

Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and Loss of Aboriginal Life. JAMES DASCHUK. Regina: University of Regina Press, 2013. Pp. xxii+318, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth. ISBN 978-0-88977-296-0.

James Daschuk's *Clearing the Plains* is a devastating read. This might be expected, as a detailed study in the "loss of aboriginal life," but the most forceful elements of Daschuk's work come in unexpected ways. The overarching narrative of Euro-American (in this case, Canadian) role of disease in demographic declines and dispossession of aboriginal peoples is familiar to scholars in various fields. In the nineteenth century, it was a declensionist narrative told with clearly defined aggressors and victims. In recent decades, however, considerable work has been done by scholars to problematize those simple narratives by emphasizing indigenous agency and resilience, introducing theoretical frameworks of settler colonialism and later, decolonization, and so forth. *Clearing the Plains* fits within these historiographies, but introduces a number of novel analytical points. In the end, by fleshing out the government policies and bureaucratic mechanisms behind indigenous death and dispossession, Daschuk both deepens our understanding of, and broadens the scope of, a very shameful history. Historians, geographers, political scientists, and others would do well to familiarize themselves with this work and integrate it into their own scholarship and pedagogy.

The text is divided into two parts, with five and four chapters respectively. The first five chapters attempt to lay out the deep context for the "organic" factors in aboriginal population decline from pre-contact to the early nineteenth century. The role of biology, he argues, is a necessary backdrop for understanding the role of human agency in aboriginal history. For many, this will be the portion of *Clearing the Plains* with the most familiar content and concepts. It is also where the study feels rushed. The first chapter, for instance, glosses over the topic of pre-contact indigenous health and environmental relationships – a rich topic with deep historiography and scientific literature – in merely ten pages. Indeed, it need not be the focus of the text, but a topic worth a slightly more robust literature review. As the narrative introduces Euro-Americans into the continent, the role of fur traders, and Native involvement in developing and expanding trade routes and networks illustrate how disease spread, affected communities, and eroded aboriginal health conditions into the period of the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly. These chapters are challenging, but fall in line with familiar narratives of Euro-American geographic expansion and its effects on aboriginal peoples. Though familiar, Daschuk successfully argues how the subsequent history of destructive Canadian policies must be contextualized in the ongoing biological history of Native health and demographic decline.

With that context as foundation, Daschuk builds a damning narrative of how Canadian policies hastened the decline of First Nations health conditions and failed to mitigate various preventable catastrophes. These last four chapters move fully through the remainder of the 1800s. Chapter 6 explores the role between late-stage epidemics (smallpox in 1869-70) and Native desires for treaties. Experience pushed some during the late numbered treaties stage to demand that medical provisions be included in the treaties. As Canada pushed onto the plains, carving out sections for settlement and completing treaties with regional Natives, ongoing health issues were compounded by the precipitous collapse of bison herds in the late 1870s and widespread starvation, tuberculosis and other attendant ills. Daschuk explains, "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 (p. 100-101)." Here, the full weight of Daschuk's study is revealed. Disease and death on the Plains were spread through Euro-American contact for

centuries, and in the broadest sense, Canadians shoulder some blame for that. At this late stage, however, Canada's expansion and the disease and famine it brought unfolded within a legal relationship where Canada was responsible for providing care. The very legal frameworks by which the Canadian state legitimized their geographic expansion also bound them to save Native peoples from the disasters they were introducing. In these obligations, Daschuk shows, they failed.

If the broad indictment of Canada's failure to fulfill its treaty obligation is damning, the last two chapters' description of on-the-ground abuse proves even worse. Through the reserve system, local officials held tremendous power through the control of food and medical supply distribution. Often, they used that power to not only personally profit (through various unethical business practices) but control indigenous behavior. Misappropriated funds, distribution of spoiled food, withholding of desperately needed supplies and rations, sexual abuse, and other mistreatment led to widespread rebellion in 1885. Finally, the completion of the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway accelerated white settlement of the Plains. This led to even greater restrictions of Native peoples, further abuse in the withholding of food and supplies, worsened health outcomes, famine, and death. It is difficult to read.

In the end, what does all of the condemnation mean? First, it helps dispel the still common mythologies of friendly agricultural expansion onto the Plains. Both before and during widespread Canadian settlement of the region, natural and consciously-made Canadian policy cleared the Plains of indigenous control in the most horrific ways. The general sense of guilt or, in the least, cognizance of the indigenous lands upon which Canada is built, is not uncommon in contemporary national rhetoric. Even the violence of warfare is commonly acknowledged. However, the manmade mechanisms by which the land was wrested from aboriginal peoples through preventable epidemics and starvation are rarely discussed. The prevention of Native death by disease and starvation was well within the capabilities of Canada's settler colonial project during the 1800s. The failure to do so must be integrated into national conversations about the region's past and present. Daschuk's concise and direct study should help drive that conversation. It is with no small amount of irony that the book won the 2014 John A. MacDonald Prize from the Canadian Historical Association, being named after the very politician who oversaw much of the policies condemned by Daschuk. The award is well-deserved.

Brenden W. Rensink
Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, Brigham Young University