

Journal of the Canadian Historical Association
Revue de la Société historique du Canada

Journal of the
Canadian Historical Association
Revue de la
Société historique du Canada

Clearing the Path to Truth: *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation and the Loss of Aboriginal Life*, by James Daschuk, and the narrative of Canadian history. A Commentary

Mary-Ellen Kelm

Volume 26, Number 2, 2015

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1037223ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1037223ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Article abstract

This paper considers how *Clearing the Plains* helps contextualize, through Canada's long history of settler colonialism, the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (print)
1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Kelm, M.-E. (2015). Clearing the Path to Truth: *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation and the Loss of Aboriginal Life*, by James Daschuk, and the narrative of Canadian history. A Commentary. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 26(2), 43–52.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1037223ar>

Clearing the Path to Truth: *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation and the Loss of Aboriginal Life*, by James Daschuk, and the narrative of Canadian history. A Commentary.

MARY-ELLEN KELM

Abstract

This paper considers how Clearing the Plains helps contextualize, through Canada's long history of settler colonialism, the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Résumé

Cet article s'interroge sur la manière dont Clearing the Plains permet de comprendre les résultats de la Commission sur la vérité et la réconciliation dans le contexte de la longue histoire de la colonisation au Canada.

Seldom has there been a better time to discuss Indigenous histories in Canada than at the 2015 meeting of the Canadian Historical Association. A consistent thread of sessions devoted to Indigenous history, sponsored by the Aboriginal history group of the CHA, wove throughout the program. Special round-tables considered the history and future of ethnohistory, and of the archives in the writing of Indigenous histories. Panels explored Indigenous feminisms and historical consciousness, labour, material culture, and argued the value of decolonizing methodologies for historical study writ large. The coincidence of the CHA meeting with the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Report was perhaps most affecting.¹ CHA members who also witnessed the report's release saw first-hand the importance of history to justice, and to re-shaping how Canadians understand our past and our present relationships with Indigenous peoples. Historians, being what we are, could not of course forget that we had once been equally excited and optimistic about the 1996 report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, and so our optimism was tempered by historical consciousness. Still our

round table discussion was convened in celebration of the 2014 Sir John A. Macdonald Prize-winning book, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation and the Loss of Aboriginal Life*, by James Daschuk and we began our comments with the acknowledgement that the 2015 Macdonald prize had, yet again, gone to a book in Indigenous history: Jean Barman's *French Canadians, Furs and Indigenous Men*. It was a great time to be an historian of Indigenous people at the CHA.

It was the right moment to be discussing *Clearing the Plains* because it offers an important contextualization of the TRC's revelations about residential schooling. It is also a great book. *Clearing the Plains* is meticulously researched and relentlessly argued. The first half of *Clearing the Plains* argues that Indigenous population collapse due to epidemic disease in the era preceding the Canadian government's acquisition of Rupert's Land was "a tragic unforeseen but largely organic change."² In the second half of the book, Daschuk's evidence reveals something much less natural and more like, in his words, ethnic cleansing. The policy that used starvation to force Indigenous peoples off their land, out of the way of railway development and settlement and onto relatively unproductive reserve lands emanated from the Prime Minister's Office itself. Macdonald's own words are chilling: "We cannot allow them to die for want of food ... [W]e are doing all we can, by refusing food until Indians are on the verge of starvation, to reduce the expense."³ This policy led directly to further disease, to sexual exploitation, and to murder. Ultimately it forced some Indigenous people into participating in the Northwest Rebellion, into taking Métis script, or into fleeing to the United States where they hoped for a safer, less impoverished life. Such revelations fundamentally alter our nation's origin stories — the histories we tell ourselves of a peaceful past and the stories we tell others about what it means to be Canadian.⁴ *Clearing the Plains*, will help Canadians set what they are learning about the residential schools within a history of settler colonialism and systemic violence.

More than ever, Canadians' understanding of Indigenous people revolves around the history of residential schooling.

