

# Making Way for Canada's Empire



## EDITOR'S NOTE

SOME ACADEMICS deliberately ignore THE DORCHESTER REVIEW in the hope that we will fade away. In some instances this is a case of "I've never read *The Dorchester Review* because I don't like it." They feel hostile, though sight unseen. But quite a few history professors, including **Ken Coates** (page 3 of this *Sampler*), have reviewed books from academic presses in our pages to good effect, like this one from 2014. ✨

— C.P. CHAMPION, PHD, FRCGS

## MANIFESTO (2011)

*The Dorchester Review* is founded on the belief that leisure is the basis of culture. Just as no one can live without pleasure, no civilized life can be sustained without recourse to that tranquillity in which critical articles and book reviews may be profitably enjoyed. The wisdom and perspective that flow from history, biography, and fiction are essential to the good life. It is not merely that 'the record of what men have done in the past and how they have done it is the chief positive guide to present action,' as Belloc put it. Action can be dangerous if not preceded by contemplation that begins in recollection.

Every historian and every writer has an agenda, frequently political and often unadmitted. To the entrenched complacencies of much professional scholarship and literary journalism, one antidote is corrective and restorative history, engagingly written. There are too few critical reviews published today, particularly in Canada, and almost none translated from francophone journals for English readers. *The*

*Dorchester Review* has no political agenda but a robustly polemical one. The 'pure Canada' nationalism that began with the 1920s centre-left has in some ways produced a narrowing effect on the country's imagination, squeezing out elements of tradition and culture inherent to Canadian experience that fail to conform to a stridently progressivist narrative. While the centre-left has contributed in certain ways to the progress and advancement of civilization, the tendency to assume that theirs are the only valuable ideas — that history moves in only one direction — is to be resisted.

We confess another potentially unpopular belief: that, at its core, Canada's strength and advantage — that of a British liberal society with a strong French national enclave, resilient aboriginal communities, and a vital pluralism born of successive immigrant arrivals — would be void if polemically separated from its European, Judeo-Christian and Classical traditions, which is another answer to: why history. We are conscious and grateful heirs to an invaluable if variously pressured tradition of free expression and criticism that is found and defended with particular seriousness in the North Atlantic societies, and this we think should be recognized, protected, and always enhanced.

In our choice of a moniker and historical patron we take the name of a bewigged British soldier, an astute and unapologetic colonial governor from the pre-democratic era, in order to underline that history consists of more than a parade of secular modern progressives building a distinctively Canadian utopia. That the King praised **Sir Guy Carleton, 1<sup>st</sup> Baron Dorchester**, as 'a gallant and sensible man' is no small recommendation. ✨

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## CANADA

# Making Way for Canada's Empire

Ken Coates

James Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* University of Regina Press, 2013.

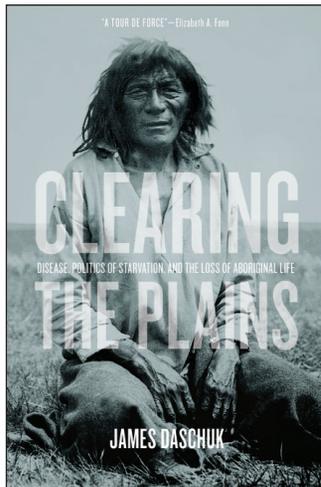
It is not often that a heavily footnoted, historiographically informed and detailed historical monograph becomes a minor bestseller in Canada. Popular histories do well — from Pierre Berton to Charlotte Gray and with many other contributors like Peter C. Newman to Christopher Moore — but solid academic books rarely find cross-over audiences these days. James Daschuk's *Clearing the Plains* has made the grade, emerging from the newly launched University of Regina Press (a re-launch and repositioning of the Canadian Plains Research Centre Press) to find considerable public attention and robust sales.

Wasn't the serious contemplation of Canadian history supposed to be dead? We have heard the funeral dirge for several decades now, led by Jack Granatstein's provocative *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Detective Granatstein found the culprit: the many derivations of social history and an over-abundance of theory). A hotly debated book by Australian author Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History*, made a similar

argument twenty years ago, castigating post-modernism and lamenting the loss of the story and effective writing that had long made the study of history widely popular. In Canada, the large followings for Tim Cook's impressive First World War history, *At the Sharp End* and *Shock Troops*, and Margaret McMillan's revitalization of popular diplomatic history, particularly in *Paris 1919*, have demonstrated that there are large and sustained audiences for books that meet high scholarly standards but are also designed to read beyond the academy.

