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## *Clearing the Plains* and Teaching the Dark Side of Canadian History

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Article abstract

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## ***Clearing the Plains* and Teaching the Dark Side of Canadian History**

**SUSAN NEYLAN**

### ***Abstract***

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### ***Résumé***

*L'ouvrage Clearing the Plains de James Daschuk nous permet de remettre en question le discours national entourant la relocalisation pacifique des réserves autochtones et la prétendue mansuétude des politiques canadiennes à l'égard des peuples autochtones ou de la conclusion de traités. Ce livre est aussi l'occasion d'examiner dans quelle mesure ce passé trouve des échos aujourd'hui. Le présent article se demande comment ce livre et les questions qu'il soulève peuvent servir à l'enseignement universitaire. Il met en évidence l'utilité de faire voir le côté « sombre » de l'histoire canadienne et comment cela s'inscrit dans les discussions contemporaines entourant la réconciliation.*

At the end of the winter 2015 university term, the *Association for Canadian Studies* newsletter appeared in my email inbox. It summarized a recent survey conducted in mid-March 2015 among 1500 Canadians related to awareness about historic injustices committed against Canada's Indigenous people and a sense of national pride for this country. Survey respondents were asked to agree or disagree in varying degrees whether they knew a lot about the historic mistreatment of Aboriginal peoples, and then asked to separately rate how Canada was or was not the best

country in the world. The results caught my eye — the more respondents claimed to be knowledgeable about the history of mistreatment of Canada's Indigenous peoples, the more pride they also had in Canada. One possible interpretation is "that Canadians simply don't make the connection between the two matters and consider the issues apart from each other."<sup>41</sup> Now, as a historian, I cannot help but think we are failing to convey some of those "big six" ideas Peter Seixas tells us are the benchmarks of historical thinking and should be essential to history education.<sup>42</sup> If the ACS's survey is at all representative somewhere along the way, the historical significance and the moral dimension of this history are not getting through to all Canadians. Reconciliation of the Indigenous-Settler relationship cannot happen without making that connection. The Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Justice Murray Sinclair, recently reminded Canadians that "Reconciliation is not an Aboriginal problem — it involves us all."<sup>43</sup> What stories can we tell that teach the dark side of Canadian history in ways that do not demoralize students, but rather inspire them to effect change?

James Daschuk's *Clearing the Plains* is a fitting choice for unsettling national narratives about the peaceful resettlement of the western prairies, for confronting presumptions about the benevolence of Canadian policy towards Indigenous peoples or a fair treaty process, and for appreciating how this dark side of Canadian history resonates today. "Now, in the twenty-first century," writes Daschuk in his introduction, "it is for all Canadians to recognize the collective burden imposed on its indigenous population by the state even as it opened the country to our immigrant ancestors to recast the land to suit the needs of the global economy of the late nineteenth century."<sup>44</sup> But how do you bring the past into the present without being presentist and anachronistic? After all, "the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there" (I'm preaching to the choir here, I know).<sup>45</sup> *Clearing the Plains* helps convey to readers the importance of adopting a historical perspective on the past. It illuminates the motivations driving the policy decisions of government officials, including the callous bottom line of not wanting to pay

to ameliorate the humanitarian crisis on the Canadian Plains by the 1880s. We should, as other scholars do, move beyond Daschuk's policy-centred approach and incorporate Indigenous perspectives and voices on that past as a way of further enriching counter and alternative nation-building narratives. But his work can be an important foundation for even non-specialized readers uninformed about this history.

Let me first start with my experiences teaching with the book—and entirely anecdotal (I make no pretence here of this being anything other than one university professor's impressions based on a single experience). In the fall term of 2014, I assigned *Clearing the Plains* for an assignment in a third-year Canadian Native History course.<sup>46</sup> The assignment is a hybrid book review-critical commentary that asks students to assess a text and consider the scholar's contribution to both the field of study and to the student's own knowledge in the course of answering a set question. I give students choice and there are topical and content-related queries as well as methodological ones. For Daschuk's book, I asked students to consider disease in Western Canada and where tuberculosis fits within epidemiological history. Was the book ultimately the story of the colonization of Aboriginal health and how did that work? I posed a question about violence and conflict at the heart of Indigenous-Settler relations and asked students to evaluate Daschuk's interpretations about the impact of trade on environments and ecologies, not merely humans. Lastly, students could contemplate whether or not the emphasis on Indigenous peoples as victims of colonialism, state policies of starvation, and assimilation downplayed Indigenous diversity, agency, and voice.<sup>47</sup>

