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Book Review: Daschuk, J. (2013). Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life

Godfred O. Boateng
Cornell University, Ithaca, gboaten@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article is a critical review of James Daschuk's book, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics, Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life*.

Keywords

Dominion of Canada, First Nations, diseases, famine, treaty, oppression

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Book Review

Daschuk, J. (2013). *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life*. Saskatchewan, Canada: University of Regina Press. 334 pp. \$17.52 (Paperback). ISBN-10: 0889773408

Supported by archaeological, historical, and other empirical evidence, James Daschuk's *Clearing the Plains* provides a rich account of the political, ecological, and economic systems that have led to disparities between non-Indigenous Canadians and the Indigenous people of the Plains. The author addresses distortions in the existing literature that attributes the precarious position of Aboriginal peoples in Canada to cultural attributes of Indigenous peoples themselves. Challenging such approaches, the author describes the history of Aboriginal peoples as one characterized by struggle in the face of infectious diseases, starvation, suppression, and displacement by settler populations.

This compelling book contains nine chapters, each exploring a theme that reveals the historical and ecological antecedents that spawned the present predicament of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. The introduction clearly lays out the argument of the book, and its conclusion gives the reader a cogent summary of the issues, which together create a powerful account of the assault on the viability of Indigenous people's health and livelihood. The author's thorough knowledge of environmental change and the health of Indigenous peoples inform the critical analysis that is brought to bear in his discussion.

Chapters 1 through 5 highlight the challenges faced by First Nations in Western Canada, as well as their survival strategies before the takeover of their territories by the Dominion of Canada. In the first chapter, Daschuk describes the population growth and economic well-being among First Nations on the Plains during periods with favorable climatic conditions (900-1300 BCE), as well as the misery and pain they endured during times of protracted inclement weather and during outbreaks of contagious diseases. In Chapters 2, 3, and 4, he connects the drastic, cataclysmic decline in First Nations populations, and corresponding changes in the social, cultural, and physical environment of Indigenous communities, to diseases, harsh weather conditions, and influences stemming from colonial encounters. In Chapter 5, Daschuk explores the interaction between economics and health outcomes during the time when the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) controlled Rupert's land (a territory in British North America) in the mid-1850s. According to Daschuk, the development of a wider transportation network, expanded economic development, and the invasion of Indigenous lands by Europeans became vectors for the spread of measles, tuberculosis, and small pox—which together precipitated a dramatic downturn in the health and well-being of First Nations peoples of the Plains.

Chapters 6 through 9 highlight the takeover of Indigenous lands by the Dominion of Canada and the unparalleled changes it brought to First Nations on the Plains. In Chapter 6, Daschuk describes the negotiations that went into the signing of various treaties that ultimately gave the Crown control over lands that were the traditional territory of First Nations. He then describes how these treaties quickly became dysfunctional as the Crown failed to honour its promises outlined in the treaty agreements leading to an increase in famine and pestilence. In Chapters 7 and 8, the author further illustrates the egregious misconduct of the Canadian government and the hardships meted out to First Nations that contributed to great famine and destitution. Daschuk posits that any response given by the Crown was

intended to further its own interests. Moreover, he explains how issues of food insecurity, malnourishment, and the deprivation of micronutrients made Indigenous peoples more susceptible to both human and zoonotic diseases. The most heinous of the Crown's deeds that Daschuk lays bare is its practice of storing food until it rotted away while Aboriginal peoples starved to death. Daschuk describes how the severity of famine resulted in the exhibition of depraved acts, increased sexually transmitted diseases, and a revolt against government officials. These effects are dire when one compares these examples to the success story of the Dakota (Sioux) who never signed a treaty with the Crown and experienced good health and economic growth in a time of severe famine and disease outbreak. In Chapter 9, Daschuk assays the impact of excessive measures of control implemented by the Crown on the well-being of First Nations. For instance, he illustrates how the institutionalisation of a pass system, which confined First Nations peoples to reserves, later became a vector for the spread of infectious diseases. He describes how the expansion of transportation networks induced large-scale migration among settlers and also facilitated the spread of infectious diseases, bringing Indigenous populations to a demographic nadir. Daschuk also highlights the deleterious effect of Indian Residential Schools on Aboriginal populations. Taken together, these factors contributed to the near extermination of First Nations from the Canadian Plains. Daschuk affirms that "the collective subjugation, hunger, sickness and death [are] the origin of the chasm that exists even today between health conditions of mainstream Canadians and Western Canada's First Nations population" (p. 172).