*Clearing the Plains* is an impressive package, from an evocative cover to a well-written text, a compelling story and a strong connection to contemporary affairs. This is, at root, a classic example of academic scholarship arising from and shaping public debate, one accelerated by the willingness of the author and the press to reach out to the Canadian media. How many Canadian historians have had Members of Parliament write music videos about their works? Daschuk's book gained the attention of NDP M.P. Charlie Angus, who produced "Four Horses" with 11,600 hits on YouTube as of mid-March), a country-style video profiling *Clearing the Plains*. As Mr. Angus said, "This book completely blew everything I thought I knew about Canada away ... What this book really shows is the poison in the relations that went wrong" So, what's the fuss all about?

James Daschuk has written an impressive piece of political biology, a detailed study of the



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intersection of European expansion, government policy, disease, and Aboriginal people in western Canada. He explains how existing diseases, like tuberculosis, and imported illnesses, like smallpox, ravaged the Indigenous population in the region. Daschuk goes beyond this now well-known story to link disease to European attitudes about Aboriginal cultures, assumptions about the demise of Indigenous peoples in the West, and the politics of western Canadian settlement. By doing so, he has linked several of the most compelling themes in Canadian history: the challenges facing Indigenous cultures, European colonialism, the destructive forces of epidemics and, most significantly, government perfidy in dealing with Aboriginal Canadians.

The central arguments in *Clearing the Plains* are not original, which Daschuk readily acknowledges. There has been a lengthy debate about the manner in which imported diseases depopulated Indigenous cultures. Over a decade ago, Maureen Lux, in *Medicine that Walks: Disease, Medicine, and Canadian Plains Native Peoples 1880-1930*, offered comparable analysis about the connection between disease and cultural dislocation. John Tobias, in a remarkable and effective article, "Canada's Subjugation of the Plains Cree, 1879-1885" in the *Canadian Historical Review* 64 (1983), anticipated by more than twenty years Daschuk's headline-grabbing arguments that the Dominion of Canada deliberately starved First Nations in order to force them to comply with government policy. The demonization of the Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, and his policy of shoving Aboriginal people aside in order to accelerate western settlement did not start with this book.

It is important to recognize Daschuk's central contribution, which connects pre-contact biology with European expansionism and nineteenth century development policies. He outlines the potent combination of virgin soil epidemics — illnesses for which Indigenous peoples in North America had no natural immunity — government-exacerbated poverty, and cultural ideologies that assumed First Nations would die in the face of European biological and economic superiority.

The book begins with a description of the pre-

European contact health status of Indigenous peoples and the rapid population loss that accompanied the arrival of the first imported diseases and the expansion of fur trade into the region. These biological transformations, Daschuk shows, had substantial impacts on Indigenous cultures, habitation patterns, and economic activities. Equally, the fur trade and related economic activity had substantial demographic consequences, despite the efforts by Hudson's Bay Company officers and missionaries to provide medical assistance.

The political transformation of the region, highlighted by the expansion of Canada into the region through the purchase of Rupertsland in 1870, brought different but equally destructive changes. Tuberculosis, a latent danger before the arrival of Europeans, spread rapidly as poverty and privation hit the First Nations. Smallpox once again devastated the region, the destructive effects of this devastating disease exacerbated by the food policies of the Dominion (federal) government. The surging settlement population brought increased conflict, particularly in the mid-1880s and the 1885 Rebellion, including efforts by Indian Affairs officials to control First Nations by the manipulation of food supplies. By 1900, the beginning of "Canada's Century," Aboriginal people in Western Canada had been ravaged by successive epidemic diseases and widespread tuberculosis that killed many people and weakened many survivors.

By piecing together these elements, Daschuk has produced a compelling narrative, one filled with political implications. The broad picture that he sketches draws together familiar elements. Daschuk positions his work in the growing and global body of scholarship that goes beyond documenting the effects of disease, illness, and poverty and links these powerful forces to the political actions and inactions that launched, influenced or failed to prevent privation. In the process, Daschuk links thousands of First Nations deaths, widespread starvation and years of intense hardship to Canadian authorities.

