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Some Reflections of My Own on *Clearing the Plains*

JAMES DASCHUK

I would like to thank my colleagues for putting so much time and thought into their papers along with all of those who attended the roundtable discussion of *Clearing the Plains* at the 2015 meeting of the Canadian Historical Association. I have been both humbled and amazed at the response the book has received since it was published three years ago. By the time of the 2016 Congress in Calgary, there will be over 20,000 copies in print. As Ian Mosby mentioned, MP Charlie Angus wrote a song about it and the video produced in collaboration with the University of Regina Press has had almost 17,000 hits.⁷⁷ Maori artist Brett Graham was inspired to produce the installation entitled *Pioneer* which was recently purchased by the National Gallery of Canada⁷⁸ and, if things were not surreal enough, *Clearing the Plains* was sold at Costco.⁷⁹ In December 2015, the French translation, *La destruction des Indiens des Plaines. Maladie, famines organisées et disparition du mode de vie autochtone* was launched by Les Presses de l'Université Laval. Over the past two years, I have done more than 100 presentations and interviews including at a dozen universities, public spaces, and schools, among others. Despite the harsh message my work conveys, people seem genuinely interested in hearing it. As Ian said, we all aspire to make a substantive contribution to both an academic and public understanding of the past, and I am thankful to have had the opportunity to do so.

I am grateful too, because it almost did not happen. In the decades (yes, decades) it took to complete this project, so many things happened to undermine its progress that I seriously began to think it was cursed. The first hurdle I encountered was in defending a dissertation that was unabashedly a scholarly synthesis rather than a deep-dig archival study of a specialized topic. "Why make a brick when I can build a wall" I naively thought to myself. I also wanted to do something *important*. From my perspective, tracing the roots of the chasm between the living

conditions of Indigenous people and the rest of us was the issue that was (and still is) dragging us down as a society.

At my defence, a committee member did not consider a scholarly synthesis to *be* a dissertation and I was lucky to have made it through. For years after graduation, I continued to work on the manuscript, adding my findings from a number of research jobs in medicine, climate change, and others, to the story. In 2009, the manuscript was sent to the Aid to Scholarly Publications Program (ASPP), the final step in a process that had already taken 15 years. An anonymous reviewer concluded with the statement, “zero scholarly value, do not publish.” If *Clearing the Plains* had been submitted to any of the large university presses (dependent of ASPP funding), it would never have been published.

Fortunately, my regional study of Indigenous health on the plains fit the publishing program of the Canadian Plains Research Centre (CPRC) at the University of Regina and it continued without ASPP support. Unfortunately CPRC was almost closed down completely in 2012. For at least six months, I had no idea if my publisher was going to survive. During those months in limbo, the manuscript underwent a major editing, with copy editor Dallas Harrison cleaving off 20 percent of the manuscript's volume.

My luck changed with the hiring of Bruce Walsh as Director of the newly-minted University of Regina Press, in early 2013. Bruce had more than 20 years of experience in both academic and commercial publishing before coming to the University of Regina and, as a non-historian, he was shocked by the book even though I told him that it was not as ‘new’ as he thought it was. Bruce backed up his plan to turn *Clearing the Plains* into a trade book with a \$20,000 investment in marketing. Some of you may remember the “wall-of-books” and the full-page ad in the 2013 Congress schedule in Victoria. They The Press produced an online video trailer to promote the book.⁸⁰ When asked how I liked it, I had to admit that I did not know what to think of it as none of my friends had had that kind of promotion. The imagery from the trailer was used later in Charlie Angus' video.

There is no question that the timing was right for the launch of the book. *Idle No More* brought a new spirit of hope and activism to Indigenous issues and their portrayal in the media. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was working its way across the country, making headlines with the testimony of survivors and their families. Ian Mosby's explosive *Histoire sociale/ Social History* article on nutritional experiments conducted on residential school children was front-page news and truly opened the doors to widespread acceptance of my findings. As Susan Neylan observed, it captured the zeitgeist of the times. The success of the book was a combination of hard work, marketing skill, and ingenuity on the part of University of Regina Press and good luck.

