

***Clearing the Plains* and Changing the National Conversation:  
James Daschuk's *Clearing the Plains* as a Work of Popular and  
Public History**

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Article abstract

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## ***Clearing the Plains* and Changing the National Conversation: James Daschuk's *Clearing the Plains* as a Work of Popular and Public History**

**IAN MOSBY**

### *Abstract*

*This essay assesses the impressive public reaction to James Daschuk's *Clearing the Plains* and offers some possible explanations for its success as a work of both academic and popular history.*

### *Résumé*

*Le présent essai évalue l'impressionnante réaction du public à l'ouvrage *Clearing the Plains* de James Daschuk et tente d'expliquer le succès de cet ouvrage universitaire et d'histoire populaire.*

One of the most remarkable things about James Daschuk's *Clearing the Plains* is not its many awards and accolades but, rather, its life as a work — not just of academic history — but of popular and public history. And one does not have to go far to get a sense of the impact that *Clearing the Plains* has had outside the walls of academia. You may start, for instance, by typing in a Google search for “Daschuk” AND “Clearing the Plains.” Then, after scanning through a few of the literally hundreds of newspaper articles, blog posts, editorials, essays, podcasts, and videos that you will find there — one of which includes a folk song inspired by *Clearing the Plains* written and performed by NDP Member of Parliament, Charlie Angus<sup>24</sup> — you should also do a quick scan of social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, or Goodreads.

What you will find after doing even the most cursory online search is not only an indication as to why *Clearing the Plains* has achieved the impressive feat of becoming a national bestseller — having already sold over 15,000 copies<sup>25</sup> — but you'll also find evidence that the book and its central arguments have had a

measurable and, arguably, quite profound impact on Canada's national conversation about both its past and its present. For example: when I started to prepare this essay and did the kind of online search that I've been suggesting, I found the internationally celebrated Métis artist Christi Belcourt describing *Clearing the Plains* as "a must read" that "makes the blood boil and the heart break."<sup>26</sup> I found the *Globe and Mail's* international affairs columnist Doug Saunders referring to *Clearing the Plains* a "masterpiece of scholarship" that was "arguably the most influential single political book of [2014]."<sup>27</sup> And I found *New Republic* senior editor, Jeet Heer, calling it a "brilliant" book that "deepen[s] our understanding of [the] terrible price of nation building" and that allows us to "come to grips with legacy of John A. [Macdonald] and think about how to remedy it."<sup>28</sup>

But what struck me the most, on a much more personal level, were the comments and reviews from ordinary readers, such as the Amazon.com reviewer who wrote in May 2014: "As one who has looked at aboriginals with less than love for many years, this book has helped me to understand why our relationship with aboriginals has developed as it did. I now look at aboriginals with a whole new understanding of what they have come through and feel their pain."<sup>29</sup> Or, for instance, the reviewer on the popular book recommendation and review site Goodreads.com, who wrote: "I felt a stinging shame reading this book, I felt the infuriation of having been lied to by omission, and I felt a deeper understanding of Canada's need to take responsibility for our dark history."<sup>30</sup>

In review after review, in newspaper editorial after newspaper editorial — and in any number of Twitter threads or Facebook comments — I found this same sentiment repeated over and over again. Readers were shocked and angry that they did not know this had happened and they badly wanted their fellow Canadians to learn about this awful chapter in our collective history. As one Amazon.ca reviewer summed up their feelings: "This should be required reading for every school in the country. It is reprehensible that the majority of its citizens remain unaware of their own country's history."<sup>31</sup>

Now, one of the amazing things about these reviews — and, for that matter, much of the media commentary surrounding *Clearing the Plains* — is that the story Daschuk tells is not exactly a new one. As Anishinaabe scholar and activist Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair noted in his review of the book for *Canada's History*, “First Nations historians have been relaying stories of starvation, legal impositions, and resistance for decades; it might just be that it takes a while for the academy to catch up and bring it to the country’s attention.”<sup>32</sup> In reality, though, academic historians have also long been aware of this story. Historians like Sarah Carter, Maureen Lux, and John Tobias have all written excellent and important works examining the ways in which specific federal policies played a key role in creating the conditions for mass starvation and disease that have so shocked readers of *Clearing the Plains*.<sup>33</sup> That is not to say that Daschuk does not add a number of new and, I would argue, important insights and perspectives to the topics of health, disease, environment, and the colonization of the prairies. Yet I think that even Daschuk himself would readily admit that his work would not have been possible without the essential contributions made by his fellow historians such as Carter, Lux and Tobias, not to mention the more than a century of Indigenous historical writing and oral tradition about the colonization of the prairies.<sup>34</sup>

This, however, leads to a question that Canadian historians need to seriously consider: why did *this particular* book have such an impact outside of academia and, in the process, change the national conversation about Canada’s history and the legacy of Sir John A. Macdonald? If we, as Canadian historians, already collectively knew this story, why was it such a surprise to so many Canadians?