There is a closely connected story that warrants special attention. Daschuk argues that disease and depopulation restructured the territorial history and First Nations habitation patterns in the West. Epidemics occurred at times of economic transformation, represented by

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the expansion of European capitalism and the availability European trade goods. Daschuk sees these elements as closely linked:

Differential mortality and survival in epidemics provided the foundation for territorial change and the emergence of new ethnic identities under the process known as 'ethnogenesis.' Disease and death came as unintentional but inexorable parts of the exchange between previously separated ecosystems ... Expansion of the world economy and its attendant diseases shaped the responses of the surviving communities on the plains to the new economic realities. What brought death to some often translated into economic opportunities for others. (p. xii)

This, in Daschuk's view, created a great deal of territorial change in the West as Aboriginal groups contracted in size, reformed into different cultural configurations, moved onto new territories and, in the West, saw considerable westward migration by the Cree. The idea of substantial territorial reconfiguration is controversial among academics and Indigenous peoples, but demonstrates the scale of the impact of disease on the First Nations in the region.

*Clearing the Plains* is a compelling historical account of processes of cultural domination and destructiveness that many Canadians find irresistible. For more than forty years, the historical profession has been struggling to interpret the complex processes of native-newcomer encounter. Fur trade historians, led by A.J. Ray, demonstrated that Aboriginal people played vital economic roles in the early contact period. Many other historians have shown that, despite the strong and often abusive hand of Euro-Canadian business, governments, and settlers, Aboriginal people showed considerable agency in responding to the occupation of their territories and wide-ranging efforts to control

their lives and undercut their cultures. Despite the many demonstrations of Aboriginal agency, scholars concur that the cumulative impact of newcomer intrusions took a serious toll on First Nations peoples.

Implicitly or explicitly, Canadian historians of the Aboriginal experience continue to try to explain the contemporary marginalization, disempowerment and cultural decline of First Nations people. While careful to identify their successful struggle to survive, under difficult conditions, historians have been preoccupied with documenting the forces for change and transformation that took the original inhabitants of this land into conditions of poverty and profound social pathologies. *Clearing the Plains* makes no small contribution here, for it demonstrates how both unintended forces (disease), unpredictable influences (the global economy) and deliberate actions (government policies and administrators' behaviours)

cut a wide path through the Aboriginal cultures of western Canada. Reading through the documented instances of deliberate starvation of First Nations, the lack of respect for Aboriginal cultures and the iron hand of government, it is harder to explain Indigenous survival and cultural persistence than it is to understand their decline.

Here — and this is no criticism of Daschuk's fine work — rests a significant conundrum about the role of history within Canadian society. Historians have documented government perfidy and the destructive effects of European expansion. There are now hundreds of books that have, collectively, erected a formidable historical edifice around a simple theme: First Nations were systematically undermined, stripped of their lands, freedom of action and rightful place in Canadian society. Daschuk has provided a compelling portrait, one that stands broader and wider on the historiographical landscape than most others, but not significantly outside the historiographical mainstream.

That *Clearing the Plains* attracted a sizable

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audience provides further evidence that Canadians are receptive to sharp critiques of key historical figures, Euro-Canadian expansionism, and Aboriginal policy. Long gone, perhaps forever, are the days when history and historians served as handmaidens of nationalism and nation building. Instead, the positive response to highly critical works like *Clearing the Plains* suggests a thread of masochistic nationalism, a preference for stories that debunk national myths rather than those that create or reinforce them. There is an overwhelming, unassailable consensus that the forces of Canadian history were profoundly unjust to First Nations and, further, that Aboriginal peoples have shouldered far more than their share of the burdens for the injustices and biological, economic, and political crises of the past.

HISTORIANS, IT APPEARS, have done their job. There are few if any Canadians who would dare attempt to argue the reverse and suggest that the processes and experiences of the past produced substantial benefits for Aboriginal people in this country. Even those who argue for a more nuanced — and less systematically critical — approach to native-newcomer history are quite quiet at present. Those who criticize the contemporary expression of Indigenous rights resort to the suggestion that Aboriginal people should focus on the future rather than the past. If Idle No More found its inspiration in remembrance of historical processes, critics of the nationwide movement argue that Aboriginal people should get on with their lives and stop complaining about historical grievances, however justified.