Are there any lessons to be learned from *Clearing the Plains*? One is that there is an appetite for scholarly history in the general public. The challenge is to tell our stories in ways that are understandable to a non-professional audience. In researching and writing *Clearing the Plains*, I tried to reflect the events that transpired as accurately as I could understand them with the evidence at hand. As historians, this is, of course, our duty. In the three years since its publication, no one has disputed the events and outcomes described in the text. I did not characterize the events as "genocidal" or even "colonial" as those words, as important as they are, would have proved too provocative for some — probably many — readers. I wanted them to understand the story first and foremost. The undeniable brutality described in the last chapters of the book is something that should be recognized by readers across the political spectrum. Indeed, Andrew Woolford praised *Clearing the Plains* for not using genocide, "because Daschuk does not set himself as both prosecutor and judge, and instead allows the historical record to tell the story, his is a more convincing intervention in these debates than those who seek to impose a rigid Holocaust analogy onto the Canadian context."⁸¹

I first used the term in an opinion piece published in the *Globe and Mail* as a short hand to describe Canadian Indian policy within the paper's word limit.⁸² I admit that I was nervous about distilling a career's work into a single word that could have

had me written off as a radical. But the opposite proved to be true. The national debate over genocide has advanced so far, so fast. The interim report of the TRC, launched at the same time as the 2015 Congress, brought the term “cultural genocide” into the mainstream. As Ian Mosby wrote, recent polls have shown that almost 70 percent of Canadians accept the view that the residential schools implemented a system of “cultural genocide.”

There are of course still many holdouts regarding the label; but the conversation has shifted in a way that the events themselves are now widely accepted and only undeniable to those who are willingly blind to them. As a non-specialist, I will admit that my own position on the issue of genocide in Canada has changed many times, even over the past few years. For anyone still trying to make sense of genocide in the North American context, I recommend *Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America* edited by Woolford, Benvenuto, and Hinton⁸³ for a range of views and meanings.

I agree with the comments that the story told by *Clearing the Plains* would be improved through the integration of Indigenous knowledge and methodologies. In this perspective, the text is an artifact of the time when it was conceived. Although still an important issue in 2016, the battle over cultural appropriation was a heated, almost visceral, debate in the early 1990s.⁸⁴ Although oral history was one of the research fields of my comprehensive exams, I retreated to the documentary evidence available to me that contributed to the policy orientation described in Susan Neylan’s commentary. On many occasions, I have said that *Clearing the Plains* represents one-half of the story and that the other half should be written by an Indigenous scholar. Mary-Ellen Kelm is right to note that the book should serve as a platform for others to undertake more sophisticated studies. As scholars, we should welcome the fact that our work serves to motivate the next generation of scholars: it means that our work is relevant.

Clearing the Plains represents more than 20 years of work. It is a materialist history in an age where the interest in ideas prevails. It is a synthesis in a field that rewards specialization. It

was panned as worthless by at least one peer reviewer. It took so long to complete that my publisher went under. Its reliance on western documentary sources is something of an anachronism in 2016. Despite these weaknesses, the success of the book is as much as any of us can ask as historians. I am grateful for the kind words of the panelists and for all of the people I have met and shared my work with since 2013. I am also optimistic: a few weeks ago, a fourteen-year-old named Anya read *Clearing the Plains* and used it as the basis for her heritage fair project on Indigenous health. That is a cause for hope.

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Endnotes

- 1 For a review of the closing ceremony of the Truth and Reconciliation and links to its report, see: <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=890>.
- 2 James Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2013), xv.
- 3 Ibid., 123.
- 4 Government of Canada, *Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship*, <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/publications/discover/section-06.asp>. Accessed March 28, 2016. For a corrective to the history and national identity depicted in the official citizenship

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 - 6 *Ibid.*, 50.
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 - 8 Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life*, 162.
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 - 15A. Dirk Moses, “Genocide and Settler Society in Australian History” in *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History*, ed. A. Dirk Moses (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004) 4–48, cited in Andrew Woolford, *This Benevolent Experiment: Indigenous Boarding Schools, Genocide, and Redress in Canada and the United States* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015), 44.
 - 16 *Ibid.*, 23.
 - 17 Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944), cited in Andrew Woolford, *This Benevolent Experiment*, 23.
 - 18 Glen Coulthard, *Red Skins, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), Kindle edition, location 1459 of 5824.
 - 19 *Ibid.*, location 424 of 5824.

