to 1869 CE and the consolidation of Canada’s control over the West. Daschuk dispenses with the myth that North America was a disease-free place prior to the arrival of Europeans, and he identifies tuberculosis epidemics that preceded Columbus. However, bison-hunting indigenous peoples on the plains were largely untouched by pre-contact epidemics. Indeed, these peoples flourished. They were some of the tallest people in the world, whose health would only be compromised with the arrival of European-borne diseases. At the forefront was smallpox, although measles and influenza also took their toll. Trade patterns brought smallpox from one community to the next, but it was not equally destructive for all indigenous peoples. For example, eastern groups who engaged in the nascent fur trade with Europeans, and who developed immunity through this early exposure, were able to take advantage of emerging trade opportunities when the disease ravaged those living further west. Others engaged in processes of ethnogenesis, merging with other groups ravaged by illness.

In short, Daschuk identifies a confluence of factors that contributed to the initial, often-catastrophic spread of disease across the plains—the peculiar transmission patterns of smallpox, the networks of trade forged around the acquisition, preparation and sale of furs, and the introduction of new technologies, such as horses and steamboats—that expedited travel and made the further spread of disease possible. In Daschuk’s rendering of this era of Canadian history, there is no agent or set of agents held solely or largely responsible for the deaths of many indigenous people, either through acts of commission or omission. There is also no uniform pattern, as Daschuk takes great care to show the diversity of indigenous groups who struggle in different ways, and with different resources at their disposal, to resist (and in some cases even thrive) in the face of multiple epidemics. To his credit, the author treats indigenous groups as distinct entities and not part of a homogenous mass.

What is curious, however, is that Daschuk describes the destructive spread of smallpox as, for the most part, “organic,” and thereby risks over-naturalizing the processes he describes in such careful and complex detail. A more evocative term might be the one used by historical anthropologist and archeologist Robbie Ethridge to describe the dangerous mix of unstable chiefdoms, an emergent capitalist system defined by the slave and

fur trades, disease and inter-tribal warfare that was exacerbated by the introduction of deadly new technologies in the late 16th- to early 18th-century American South: the shatter zone. A shatter zone emerges when multiple destructive forces combine to form a toxic admixture, and this is certainly an apt description of the situation on the plains prior to increased European settlement. As Daschuk recounts, “by 1821, the Canadian northwest was in social, demographic, and environmental crisis. Harsh climatic conditions compounded by the eruption of Mount Tambora [in Indonesia], along with catastrophic disease episodes, created severe conditions for the physical environment and people of the northwest.”

The viciousness of this shatter zone would however be somewhat offset on the plains through the resolution of fur trade competition in the region. As Daschuk notes, rivalry between traders had resulted in multiple harms for indigenous peoples: overharvesting of furs, excessive reliance on local food sources such as the bison, the sale or gifting of liquor to win indigenous favour and, of course, the further penetration of deadly pathogens into areas previously free of infection. The creation of the Hudson’s Bay Company monopoly, however, did not fully alleviate these issues. The establishment of the Red River Colony, as well as western settlement more generally, placed greater pressure on the bison. Improved transportation to move settlers and traders westward also facilitated the migration of disease. Nevertheless, the HBC also possessed an interest in protecting its workforce, and vaccinations for smallpox and other forms of medical support were made available to those indigenous men involved in the fur trade, as well as their families, although in their efforts to quash this disease HBC-sponsored emissaries of health often brought other ailments such as influenza with them. Other events also had unintended consequences, such as when the Oregon territory opened for settlement in 1846. Daschuk records how the rush to move troops to protect the colony from U.S. incursion also meant the violation of quarantine policies that would have held the soldiers in one place for a sufficient period to ensure that they would not be carriers of disease to indigenous and burgeoning settler populations. Likewise, the 1849 California Gold Rush increased travel throughout the continent and, subsequently, provoked animosities, resource depletion and illness.