In itself, this is an astonishing shift in national consciousness. No long ago, only a few Canadians knew anything about the schools. Decades of life-writing by Indigenous authors, testimony before the Royal Commission on Aboriginal people, the resultant claims processes and court cases, and finally the great work of the TRC itself have changed that. Now, as Dian Million argues in her book, *Therapeutic Nations*, the trauma of residential schooling dominates Canadians' perception of both Indigenous people and Canada's history of colonial policies and practices. The result, however, creates a new stereotype, a new trope of settler colonialism: the Profaned Indian. The Profaned Indian, in Million's words, "dehumanized and not worthy of regard," carries the weight of the effects of residential schooling in discourse so that Canadians come to know the "colonized subject" as a "trauma victim."⁵ At the same time, Canadians have yet to grasp fully how residential schooling was an expression not just of assimilationist attitudes, but of the normative violence that lies at the heart of Canadian settler colonialism. Daschuk's book lays the groundwork for making those connections.

Million argues that the Profaned Indian was produced at the "dense nexus of racial and sexual proscriptive narrative."⁶ Through the scholarship of the last two decades, and now with the TRC report, we know well the dangerous net that ensnared children once they entered the schools. Punishing children for speaking their own language, defaming Indigenous cultures, assigning new names or numbers to students, and separating siblings by gender, the schools sought to break parental, familial, and community bonds and to refashion the self. Substandard food, overcrowded conditions, dangerously dilapidated and poorly serviced buildings, sometimes without running water or functioning sewer systems, endangered the children's physical health. Limited education and gender-specific training in only the most menial or outdated skills, ensured economic integration for graduates at only the lowest echelons of settler colonial society. Physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual abuse produced lasting psychosocial harms. As Million writes, the schools made Indigenous people feel ashamed of being Indigenous.⁷ What

Daschuk proves is that it was no different for those outside of the schools. On Canada's Prairies, starvation was government policy designed to break the political will of Cree leaders and to move them from the areas they had chosen as reserved land in the face of advancing settlement. This government assault ensured that the Cree leaders who had trusted the 'sweet promises' of the treaty commissioners were now ashamed of having done so. The basis for peaceful leadership was eroded even as White men came to hold the power over life and death by holding or distributing much-needed rations. Daschuk recounts the sexual exploitation of Cree women and girls at the hands of men such as Thomas Quinn and John Delany who made a survival sex trade based on the rations they controlled. Private enterprise made a profit, selling adulterated flour and rancid meat to government officials for distribution as rations, just as the schools sacrificed the health and well-being of children in their attempt to turn the schools into profitable self-sustaining enterprises. And just as the schools graduated pupils to the grave (at least 4000 based on the TRC's findings), the government policies Daschuk describes also decimated the population: a third of the Edmonton reserve residents either died, renounced their status or fled the reserves between 1885–1889. The decade after 1884 saw the populations at Crooked Lake and Files Hills decline by 41 and 46 per cent respectively.⁸ When some Cree men rose up in anger during the 1885 rebellion, the government ensured that everyone knew the result of such actions. Residential school staff ushered the children of the Battleford Industrial School into the courtyard to witness the hanging of the men convicted of murder. Such acts were clearly intended to break the spirit of resistance, the spirit of self-determination, and, indeed, the spirit of the child who witnessed them. *Clearing the Plains* demonstrates that it was the very webs of Indigenous belonging that Canadian authorities wanted dissolved.⁹ The residential schools, and the conditions prevalent there, were not isolated institutional examples of mismanagement; rather, they were part and parcel of Canada's belief that the place of Indigenous people ought to be severely limited, if not entirely eliminated.¹⁰

The policies that Daschuk describes had far-reaching effects, as he suggests. Paul Hackett has convincingly demonstrated the historical foundation of contemporary Indigenous ill-health, a foundation that stretches back to the era Daschuk describes.¹¹ The connections between policies that advanced settlement and the ones that allowed starvation were not necessarily legible to those not living directly with their impacts, to those not living on reserves. Few settlers seemed to have understood what made their Cree, Saulteaux, Nakoda or Niitsitapi neighbours so poor, so vulnerable, or so angry. The narrative of settler ascendancy, penned in this period, made these conditions seem natural. This era, richly documented by Daschuk, set the foundation for the racial antipathy described by Niels Braroe in *Indian and White: Self Image and Interaction in a Canadian Plains Community*, and was what haunts the land in Candace Savage's *Geography of Blood*. It was in this era that normative violence came to characterize the lives of Indigenous people and when internalized colonialism infiltrated their minds.¹² *Clearing the Plains* takes us out beyond the residential schools to a broader and longer view of the trauma of settler colonialism. Reading *Clearing the Plains* makes it hard to deny that Canada has been built on a foundation of violence, exploitation, and genocide.

