

REVIEWS/RECENSIONS

James Daschuk. *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life*. Regina, SK: University of Regina Press, 2013. 318 pp. Introduction. Maps. Photograph. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$39.95 hc.

Activities associated with the rise of the Idle No More Movement, the Truth and Reconciliation investigation into residential schooling, and the articulation of indigenous issues by Aboriginal scholars and community representatives have heightened Canadians' awareness of historical and contemporary dimensions of indigenous experiences. These developments have also made it clear that there is considerably more to the dark side of Canadian history, especially with regard to relations between indigenous and non-Aboriginal people and governments, that has yet to be revealed and reconciled in the process of working to achieve meaningful indigenous participation and sovereignty in a Canadian context. James Daschuk has added a vital contribution to this knowledge base in a book that offers a detailed and often chilling historical account of the ways in which changing material conditions along with patterns related to social interaction, climate, and disease shaped the development of a Canadian landscape marked by significant disparity in the life conditions and health status between indigenous and non-indigenous populations. As signified in the work's title, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* reveals how indigenous people who once dominated regions across the Canadian plains came perilously close to being eliminated by the early twentieth century through a combination of epidemiological factors, political and economic developments, and policy implementation.

The text skilfully interweaves the complex interplay among these various factors as they played out over the course of several millennia, focusing most heavily on the period following the establishment of the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly in 1821 through the disastrous administration of Indian Affairs by the federal government in the late nineteenth century. Between the introduction and conclusion, eight chapters each address the core developments that occurred within a designated period of time, framed through a narrative that traces the ways in which a broad array of factors—epidemiological, ecological and environmental, political, economic, social, and physical—intersected to produce the distinct trajectories experienced by indigenous and non-indigenous populations as Canada established its national status. Extensively documented with meticulous attention to detailed

archival and official records, contemporary accounts, and secondary literature (over 100 pages are devoted to notes and bibliographic references), the story becomes increasingly more disturbing as disasters fostered by natural phenomena and contingent historical events give way to massive population losses heightened by a combination of neglect, unintended outcomes of prior decisions, and deliberate policy and economic decisions. The analysis reveals how exploration, economic activity and administrative decisions of trading companies and governments contributed to the transition from an indigenous plains region that housed many diverse and often thriving social units to populations largely confined to reserve lands in which high incidences of disease, hunger, and economic dependency were common. Some factors, such as the early spread of diseases by Europeans who had developed immunity through previous exposure to vulnerable populations that had not previously encountered contagions such as measles, smallpox, or tuberculosis were not likely to be anticipated, but the same could not be said of practices like the warehousing of rations and distribution of contaminated food by federal agents even as reserve populations were weakened by hunger and disease. While a skeptical reader might look at some of the claims as possible exaggerated or exceptional cases, the analysis is made more powerful and convincing by the author's triangulation of data, drawing from diverse documentary sources and accounts to enrich the descriptions and discussions of relevant events and phenomena. This careful approach, and the direct way in which much of the evidence is presented, provides a depth of analysis that is especially evident in instances in which recorded statements or related literature reveal contradictory claims and observations.

With a compelling narrative that flows through the integration of themes that are more typically analyzed on their own, the book provides a much more well-rounded understanding of the dynamics associated with the political, social and economic development of the Canadian west than is typically conveyed through more specific orientations presented across disparate bodies of literature. This analytical sophistication enables the reader to gain an appreciation for how phenomena such as patterns of land use among indigenous people, various forms of contact among indigenous and European people, and processes of colonization did not simply "happen" in a straightforward or predetermined way, but were shaped through the complex interplay of multiple intersecting factors. The analysis reveals, for instance, several cases in which the spread and impact of disease were magnified by hunger and malnutrition which were induced, in turn, by trading practices, depletion of resources, and administrative decisions that were in some cases further exacerbated by severe climactic conditions. These same practices and conditions, in turn, often induced indigenous bands or communities to protest or resist, often drawing disciplinary rather than constructive action on the part of authorities. A powerful exam-

ple of these relationships appears in the discussion of tensions related to events known as the Cree uprising in the North-West Territories in 1884-85. The tragic irony is that violence directed against authorities who had committed serious abuses against reserve populations, including sexual exploitation and withholding of rations, resulted in punishment and reprisals against some bands and band members that took the form of measures that provoked the resistance in the first place by placing even greater limits on access to economic activity and food supplies. As revealed in this and many similar developments highlighted throughout the text, the analysis contributes to an understanding of how historical events and patterns emerge through the intersection among particular actors, specific contextual factors, and broader social and natural frameworks.

The book is written in an engaging manner and has already begun to reach some of the wide readership it warrants by virtue of the significance of its subject matter and the lessons and conclusions it offers. The only limitations that might discourage some of the work's potential audience reflect common issues that arise in the conversion from doctoral dissertations into book form. Some immediacy and accessibility are sacrificed through minor gaps or imbalances in places where the inclusion of either less or more information would add clarity. In a few sections, discussion is overly dense and detailed while in others – especially with regard to concepts or discourse that make sense with respect to analysis within specific academic disciplines – terms are superfluous without the inclusion of greater definition or contextual information (an example is the reference to Besant and Avonlea technological phases on pp. 4-5). Descriptive shortcuts sometimes result in passages that appear to attribute agency to non-human phenomena such as diseases, policies or reports. Reference, for instance, to “the usual cynical tone” of the *Saskatchewan Herald* (123), does not tell us as much as would otherwise be revealed by attributing the cited passages to the paper's editor, P.G. Laurie, in relation to his anglo-centric and rugged individualist positions on settling the west. Finally, while the text is supported by reference to accounts by indigenous people and the work of indigenous scholars, these voices are relatively muted in comparison with the high degree of reliance on a few well-established historical and anthropological sources produced by Euro-Canadian scholars. Nonetheless, in integrating an extensive range of primary and secondary sources and clarifying our understanding of relationships among indigenous and non-indigenous populations in the west, the work opens the way for ongoing interrogation and dialogue on matters of immense significance.

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