Daschuk locates a watershed shift from the unintended consequences of the pre-treaty era to the more interventionist policies that followed after the treaty period and the push for European settlement on the plains. It is at this stage that one sees in Daschuk’s book the active “clearing” of the plains, as suggested by the title. The treaties themselves are part of this process. Although conceived by indigenous peoples on the plains as a means of survival in the midst of a rapidly changing world, for the Dominion the treaties were a means to contend with indigenous peoples who were perceived as obstacles to settlement. Nonetheless, indigenous groups used their leverage to negotiate for treaty concessions that they felt would benefit their communities. In this respect, Treaty 6 included promises for “extra assistance in their conversion to agriculture, protection from famine and pestilence, and inclusion of the ‘medicine chest’,” with the latter term left undefined as to what it entailed. Daschuk rests his harshest criticisms of the clearing of the plains on the lack of fulfillment of treaty promises. In making the treaties, the federal government recognized that indigenous ways of life were about to change radically, and it promised to help ease this transition. But rather than assist indigenous peoples, the government instead used starvation and disease to control, isolate and eliminate them.

The disappearance of the bison and the re-emergence of tuberculosis represent two catastrophic moments for the indigenous peoples of the plains. Daschuk does not fall in line with those who suggest that the bison were purposefully extirpated to weaken indigenous nations, nor does he subscribe to theories about pestilence blankets. Nonetheless, he holds federal authorities to account for their failure to provide sufficient food to stem famine on the prairies or to take adequate action to prevent the spread of tuberculosis. The two are connected, of course, and they also link with other government incursions into the lives of indigenous

peoples. The treaties forced indigenous peoples onto small reserves, and when bison herds faltered, indigenous peoples were left overcrowded and malnourished. These are the conditions in which tuberculosis thrives. As Daschuk puts it, “years of hunger and despair that coincided with extermination of the bison and relocation of groups to reserves, exacerbated by inadequate food aid from the dominion government, created ecological conditions in which the disease exploded. Half-hearted relief measures during the famine of 1878–80 and after, which kept plains people in a constant state of hunger, not only undermined the government’s half-baked self-sufficiency initiative but also illustrated the moral and legal failures of the crown’s treaty commitment to provide assistance in the case of a widespread famine on the plains.” Rather than live up to its treaty promises, the Tory government under John A. Macdonald used starvation to its advantage to control indigenous nations, imposing on them policies of pacification to ensure the unobstructed construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, and using threats of hunger to pressure those who had not signed treaties to come to the table and to confine indigenous peoples to their reserves.

Indian residential schools only added further instances of malnourishment and crowding, creating ideal spaces for disease to spread among indigenous children. As well, in the name of fiscal restraint (and to line the pockets of corrupt politicians such as Edgar Dewdney, the Indian commissioner for the North-West Territories), food aid was kept to a minimum, and when it arrived it was too often tainted and itself a danger to indigenous health. And then the completion of the railway brought more settlement, and new diseases such as measles, to the plains. What Daschuk refers to as the “demographic nadir” of the indigenous population on the plains, occurred in 1889–90 when “the confluence of coercive dominion policies that abetted the rise of disease meant that Indians were not only punished after the [1885] rebellion; in many cases, they were punished to death.”

Based on the historical narrative recounted in Daschuk’s book, it is no surprise that Canadian health scientists experimented on malnourished indigenous children and adults in the 1940s. By that time, indigenous hunger had long been a component of Canadian policies of social engineering. More importantly, the skeletons of genocide in Canada’s closet—that is, the purposive attempted destruction of indigenous groups—are evidenced in Daschuk’s book, as politicians used a diversity of strategies, ranging from forced assimilation to impoverished isolation to starvation, to remove indigenous groups, as groups, from the plains landscape.

In light of recent debates about genocidal policies in Canada, some may criticize Daschuk for being too cautious in his analysis and for not naming the clearing of the plains an instance of genocide or, more accurately, identifying the multiple attempted genocides of indigenous plains peoples. However, I do not believe this is a criticism that needs to be made. The fact that scholarship such as Daschuk’s is emerging to shed light on the complicated stories of destruction, resistance and resurgence that mark Canadian history is most welcome. Indeed, because Daschuk does not set himself as both prosecutor and judge, and instead allows the historical record to tell the story, his is a more convincing intervention in these debates than those who seek to impose a rigid Holocaust analogy onto the Canadian context. In truth, we need diverse contributions to the discussion of genocide in Canada, deriving from multiple standpoints. Whereas countries such as Australia have had their “history wars” and engaged in public debate about the harms of their settler colonial past, these discussions have too often been wilfully ignored in Canada. An important part of this discussion is educating Canadians about their history, and the policies and decisions that were made on their behalf, in the formation of this country.

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