That word — genocide — is not used in *Clearing the Plains*. In our CHA session, Daschuk reminded us that he did use the word in an Op-ed published in the *Globe and Mail* after the book's publication, and often in subsequent interviews and presentations.¹³ He alluded to the controversial nature of the term and of its application to Canadian history; indeed a controversy erupted at the session itself around that very notion. Benjamin Madley and Andrew Woolford are two scholars who are grappling with the utility of the term genocide as a way to better understand American and Canadian settler colonial histories. In particular, Madley responds to the critique of scholars as distinguished as Richard White who argues that genocide is too sweeping a catch phrase, by offering a set of particular criteria, including genocidal statements, massacres, body-part bounties and mass death in government custody, that can be used to

assess detailed case studies such as the one Daschuk provides in *Clearing the Plains*.¹⁴

But Andrew Woolford in his book *This Benevolent Experiment* would argue that a checklist approach to determine what is genocide ignores its dynamic, complex, and networked nature. Woolford argues, based on the writing of Australian scholar Dirk Moses, that the search for intent in the determination of genocide must move beyond “explicit, prior statements of settlers and governments, [to] the gradual evolution of European attitudes and policies that are pushed in an exterminatory direction by the confluence of underlying assumptions, the demands of the colonial and international economy, their plans for the land, and the resistance to these plans by the indigenous [peoples].”¹⁵ Turning his attention specifically to residential schooling on both sides of the Canadian-American border, Woolford considers the role of cultural suppression in genocide. Looking back at the material produced by Raphael Lemkin, Woolford finds much with which to contemplate settler colonialism as genocidal. According to Woolford, Lemkin understood the practices of colonialism to be “intimately related to those of genocide.”¹⁶ Further, twentieth-century scholarship, focused mostly on biological and physical destruction, was at odds with Lemkin’s own thinking on the subject. Writing in 1944, Lemkin observed something much more complicated:

Generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished through mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of the essentialist foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be *disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feeling, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups*.¹⁷ (italics mine)

Here is a critical point. Culture is what makes a group a group. Genocide may be directed at individuals (in all the varying ways described above), but what makes it genocide (as opposed to individual violence) is that desire to eradicate the group as a group. Hence cultural assault is essential to genocide. When Canadian officials used starvation to coerce First Nations to take treaty, to force them onto reserves, and to strip them of their lands and livelihoods, Canadian officials most certainly aimed to destroy the self-governing potential of First Nations. All of this was simultaneously political, economic, and cultural work. Is it right, then, to differentiate what Dashuk refers to as “culturalist preoccupations” from material conditions? Certainly, Daschuk’s political economy approach, could accommodate a definition that includes culture.

Yellowknives Dene political scientist Glen Coulthard offers an Indigenized political- economy framework that incorporates culture understood as “the interconnected social totality of a distinct *mode of life* encompassing the economic, political, spiritual and social.”¹⁸ Rather than diluting Daschuk’s materialist analysis, incorporating culture according to Coulthard’s approach would offer a productive expansion of Daschuk’s framework. Daschuk’s analysis, in the first half of the book, is anchored in the biotic, linking population fluctuations to climate change, following disease transmission along Indigenous trade networks, and connecting cross-species zoonoses to devastating endemic tuberculosis. Indigenous knowledge of the complex relations with the non-human world, alongside stories of migration and disease, could only advance Daschuk’s project of understanding the global ecological integration of the Great Plains.