Thirty years ago, Aboriginal people and their supporters could rightly complain that Canadians paid far too little attention to Indigenous history. While additional scholarship, including impressive works of synthesis like *Clearing the Plains*, is always welcome, the reality is that First Nations have been extensively studied. Aboriginal history is firmly entrenched in the study of

Canada's past, with the dominant narrative emphasizing the many ways in which newcomers undermined and disempowered Indigenous peoples. Work of this nature appeals to the innate interest in scandal, corruption, racism and cultural destruction — of greater interest to some than uplifting historical accounts and success stories. If the truism that we learn from our errors is applied to the historical profession,

it is quite clear that we are preoccupied with national and regional failure much more than any accomplishments.

There is, in fact, a long-standing pattern of using the investigation of Aboriginal policy as a means of highlighting the shortcomings of the country as a whole. The writing of Aboriginal history or, more accurately, the study of native-newcomer relations, provides fertile ground for those looking to document Canada's failings. There is less evidence as yet, sadly, that the ethnographic and culturally focused histories of Indigenous peoples are having a comparable impact on Canadians at large. The interest in First

Nations is limited, it seems, to the interface between Indigenous peoples and newcomers rather than on the Aboriginal people themselves. Works like *Clearing the Plains* ultimately tell us more about the evil and errors of Europeans and Canadian officials than they do about First Nations, except as clear and unfortunate victims of historical processes.

What, then, does *Clearing the Plains* and the positive response to the book, say about where the study of Aboriginal history in Canada goes in the future? Daschuk is very careful to position his work within the appropriate historiographical and conceptual contexts. He rightly sees the Dominion's actions as part of a global pattern of government-induced poverty and starvation. He understands the widespread but not uniform impact of epidemic diseases on Indigenous peoples. He knows his western Canadian historiography well and appreciates where he is making incremental contributions to the interpretation of the region's history.

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Historians, it seems to me, have two options now facing them. The first, and most common approach, is to position their work as a contribution to Canadian and occasionally international scholarship on Indigenous peoples. Here, as Daschuk does, they can challenge existing interpretations, test new methods, and offer different conceptual frameworks, focusing largely on influencing their academic peers. Little of this work will filter out directly into the general Canadian understanding of the past, but the academy continues to believe that thoughtful and well-researched analysis will, over time, recast our understanding of humanity and historical processes, bit by historiographical bit.

Historians could also, as Daschuk has also done with *Clearing the Plains*, produce work that speaks to a broader audience, to the public at large. Writing the book is not enough on its own. Again Daschuk has done well, following through with a deliberate and sustained effort to engage with the media and non-academic audiences, a time-consuming and challenging effort for which academics are generally poorly trained. Such an approach gives life to important ideas and, in this instance, has helped maintain national aware-

ness of government misdeeds and the negative impact of European expansion.

Inasmuch as historians can change the public's understanding of the past, scholarship on First Nations history has accomplished a great deal. This perspective has to be continually reinforced, lest historically inaccurate revisionists reshape the debate. (If "historians" can misguidedly challenge the existence of the Holocaust in Nazi Germany, it is conceivable that mischievous writers could "deny" the core of indigenous-newcomer history.) It seems to me, however, that the main points about the role of government in the destruction and decline of Indigenous peoples are well understood. While Charlie Angus — and many others, to judge by the public response — may have been "blown away" by the revelations in *Clearing the Plains*, many of the core arguments have been long-debated among historians. In short, this was not news. The response to Daschuk's fascinating book says as much about academic historians as communicators as it does about the interpretation of the past. Fortunately, Daschuk has productively joined scholarship and outreach, producing a book that deserves both academic and public attention. ✂

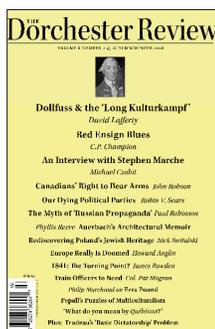
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