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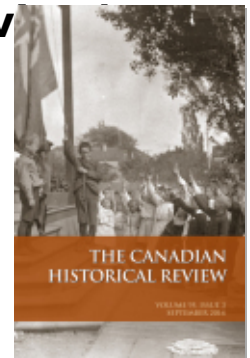
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## Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life by James Daschuk (review)

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by culture, supported by the words of the emigrating Mennonites quoted from their diaries.

Ethnocultural identity and survival are discussed in Linda Ledohowski's "Little Ukraine on the Prairie," which sees the potential in new imaginings of identity rather than the replication of traditional cultural models. The collection moves on to cultural geography in Beverly Sandallack's essay on prairie towns, offering several examples of how main street projects have helped communities preserve their built heritage in a general context of rapid loss. The volume concludes with an incisive semiotic-historical essay by Jared Wesley on the codes of prairie politics, yielding insights on dominant tropes influencing the different political cultures and histories of the three prairie provinces.

As R. Douglas Francis suggested in his review of *The West and Beyond* (CHR, September 2011), not all practitioners are comfortable with the trend toward social and cultural diversity in Western Canadian historiography. Yet Western Canadian culture and society have become far more diverse since the 1980s. *Place and Replace* comprises a solid set of essays in the tradition of diversity established by *The West and Beyond*, and points to promising directions for future research and historical production.

LYLE DICK *History and Heritage*

*Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life.* JAMES DASCHUK. Regina: University of Regina Press, 2013. Pp. xxii + 318, \$39.95

In *Clearing the Plains*, James Daschuk presents a dense but compelling history of the peoples of the plains. Like many scholars interested in Canada's Aboriginal people, Daschuk is motivated by the current disparities in health and social well-being between Canada's general population and the Aboriginal peoples within its borders. Thus, the book's primary goal is "to identify the roots of the current health disparity between the indigenous and mainstream populations in western Canada" because "health as a measure of human experience cannot be considered in isolation from the social and economic forces that shape it" (ix). A second and important goal is to examine how disease contributed to the history of the territory between the Missouri River and the boreal forest from the early eighteenth century up to Canada's acquisition of it in the latter part of the nineteenth century. To achieve these goals Daschuk sets broader tasks, including "the study of what First Nations peoples did, where they lived, and what they ate over

approximately 160 years as the global economy ... took hold on the Canadian plains" (xi) and "an interpretation of territorial realignment based on differential outcomes of eighteenth-century epidemics" (xv).

Daschuk divides the book in two. The first half is devoted to the economic, demographic, and territorial changes experienced by First Nations prior to 1867. The second half then explores the impact of the new Canadian economic and political order on the health of the plains' First Nations from Confederation through to the 1890s. Throughout, Daschuk is guided by theories of political economy, especially Wallerstein's neo-Marxist, modern world system theory and, to a lesser extent, Frank's dependency theory.

This is an ambitious, meticulously researched study drawing on an extensive body of historical literature, as well as many primary sources from the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Library and Archives Canada, and the provincial archives of Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Daschuk's treatment of the pre-European contact period is illuminating in its description of various tribal groups, their economies, trading relationships, and forms of subsistence. Favourable climatic conditions allowed for the development of horticulture and concentrations of population, but in 1259 a massive volcanic eruption resulted in such severe climate change – a mini ice age – that most of these more sedentary economies collapsed and tribal groupings didn't survive, were forced to amalgamate with others, or migrated elsewhere, including to the western plains.

The book's strength lies in Daschuk's exploration, first, of the European encounters with First Nations primarily during the fur trade of the eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, and second, of the dominion policies directed toward them as settlement intensified during the post-Confederation period. Of note was the difference in trading practices between the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and the upstart Canadian entrepreneurs who later formed the Northwest Company (NWC). The HBC for a long time conducted its trade from a limited number of forts either on the coast of James Bay or from strategic locations that had ready access to the ocean and direct shipping to England. The NWC conducted its trade directly with First Nations using the continental waterways. It was a much faster system of trade, but the NWC's direct interface with First Nations and the use of the vast system of waterways introduced disease – especially smallpox – in ways not previously experienced; outbreaks became swiftly communicated epidemics. Responding to its competition, the HBC abandoned its limited fort system and engaged in a more direct trade, thus contributing to and accelerating the spread of disease. In addition, throughout the early part of the

nineteenth century harsh climatic conditions, including droughts and severe winters, resulted in a scarcity of game. Starvation and disease severely restricted many First Nations' ability to hunt, resulting in greater starvation and more disease. When the two companies amalgamated in 1821, the northwest was already in "social, demographic, and environmental crisis" (57). The subsequent HBC monopoly, according to Daschuk, did nothing to alleviate these growing problems.

Competition for scarce resources, a shrinking fur trade, and the acquisition of land for ranching further contributed to the elimination of traditional First Nations economies, as well as to further starvation and greater vulnerability to deadly disease, including tuberculosis and measles. After 1867 Ottawa exerted its presence through the treaty process, the establishment of the North-West Mounted Police, and the extension of the Indian Affairs administration. Daschuk concludes his study with an extended analysis of Ottawa's Indian policy in response to the crisis of First Nations' survival during the post-Confederation period. He convincingly demonstrates how the dominion government, in the interests of westward expansion, deliberately exacerbated their plight principally through the use of food rations as a carrot-and-stick method to "oblige" them to take treaty or to stay on their reserves. These policies were designed to subjugate them, to eliminate their independence, and to contribute further to their marginalization and mortality through disease and starvation. Indeed, Daschuk argues, so terrible was the harm inflicted upon them that it has left them to this day in what seems a permanent state of disadvantage and extraordinary inequality in comparison to mainstream Canada.

Daschuk has added to Canadian history a valuable account of the contact between Europeans and Aboriginal people of the plains and the destructive impact of unbridled commerce and greed. But the book's strength is also its weakness. Daschuk compiles an extraordinary amount of documented evidence, so much so that the thread of his narrative is sometimes lost or is difficult to follow. Occasional poor editing and grammar do not help. In addition, he could have underscored his theoretical interpretation more decisively by summarizing each chapter with a reflective analysis of what had transpired. Finally, the addition of tables to present the data – especially on disease – together with timelines would help the reader digest the enormous quantity of information Daschuk presents. Overall, *Clearing the Plains* is an important contribution to Canada's highly problematic history with First Nations and to understanding their deplorable socio-economic conditions today.

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