Coulthard also demands that those engaged in a political economy analysis of Indigenous-settler relations situate their work in a “radical intersectional analysis” that “confront[s] more than economic relations.”¹⁹ Daschuk’s book is rich with evidence of the escalating violence that was at once patriarchal, White supremacist and capitalist in its origins, techniques and effects. White men working for the Canadian government sexually exploited Indigenous women and girls because they thought

they had a right to do so thanks to their race and gender, but they did so, crucially, using rations that they purchased from private companies on a market made lucrative by the demands of government policy. Similarly, the policies of rationing linked to land dispossession and obedience to the settler state ensured that the power and privilege to *care for* others — family, extended networks of kin, politics of varying kinds — belonged only to White men; they were only occasionally and provisionally delegated to Indigenous men favoured for the moment over others. All of this work is deeply gendered, deeply embedded in the racialized political economy of settler colonialism.

In the first half of the book, Daschuk describes the rising tide of epidemic disease and ecological crisis as “a tragic, unforeseen, largely organic change,” while we might ask for a more robustly intersectional interpretation that is attentive to human motives as well as environmental factors. We know from the work of David S. Jones that non-Indigenous people accepted, from a very early day, that massively destructive epidemic disease was the collateral damage of ever expanding commercial networks.²⁰ The Hudson’s Bay Company’s massive vaccination campaign across Rupert’s Land in the wake of the 1837–38 smallpox pandemic proves both that they expected the disease to return but also that they felt some obligation, financial if not moral, to prevent further loss of Indigenous life. These commercial networks were not, of themselves, amoral, disinterested forces, as Daschuk well knows and demonstrates in the second half of the book. Daschuk distinguishes himself from, and dismisses the work of, those who “place human agency and greed and the expansion of colonial powers at the centre of the decline of indigenous nations in the western hemisphere.”²¹ Over the course of the twentieth century, Indigenous depopulation has been repeatedly rediscovered by scholars, and each generation has dismissed the work of the previous one. We have not been well-served by the “discourse of novelty” that infuses such disavowal.²² Indigenous scholars, such as Coulthard, are demanding analyses that include Indigenous knowledge that weaves complex webs from strands of culture, social relations, biological, and environmental processes. Like all good books,

Clearing the Plains sets a platform that will launch other scholars to ask, and answer, ever more complicated questions.

We could not have found a more propitious time to have this conversation about *Clearing the Plains*. As Dian Million contends, the idea of colonial trauma, of Indigenous genocide, has taken decades to surface in North American consciousness. Indigenous writers produced heart-breaking narratives that first told the story of residential schooling in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Individuals bringing suit against perpetrators, communities making their healing work public, class action suits, and then the countless hours of testimony of elders and others before the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People propelled the topic of residential schooling, abuse, and intergenerational trauma into the limelight in the 1990s. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was one result of that tremendous effort and we do not yet know what will come of this body of work.²³

The willingness of commentators on the TRC report to use terms such as genocide might mark a sea-change in Canadians' ability to fully grasp the foundational violence of our nation's past. Or not. The media, the public, and our own scholarship suffer too often from the "discourse of novelty", as we continually forget what we have already learned. Settler colonies thrive on historical amnesia and intractable problems, including those associated with reserve conditions, begin to seem natural. Books such as *Clearing the Plains* demonstrate that there is nothing natural about the conditions of settler colonialism. And what can be made, can be unmade. Honouring James Daschuk for his important contribution with *Clearing the Plains* works against amnesia, stimulating other scholars to pursue critical research on Indigenous history in Canada. In so doing, Indigenous political economies and epistemologies must be brought forward as we envision a future that is based in shared values, sustainable practices, and equitable distributions of wealth — in short, a world so very at odds with that which Sir John A. Macdonald brought into being in the Canadian West of the 1880s.

MARY-ELLEN KELM is a professor of History at Simon Fraser University. She is the author of *A Wilder West: Rodeo in Western Canada*. Her current work focuses on how Aboriginal health became a subject of biomedical research.

MARY-ELLEN KELM est professeure d'histoire à Simon Fraser University. Elle est l'auteure de *A Wilder West: Rodeo in Western Canada*. Elle s'intéresse actuellement à comprendre comment la santé des Autochtones est devenue un objet de recherche en sciences biomédicales.