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Book Review

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

James Daschuk

University of Regina Press, 2013: 318 pages

Review by Bradley C. Hiebert (Queen's University)

At a time when Indigenous hunger and strife is gaining public attention in Canada, James Daschuk's book *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (2013) provides a necessary glimpse into the issue's deep-seated roots. Now a professor at University of Regina specializing historical Indigenous research, Daschuk has published a number of works regarding the health of First Nations peoples of the Canadian Plains (Daschuk, Hackett, & MacNeill, 2006; Daschuk, 2008, 2009). Compiled as part of his doctoral research, *Clearing the Plains* succinctly consolidates a breadth of ostensibly buried Canadian historical literature to reveal the true nature of Canada's Midwest settlement, while depicting monopolization's devastating effects on marginalized populations in the process. It outlines Indigenous food-related health outcomes caused by contact during inter-tribal territorial conflicts, relationships with early European traders and explorers, and the extensive relationship between Indigenous Peoples and Hudson Bay Company up to the late 1800s. The tuberculosis epidemics caused by such interactions between the 15th and 17th centuries are acknowledged as natural and unfortunate side effects of population expansion, which sets Daschuk up to highlight the barbaric roots of Indigenous tuberculosis during the late 1700s and 1800s. He reveals methods used by the Dominion of Canada throughout the 18th and 19th centuries to starve the First Nations peoples of the Prairies into chronic sickness and death, eroding their population to ensure compliance with Canada's westward expansion. During this period, starvation and chronic illness had become so prevalent in First Nations populations that physicians believed tuberculosis was hereditary among the Plains Cree. By continuously comparing Indigenous tuberculosis rates prior to, and during, the Indian Treaty Era, Daschuk brilliantly demonstrates food's historical significance as a weapon of attempted ethnocide and its lasting impact on Indigenous subjugation.

Daschuk describes how the Dominion used food to coerce tribes struggling with famine and tuberculosis into signing Indian Act treaties (114) and move onto Dominion-controlled Indian Reserves. Once on reserves, Canadian authorities withheld food from starving First Nations tribes, claiming they had to "earn" their meals through labour; a cost-saving practice that directly contradicted terms outlined in Indian Treaties. The meagre food First Nations peoples did receive was often tainted or expired (116), which compounded lingering tuberculosis issues. Attempts in the late 1800s to force on-reserve First Nations to subsistence farm allowed the government to fully isolate them from an emerging agrarian economy (160). They were barred from trading their food off reserve to preserve new settlers' economic opportunities and chances of success on the prairies, which further alienated the First Nations from the emerging culture and solidified their position as The Other in the Canadian Prairies.

Furthermore, *Clearing the Plains* highlights how the commodification of a determinant of health results in adverse outcomes for marginalized populations due to monopolization and greed within the dominant group. The prevalence of food contracts between the Canadian government and American wholesale distributors are described as 'big business', with distributors often dictating the price; government expenditures for food relief to treaty populations nearly quadrupled between 1880 and 1882 (128). However, corrupt government officials barred hungry and tuberculosis-infected First Nations families from accessing relief supplies and the majority of orders were stockpiled in warehouses until they spoiled. These power abuses by Canadian government officials exacerbated tuberculosis outbreaks and famine among treaty First Nations populations. In contrast to the plains tribes who had entered into treaties and subsequently rebelled in 1885 due to subjugation and mistreatment, the Dakota were self-sufficient and economically autonomous (125). Maintaining their autonomy allowed the Dakota to avoid famine and tuberculosis outbreaks by controlling their own food. Without the need to rely on government assistance—and corporate procurement contracts—they also avoided barbaric starvation practices legalized under the Indian Act. In essence, the Dakota were reminiscent of First Nations tribes pre-colonization: they supplied their own food, hunted and farmed according to tradition, and managed their own trade and economy. Therefore, contrasting the Dakota and treaty First Nations not only exposes the danger associated with entering Treaties, but also condemns the monopolization of food as a tool for cultural subjugation.

As Daschuk describes, media coverage of the First Nations' rebellion in 1885 ignored Indigenous deaths caused by government corruption and embellished white deaths as acts of Indian savagery (156). Skewed media portrayal was crucial to Other the First Nations and establish their supposed savageness; this was a widespread practice during Canada's settlement which exists more discreetly in the 21st century (Anderson & Robertson, 2011). By including media coverage of Indigenous starvation and disease, Daschuk allows the reader to easily compare centuries old issues to those of modern Canada. For example, in December 2012 Theresa Spence—a chief from Attawapiskat First Nation—staged a hunger protest to gain public awareness of the deplorable conditions her community experienced and the government's inaction to alleviate them. Her claims echoed one of Daschuk's main arguments, that food must not be used to manipulate First Nations populations and cast them as The Other.

One weakness of *Clearing the Plains* is the limited comparison to other Canadian interactions with Indigenous populations, which could have created a more complete image of Canada's history of racial subjugation. However, one of the book's strongest features is Daschuk's ability to compile archived documents into a form of narrative for the Canadian Prairies. As opposed to traditional historical texts composed of a litany of chronological facts, his

book is incredibly readable and at times the readers may find themselves forgetting they are reading a historical piece. This aspect will allow his book to be appreciated by any audience – although some prior knowledge of Canadian history would be beneficial. After reading *Clearing the Plains* it becomes evident to the reader that the Indigenous hunger issues reported in Canadian media in the 21st century are not new phenomena, and are deeply rooted in centuries of cultural subjugation, manipulation and attempted extermination.

Bradley C. Hiebert is a doctoral student in Health Information Sciences at The University of Western Ontario investigating health and healthy policy in rural Ontario. His Master's research focused on Indigenous food insecurity issues in the Arctic and their coverage by national media. More broadly he is interested in the intersection of healthy policies, dietary behaviour and discourse.

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