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- 21 Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains*, xvi. Maureen Lux, *Medicine That Walks: Disease, Medicine and the Canadian Plains Native People, 1880–1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); see also Richard White, “Review of American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History since 1492, by Russell Thornton; Vectors of Death: The Archaeology of European Contact, by Ann R. Ramenofsky,” *Ethnohistory* 37, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 69.
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- 24 Charlie Angus, “Four Horses: Official Music Video,” *YouTube* video, 5:25, posted by “U of R Press TV,” 20 November 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2n1EMWIUmn8>.
- 25 See Colleen Skidmore, “How to write, publish, and market a national bestseller,” *There’s A Hole In The Bucket Blog: University of Alberta Press*, 14 July 2015, <https://holeinthebucket.wordpress.com/scholarinresidence/how-to-write-publish-and-market-a-national-bestseller/>.
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- 30 Johnny D., Goodreads.com review, 2 April 2014, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/895111720>.
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- 32 Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, “Appetite for Redress,” *Canada’s History* 94, 4 (Aug/Sept 2014): 56.
- 33 See, for instance, Maureen Lux, *Medicine That Walks: Disease, Medicine and Canadian Plains Native People, 1880–1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Sarah Carter, *Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy* (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen’s, 1990); and John L. Tobias, “Canada’s Subjugation of the Plains Cree, 1879–1885,” *Canadian Historical Review* 64, no. 4 (December 1, 1983): 519–48.

- 34 In fact, Daschuk says precisely this in a December 2013 interview with NDP MP Charlie Angus: "One on One: Charlie Angus and James Daschuk," YouTube video, 11:31, posted by "U of R Press TV," 11 December 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gW7js37zK7Q>.
- 35 See, for instance, "Ottawa Ordered to Provide All Residential Schools Documents," *CBC News: Politics*, 30 January 2013 and Laura Stone, "Extend Mandate of Aboriginal Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Opposition," *Global News*, 2 May 2013.
- 36 The article in question was, Ian Mosby, "Administering Colonial Science: Nutrition Research and Human Biomedical Experimentation in Aboriginal Communities and Residential Schools, 1942–1952," *Historie sociale/Social History* 46, no. 1 (2013): 145–72. Some samples of published newspaper articles include Andrew Livingstone, "Nutrition experiments with native kids in 1940s fuels outrage," *Toronto Star* (17 July 2013). Bob Weber, "Canadian government withheld food from hungry aboriginal kids in 1940s nutritional experiments, researcher finds," *Globe and Mail* (16 July 2013).
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- 38 "Starvation Politics: Aboriginal Nutrition Experiments," *CBC Radio 1: The Current*, 18 July 2013.
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- 41 Jack Jedwab, "Knowledge of Historic Injustice Does Not Erode Contemporary Pride in the Country," Association for Canadian Studies (ACS) (23 March 2015), <http://acs-aec.ca/en/social-research/>, <viewed 11 August 2015>.
- 42 The "big six" ideas are that history students should be able to establish historical significance, use primary source evidence, identify continuity and change, analyze cause and consequence, take historical perspectives, and understand the moral or ethical dimensions of historical interpretations. Peter Seixas has articulated these in a number of publications and resources, such as on the website of The Historical Thinking Project [online] <http://historicalthinking.ca/historical-thinking-concepts>, <viewed 11 August 2015> and in print most recently with Tom Morton, intended for curriculum development for history teachers. Peter Seixas and Tom Morton. *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts* (Toronto: Nelson, 2012).
- 43 Justice Murray Sinclair, The prepared text of remarks by Justice Murray Sinclair, chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and Com-

missioners Marie Wilson and Chief Wilton Littlechild, delivered on 2 June 2015 when the TRC officially presented its 94 recommendations, in “For the Record,” *Maclean’s* <http://www.macleans.ca/politics/for-the-record-justice-murray-sinclair-on-residential-schools/>, <viewed 11 August 2015>.