I am happy to say that my students would have skewed the results of the ACS survey on knowledge about the historic and ongoing maltreatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada. A majority of my students referenced the contemporary resonances of this dark history to the Indigenous-Settler relationship; indeed, several did not shy away from labels such as ethnocide and cultural genocide.<sup>48</sup> What first struck me was the emotional response the book elicited in the students' essays — or rather the

extent of it, which was consistent and much more widespread than I expected. Expressions of shock, sadness, and of being “quite affected” by the “grim details” came through in their assignments as students came to better appreciate the subject matter Daschuk explores in the first half of the book, namely the historical vectors of disease and their impacts, and how these were complicated by violence, ecological degradation, and starvation over the course of the fur trade with the newcomer Europeans.<sup>49</sup> Other students conveyed a sense of frustration, even outrage as they were forced to confront an analysis of the impact of the severity of Settler colonialism in Canada. Much of the passionate tone to their prose was related to the students’ own lack of knowledge on just how brutal Canadian Indian policy was in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, which the book’s second half effectively covers in graphic detail. “Before reading this,” confessed one student, “I never critically thought about the ways violence and conflict could stem from disease and hunger, trade and government relations.”<sup>50</sup>

For about half of his book, Daschuk shows how government policies of the 1870s-1890s compounded the impact of the disappearance of the buffalo and climatic misfortunes, transforming challenge into a crisis of widespread chronic malnutrition and hunger-related disease among Plains peoples. What most stood out for my students was Canada’s failure to live up to treaty promises, especially as related to food and the exploitation of food distribution. This “politics of starvation,” as Daschuk calls it, lies at the crux of the book’s central argument. The quotation on the government’s position on relief that best captured my students’ imagination (and likely the most replicated quotation from the book) was taken from an 1882 remark by then prime minister of Canada and Minister for Indian Affairs, John A. Macdonald: “We cannot allow them to die for want of food ... [W]e are doing all that we can by refusing food until the Indians are on the verge of starvation, to reduce the expense.”<sup>51</sup> Daschuk’s examples of the withholding of food rations to compel groups to sign treaties; of the inability of holdouts such as Cree leader Mistahimaskwa (Big Bear) to maintain autonomy;

and of the mismanagement, ineptitude, and just plain abuse of the government's food distribution policies, all illustrate the pervasive disregard for Indigenous well-being. While we obviously condemn such practices, before the rise of the welfare state and a public medical system in Canada no one in the country could truly rely upon the government for assistance. However, the failure to uphold the Crown's promises made so recently through treaties adds a particularly reprehensible layer to the level of indifference to human suffering adopted by Canadian officials towards First Nations. For example, consider how treaty-guaranteed rations were distributed. Rampant dishonesty in supply contracts, which went almost universally to the American I.G. Baker and Company, was striking. One student called it mismanagement, "malicious neglect," and a corrupt "abuse of power."<sup>52</sup> "Those who oversaw the ration policy," remarks Daschuk, "overlooked or ignored the inevitable health consequences."<sup>53</sup> The government stockpiled food in warehouses, where it spoiled before being distributed, making "the quality of rations ... the absolute minimum to sustain life."<sup>54</sup>

Disease, both epidemic and endemic (notably tuberculosis), followed in the wake of Dominion administration of relief and the implementation of the reserve system, residential schools, and the Indian Act.<sup>55</sup> We actually do not know how many Indigenous people succumbed to disease and starvation in the last quarter of the nineteenth century on Canadian prairies, and that is a frightening thing to admit; it was likely a third of community populations within the space of five or six years.<sup>56</sup> While First Nations employed diverse strategies to survive — ranging from petitioning, complaining, and abandoning reserves, to killing sadistic and abusive farm instructors, and using banned spiritual practices to heal (e.g., Ghost Dance and Sun Dance) — Daschuk minces no words when he declares that the "suffering on reserves in the 1880s and 1890s was horrendous."<sup>57</sup> And then non-Indigenous Canadians forgot about this history. At first, they forgot for very mundane reasons. Just as Indigenous communities confined to reserves began to stabilize their populations by the 1890s, large-scale resettlement of their tradi-

tional territories by immigrants had begun, "recasting the region as an agricultural bastion" that made the health and welfare of Indigenous peoples an afterthought, if even thought of at all.<sup>58</sup>