Generally, this book epitomizes the very best of Canadian history without dint of bias; it shows through a very careful historical analysis how established political and economic structures suppressed and regulated the less privileged and relatively powerless First Nations to the benefit of non-Indigenous Canadians. The author provides readers with a comprehensive understanding of the intersecting factors that have contributed to the comparatively poor health and poor living conditions experienced by Indigenous peoples—conditions which continue to brew in many reserve communities. It also throws into question Canada's eighth place ranking on the Human Development Index (HDI)—especially considering the fact that scores among Aboriginal peoples continue to lag behind much poorer nations in terms of life expectancy at birth, years of schooling, and per capita gross national income (GNI) relative to non-Indigenous Canadians. Daschuk's analysis suggests that unless the Canadian government tackles the social determinants that create vulnerabilities among First Nations peoples, progress will neither be equitable or sustainable (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2014).

Clearing the Plains represents a major contribution to the literature on the history of Aboriginal health and well-being, adding to a growing and impressive body of literature that puts into perspective the plight of Indigenous peoples in Canada (Asch, 2014; King, 2013; Miller, 2009). Ideologically, it reorients the reader away from seeing First Nations as dependent on the Canadian government, and towards seeing them as a people whose culture, land, and well-being have been threatened—and in some cases appropriated—in the bid to create a new country. Daschuk's book echoes the need for government to return to and honour the terms governing the treaties that were negotiated with Indigenous peoples and signed by the Crown. This, I hope, will bridge the inequality created as a result of the failure of the Canadian government to honour those terms even after Confederation.

Although the book is focused on deprivations among Indigenous populations caused by the settler groups, it would also be interesting to know a bit more about the origins of the settlers themselves, as this will inform the ideology behind their merciless system of governance and domination. Also, while

ample evidence is provided to account for the famine and disease that were experienced by many First Nations of the Plains during the 18th and 19th centuries, the author fails to compare what was happening to First Nations to those of the White population at the time. Concentrating on First Nations alone raises doubts about some of the conclusions reached in this book. A more comprehensive narrative would have emerged if a comparative discussion was presented for both First Nations and the White settlers. The only exception is the outbreak of influenza between 1889 and 1890, which Daschuk notes was a global pandemic —affecting both First Nations and the settlers.

These shortfalls notwithstanding, the author shows in Chapters 8 and 9 how throughout history the resistance and consciousness raising of First Nations and their chiefs have positioned them in a space where they can bargain for better services and living conditions. This is most evident in the call of the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Perry Bellegarde, for the Canadian government to invest more in education, training, and housing for First Nations in order to bring conditions in line with the rest of the country (Mackrael, 2015). This and many other calls for parity seem to have finally gotten the attention of the current Canadian government. The new Liberal government, unlike past Liberal and Conservative governments, has responded more positively to such issues, with the appointment of two Indigenous members of Parliament into the Cabinet, including the naming of Jody Wilson-Raybould, who is First Nations, as the Justice Minister. These two stand in influential positions from which to create the possibility of negotiating for the well-being of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. More impressive is the promised funding to improve First Nation's education and the vow to launch an inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (The Early Edition, 2015). These current changes signify the rebuilding of relationships, which have the potential to improve the conditions experienced by First Nations peoples.

Clearing the Plains is an invaluable resource and reference for politicians, policymakers, scholars, researchers, journalists, students, and health administrators who seek to understand the enduring and complex inequalities that persist between non-Indigenous Canadians and First Nations peoples. Daschuk's well-researched account provides relevant information and new insights to researchers and scholars of Canadian history and health.

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