Part of the answer, it seems, is that *Clearing the Plains* was published at the right time. When it was first released in the spring of 2013, the Idle No More movement had just captivated the country over the previous winter, bringing Indigenous issues to the fore in a way that had not been true for years. At the same time, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was in the midst of a very public fight with the federal government to both

extend its mandate and release all of the promised documents to the TRC's researchers.<sup>35</sup> And, added to this, was the fact that July 2013 saw newspapers around the country reporting on an academic paper's revelations of a series of disturbing scientific experiments conducted on malnourished Indigenous children and adults during the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>36</sup>

In fact, Daschuk first introduced his arguments to a mass audience in the form of a *Globe and Mail* editorial that connected what he describes as "ethnic cleansing and genocide" on the prairies in the late nineteenth century to the nutrition experiments conducted by government scientists in the middle decades of the twentieth century.<sup>37</sup> It seems likely that this widely-read editorial — which was followed soon after by an interview on CBC Radio One's *The Current* — first alerted many both in and outside of the historical profession to Daschuk's research and findings.<sup>38</sup>

While the timing was right — and while it definitely did not hurt that the University of Regina Press and its Director, Bruce Walsh, put more resources towards marketing the book than is typically the case for a university press — I would nonetheless argue that most of the credit should go to the book itself. This is true, I think, for a few different reasons. One of the most important reasons has to do with the fact that *Clearing the Plains* is organized in a manner to answer a few deceptively simple and clear questions that, as it turns out, are questions that many Canadians also badly wanted to see answered. What, for instance, are the historical origins of the profound health disparities between Indigenous peoples and the non-Indigenous population of Canada? And what role did government policies — as opposed to non-human factors including environmental change or susceptibility to European diseases — play in producing these differences over time?

In order to answer these questions, Daschuk does something else that I think is key to the book's popular success which differentiates it from many of the more specialized scholarly monographs that tend to be written by Canadian historians: namely, he wrote a book that is simultaneously a work of original and extensive archival research, and also an impressive synthe-

sis of a wide range of recent historical writing in diverse fields, including Indigenous history, the history of health and medicine, environmental history, political history, and Western Canadian social history.

By combining these approaches — and by drawing upon such a diverse historiography — Daschuk manages to tell a story that spans centuries while also, in the final chapters, providing a meticulously detailed and compelling narrative of a man-made tragedy on the prairies in the 1870s and 1880s. And because *Clearing the Plains* walks this fine line between original archival research and historiographical synthesis, even readers with little knowledge of Canadian history become equipped with the critical tools needed to put the events of the late nineteenth century into their appropriate historical context. This is something that, in this profession, we do not always do particularly well, but that clearly resonates with non-specialist readers.

Finally, I would argue that one of the things that makes *Clearing the Plains* such a compelling read is that, through its almost obsessive attention to detail in the final chapters, the book somehow manages to actually convey — on both an emotional and intellectual level — the horror of this period of famine and starvation in the mind of the reader. And I think this is articulated quite well by the historian Elizabeth Fenn in her dusk-jacket blurb when she writes, “For days after reading it, I was unable to shake a profound sense of sorrow.” This is something articulated by many of the online reviews that I read. In fact, I personally experienced the same reaction the first time I read this book, which surprised me because this was a story I was already quite familiar with.

The book’s emotional impact, I think, goes a long way towards explaining why the public response to *Clearing the Plains* has been such a powerful one. Anyone who takes the time to actually read it all the way through cannot help but feel sadness, horror, anger, empathy, and — hopefully — a profound desire for justice by the time they reach the book’s conclusion. This is captured, I believe, by the former head of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Bernie Farber, who wrote: “All I thought I knew of

Canadian history was turned on its head. As a child of a Holocaust survivor I saw in James Daschuk's account of our treatment of the Plains First Nations what in my mind amounted to genocide. I have never been able to shake this vision. Indeed it has driven me to learn even more."<sup>39</sup>

As Farber's comments suggest, nowhere has Daschuk's work had a more noticeable impact than in the recently renewed debate about whether Canada's colonization of Indigenous peoples and lands constituted an act of *genocide*. This is a highly politicized and emotional debate that Canadian historians have tended to shy away from, if not ignore altogether. The most widely used Canadian history textbooks, for instance, do not use the term genocide to describe the impact of Canadian colonialism, nor do they include a historiographical discussion of the genocide question. Yet, because Daschuk describes the colonization of the prairies as an act of "ethnic cleansing" in his book and "genocide" in his *Globe and Mail* editorial, *Clearing the Plains* appears to have had the effect of bringing some renewed attention to the possibility that Canada's colonial policies were, in practice, genocidal.

As Postmedia News political columnist Stephen Maher argued in a September 2014 editorial with the provocative title, "It's getting harder to ignore Canada's genocide," it would be "pretty tough to launch much of a counterargument [against Canada's history of genocide] if you have read *Clearing the Plains*." For Maher, Farber, and others, Daschuk's book actually seems to have *changed their minds* and convinced them that Canada, indeed, committed an act of genocide on the prairies. And, arguably, this public discussion over the past few years helped set the stage for recent polls showing nearly 70 percent of Canadians agreeing with the TRC's recent finding that the residential school system constituted an act of "cultural genocide."<sup>40</sup>

The public impact of Daschuk's work, in other words, has been a profound one. I do not think that, as historians, any of us could ask for much more than to have our research go out into the world and — not only change the way that individual readers think about Canadian history — but also change the national conversation about Canada's legacy of settler colonialism. That

the work of one of our colleagues actually managed to do so is therefore a cause for celebration and means that the Sir John A. Macdonald Award is not just an ironically appropriate one for a book about the crimes of Canada's first Prime Minister, but also a well-deserved one.

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