"Required reading for all Canadians is an absolute understatement," one student's essay declared, reiterating an accolade from the book's back cover. She continued, "we have so much to learn and understand about the history in our own backyard that can speak to the gap between mainstream Canadians and First Nations that still exists today."<sup>59</sup> Why has *Clearing the Plains* received such a response from the students in my one university history class but also from a wider Canadian readership who have made Daschuk a best-selling author? Indeed, it is not that scholars before Daschuk have not been trying to complicate the Canadian historical narrative. Historian Timothy Stanley, who looks at racism in the context of Chinese Canadians, reminds us about what is lost to Canadian history when we consider the marginalization of particular visual minority or ethno-cultural groups as isolated historical events in the grand narrative taken to *be* history by many Canadians,<sup>60</sup> rather than as the "texture of life" in Canada's past.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, by putting that dark texture of life of Canadian history front and centre, we might overcome a central flaw in the foundational myth of Canadian history when it comes to Indigenous-Settler relations.<sup>62</sup> In *Unsettling the Settler Within*, Paulette Regan identifies the belief that Canada's past has long been characterized by predominantly benevolent and peaceful relations with its Aboriginal peoples, and notes that this has obscured the true nature of our shared history. This "peacemaker myth lies at the heart of the settler problem," she writes. "It informs, however unconsciously, the everyday attitudes and actions of contemporary politicians, policy makers, lawyers, and negotiators, and it remains an archetype of settler benevolence, fairness and innocence in the Canadian public mind. ... To begin the decolonizing work of truth and reconciliation, it is useful to first reassess this foundational myth in Canada's settler past."<sup>63</sup> *Clearing the Plains* lays bare the brutality of Canadian Indian policy that facilitated nation building. In acknowledging this, we are not diminishing the accomplishments of birthing a country,



but seeing that it had serious costs and complications, and that we are currently still living with them.

Furthermore, the considerable appeal and impact of Daschuk's book is not really about the originality of his overall arguments either. Daschuk was able to capture in one neat and highly readable package what a number of other writers since the 1990s have fleshed out in scholarship on the historic injustices towards Indigenous peoples in Prairie West region — Sarah Carter's *Lost Harvests*, Maureen Lux's *Medicine that Walks*, or *The True Spirit and Original Intent of Treaty Seven* by Treaty 7 elders in collaboration with some academics, all come to mind, as does John Tobias's even earlier and groundbreaking "The Subjugation of the Plains Cree" article published in 1983.<sup>64</sup> Daschuk's book also complements what students presume about residential schools, which, because of media coverage and high-profile processes such as the TRC (and its closing events in Ottawa happening just as this roundtable was being held), may prompt them to admit (just like those surveyed), that they recognize the mistreatment of Canadian Indigenous peoples in the past. Hence, I do not precisely think *Clearing the Plains* has garnered so many accolades because it came out of the blue and said something no one had heard before. But it does capture the *zeitgeist* of revisiting Canada in its nation-building age at a time when a broader Canadian public seems receptive to engage with that history. The book's emphasis on sexual violence, notably against Indigenous women as a central characteristic of nineteenth-century colonialism, was at once jarring and a deeply compelling interpretation. Daschuk repeatedly asks his readers to consider the historical nature of Indigenous-Settler relationship as it directly informs contemporary inequities within that same relationship in Canada. This is something that Indigenous scholarship has been doing for a long time, and certainly it is a message echoed by the TRC's process and by the persistent calls for an inquiry for murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls.