- 44 James Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2013), xxii.
- 45 How often do historians quote this opening passage of L.P. Hartley’s 1953 novel *The Go-Between*? Quite a lot I imagine.
- 46 HI345: Native Peoples of Western Canada, Department of History, Wilfrid Laurier University, fall term 2014.
- 47 Specifically, my questions were as follows: 1) Epidemic diseases profoundly altered Aboriginal populations in Western Canada. How was tuberculosis an example of both epidemiological continuity and a completely different kind of pathogen in effect and outcome? 2) “Health as a measure of human experience cannot be considered in isolation from the social and economic forces that shape it.” How is *Clearing the Plains* ultimately the story of the colonization of Aboriginal health? What social and economic factors contributed to this process? 3) Daschuk shows his readers in graphic detail how conflict and violence ultimately lay at the heart of Aboriginal-Settler relations in the nineteenth century. Analyze the forms and functions this violence took. 4) While trade precipitated countless effects on human populations, it also had profound environmental and ecological impacts. Discuss these impacts in relation to Daschuk’s book. 5) *Clearing the Plains* is a study of the policies of colonialism and the politics of implementing them. As such, it gives emphasis to Aboriginal peoples as victims and as objects rather than agents in that history. Is this a fair description? What are the strengths and weakness of this approach? How are Aboriginal diversity, agency, and voice represented or not represented in the book?
- 48 Although Daschuk did not use the term genocide in *Clearing the Plains*, he has done so in several op-ed pieces following the publication of his book. For instance, in an opinion piece in the *Globe and Mail* in 2013, which also gave a nod to a fellow panel member’s article on nutritional experiments on Indigenous residential school students, he writes: “As the skeletons in our collective closet are exposed to the light, through the work of Dr. Mosby and others, perhaps we will come to understand the uncomfortable truths that modern Canada is founded upon — ethnic cleansing and genocide — and push our leaders and ourselves to make a nation we can be proud to call home.” James Daschuk, “When Canada used hunger to clear the West,” *Toronto Globe and Mail* (19 July 2013), <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/when-canada-used-hunger-to-clear-the-west/article13316877/>, <viewed 11 August 2015>.

- 49 Excerpts from student papers are with permission and shared here anonymously as agreed.
- 50 Anonymous student paper, HI345 fall 2014, Wilfrid Laurier University.
- 51 J.A. Macdonald, House of Commons *Debates*, 27 April 1882, 1186, Daschuk, 123, quoted in Maureen Lux, *Medicine that Walks: Disease, Medicine, and Canadian Plains Native People*, 1880–1940 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 69–70.
- 52 Anonymous student paper, HI345 fall 2014, Wilfrid Laurier University.
- 53 Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains*, 132.
- 54 *Ibid.* See especially chapters 7 and 8, 99–158. Quotation is from Daschuk, 132.
- 55 “Because overcrowding and malnutrition are primary environmental factors in the development of tuberculosis,” the critical tipping point to TB epidemic comes after they were confined to reserves in the 1880s. Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains*, 100.
- 56 *Ibid.*, 172.
- 57 *Ibid.*
- 58 *Ibid.*, 173.
- 59 Anonymous student paper, HI345 fall 2014, Wilfrid Laurier University.
- 60 Timothy Stanley, “Whose Public? Whose Memory? Racisms, Grand Narratives and Canadian History” in *To the Past: History Education, Public Memory, and Citizenship in Canada*, ed. Ruth W. Sandwell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 34.
- 61 Timothy Stanley, *Contesting White Supremacy: School Segregation, Anti-Racism, and the Making of Chinese Canadians* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011), 6.
- 62 Paulette Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010).
- 63 *Ibid.*, 89.
- 64 Sarah Carter, *Lost Harvests: Prairie Reserve Indian Farmers and Governmental Policy* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990); Lux, *Medicine that Walks*; and Treaty 7 Elders and Tribal Council, with Walter Hilderbrandt, Dorothy First Rider, and Sarah Carter, *The True Spirit and Original Intent of Treaty Seven* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997); John Tobias, “The Subjugation of the Plains Cree, 1879–1885” *Canadian Historical Review* LXIV, 4 (1983): 519–48.
- 65 There are numerous attempts to rectify this. For example, Education Professor Susan D. Dion’s project “Braiding Histories” is all about retelling Canadian History that is more respectful to Indigenous perspectives. Thinking that one might learn from their life histories and experiences, she sought to portray Aboriginal individuals and revise the