The Canadian record for removing Indigenous peoples from history, both figuratively and literally, has not been good. Not so long ago, Canadian history textbooks featured Indigenous peo-



ples in only the first couple of chapters before disappearing them from the narrative entirely. We know this situation has vastly improved, given the seminal contributions to our national historiography (one just needs to look at the list of the Macdonald Prize winners or the number of sessions on recent CHA programs to see how many were focused on Indigenous History-related topics). Yet, we've got some way to go to retell Canadian history within Indigenous History and historiographies.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, there is much at stake, as Indigenous education scholar Michael Marker points out, for "this history is complex, ambiguous, and continues to be a highly contested terrain with regard to questions of power, purpose, reciprocity and resistance."<sup>66</sup> Many Indigenous educators and historians are reclaiming the power to tell stories about history as the only way to decolonize historical understanding. It was nearly two decades ago that the Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith wrote, "Indigenous peoples want to tell our own stories, write our own versions, in our own ways, for our own purposes. ... [But] the sense of history conveyed by these approaches is not the same thing as the discipline of history, and so our accounts collide, crash into each other."<sup>67</sup> Following Daschuk's lead, Canadian history can be reconceptualized to confront its dark side as the central part of the narrative. This, in turn, may open up the space to reframe Canadian history within Indigenous interpretations of what happened based on their evidence and research approaches (something well beyond the scope of *Clearing the Plains*), even at the expense of these narratives' coming crashing into one another. It certainly would make the meaning of the phrase "we are all treaty people" more apparent to non-Indigenous Canadians.<sup>68</sup>

Let me bookend my paper here by referencing another history-related survey done by a group of esteemed historian-colleagues known as the Pasts Collective.<sup>69</sup> In *Canadians and their Pasts*, they reported on the findings of their 2007 and 2008 surveys of some 3,419 Canadians about their connection to and engagement with history.<sup>70</sup> While their research revealed differences by region, gender, cultural or ethnic background, linguistic affiliation, age, income, and educational levels, "a vast majority

of people everywhere in the country has turned to the past to help them situate themselves in a rapidly changing present, to connect themselves to others, and to fill their leisure hours.”<sup>71</sup> For all the gloom and doom surrounding the alleged irrelevance of humanities education and disciplines such as history, Canadians do care deeply about the history of this country. Therefore, it seems that Canadians are in a promising position to accept the dark texture of nation-building with respect to Indigenous-Settler relations, and to accept it as a past with deep resonances in our contemporary relationship. “Nation is narration,” writes historian Stefan Berger. “The stories we tell each other about our national belonging and being constitute the nation. These stories change over time and place and are always contested, often violently so.”<sup>72</sup> As professional historians we know this well: this epistemological reflection is the lifeblood of scholarly debate, particularly of notions about the utility of adopting a national scope in the stories we tell about our collective past(s).

When the TRC presented its 94 recommendations on 2 June 2015, Commissioner Chief Wilton Littlechild told the gathered audience, “Above all, we must remember that this is a Canadian story, not an Indigenous one.”<sup>73</sup> Of course, this same message has since reverberated in the release of its Final Report on 15 December 2015. History education about residential schools, Indigenous-Settler relations, and Canadian Indian Policy was especially prominent in these recommendations.<sup>74</sup> It was identified as both a problem to be addressed but also a key element of meaningful reconciliation. Furthermore, calls for the necessity of this kind of history education extended well beyond just students and teachers to Canadians in many walks of life (e.g., doctors and healthcare practitioners; judges, lawyers, and others working in the legal professions; civil servants; and church leaders and their congregations, to name but a few specifically identified in the report). Surely academic analyses such as the 2014 Sir John A. Macdonald Book Prize winner *Clearing the Plains*, alongside Indigenous voices can help non-Indigenous Canadians move from a position of collective amnesia to one of collective reconciliation.<sup>75</sup> “As a colonist state,” wrote one of my students in

his insightful conclusion, "it is important to understand that this legacy of blood belongs to every Canadian citizen, and must be accounted for in order for Canada to move forward as a nation."<sup>76</sup> As history educators as well as historians, we are in a direct position to fulfill some of the recommendations of the TRC's Calls to Action, a call announced the day before this very discussion panel was presented at the CHA. The responsibility is both a heavy and pressing one. How do *you* teach the dark texture of life in Canadian history?

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