narrative about them for a new curriculum for the intermediate-level classroom. Susan D. Dion, *Braiding Histories: Learning from Aboriginal Peoples' Experiences and Perspectives* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009). She continues to promote Aboriginal-centred educational experiences in the public school system, acting as a consultant and report writer for a number of school boards. For instance, see Susan Dion, Krista Johnston, and Carla M. Rice, *Decolonizing Our Schools: Aboriginal Education in the Toronto District School Board* (Toronto: A Report of the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project, 2010), <http://ycec.edu.yorku.ca/files/2012/11/Decolonizing-Our-Schools.pdf>, <viewed 11 August 2015>.

- 66 Here Marker refers explicitly to schooling historiography, but his observations transcend the topical focus, I think, and summarize Indigenous-Settler historiography more generally. Michael Marker, "Ethnohistory and Indigenous Education: A Moment of Uncertainty," *History of Education* 29, no. 1 (2000): 81.
- 67 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: Zed Books Ltd., 1999), 28.
- 68 There have been recent developments that indicate that we might be optimistic on this point. A number of provinces, including those in the region upon which *Clearing the Plains* focuses (Manitoba and Saskatchewan), have implemented K-12 treaty education and mandatory components of training for pre-service teachers that relates to the idea that "we are all treaty people." Indeed, Saskatchewan's initiative was even entitled "The We are all Treaty People Project." "If someone enjoys the fruits of this land known as Canada, then they must recognize it was built on agreements/Treaties between its original inhabitants and the Crown." Jamie Wilson, "In Canada we are all 'treaty people'," *Winnipeg Free Press* (31 May 2012), <http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/opinion/analysis/in-canada-we-are-all-treaty-people-155890525.html>, <viewed 11 August 2015>; Canadian Race Relations Foundation, "We are All Treaty People receives 2014 Award of Excellence," Announcements: 2014 Best Practices, <http://www.crr.ca/en/news-events/articles/item/25199-2014-we-are-all-treaty-people>, <viewed 11 August 2015>.
- 69 The Pasts Collective members are: Margaret Conrad, Kadriye Ercikan, Gerald Friesen, Joceyln Létourneau, Delphin Muise, David Northrup, and Peter Seixas.
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- 71 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 72 Stefan Berger, "Narrating the Nation: Historiography and Other Genres" in *Narrating the Nation: Representations in History, Media, and*

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- 73 Chief Wilton Littlechild, *The prepared text of remarks by Justice Murray Sinclair, chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and Commissioners Marie Wilson and Chief Wilton Littlechild, delivered on 2 June 2015 when the TRC officially presented their 94 recommendations*, 2 June 2015, in "For the Record," *Maclean's*, <http://www.macleans.ca/politics/for-the-record-justice-murray-sinclair-on-residential-schools/>, <viewed 11 August 2015>.
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- 75 The phrases collective reconciliation and collective amnesia were taken from Fred Kelly, "Confession of a Born Again Pagan," in *From Truth to Reconciliation: Transforming the Legacy of Residential Schools*, eds. Marlene Brant Castellano, Linda Archibald, and Mike DeGagné, revised edition (Toronto: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2011) 29.
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- 78 Performing Turtle Island: Fluid Identities and Community Continuities, University of Regina-First Nations University (September 2015) <http://www.performingturtleisland.org/local-correspondent/>.
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- 83 Andrew Woolford, Jeff Benevento and Alexander Laban Hinton, *Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America* Duke University Press, 2014.
- 84 An example if this can be found in Rosemary J. Combe, "The Properties of Culture and the Politics of Possessing Identity: Native Claims in the Cultural Appropriation Controversy," *The Canadian Journal of Law and Jurisprudence* 6 (July 1993): 249–85.