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Canada starved aboriginal people into submission: Goar

Prairie historian discovers that Sir John A. Macdonald ordered policies that systematically starved aboriginal people to clear the West

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ALEXANDER J. ROSS / NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF CANADA

Crowfoot (Isapo-Muxika) head chief of the Blackfoot tribe in 1887: his people were among those affected by policies of using starvation against aboriginals.

By: Carol Goar Star Columnist, Published on Tue Jun 10 2014

You were never taught this version of Canadian history in school. If the guardians of the nation's collective memory are successful, your children will also be shielded from the truth.

Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first prime minister, deliberately starved thousands of aboriginal people to clear a path for the Canadian Pacific Railroad and open the prairies to white settlement. His "National Dream" cost them their health, their independence and – in many cases – their lives.

It is all meticulously documented in a new book, published in time for the 200th anniversary of Macdonald's birth. "The consequences of Macdonald's actions still resonate today," says author James Daschuk, a professor of kinesiology and health studies at the University of Regina.

He never expected *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* – which began as a doctoral dissertation – to become a national bestseller. He never imagined it winning awards and prizes. It took him 20 years to get to the bottom of the chasm between Canada's First Nations and the rest of the population. His questions kept getting bigger and more political. His publisher struggled to stay afloat. "I thought the project was cursed," he said in an interview. "I am over that now."

His book, which was published a year ago, has won four Saskatchewan book awards, the Clio Prize for Prairie history and – in an ironic twist – the 2014 Sir John A. Macdonald Prize for the best scholarly book in Canadian history.

The University of Regina Press is delighted with the all attention and the accolades it has received. But what Daschuk finds most gratifying is that his "out of style" approach to history has unlocked one of the nation's darkest secrets.

Unlike conventional historians, he works backwards. He starts with a deeply entrenched problem and traces it back to the source. He uses medical records, socio-economic data, environmental conditions and public attitudes, not dates and events. "I was lucky enough to work as a research assistant to Dr. Kue Young at the University of Manitoba medical school," he explained. "Early on I realized you could look at poor

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health outcomes almost as a measure of oppression and marginalization.”

Both nature and disease conspired against the aboriginal peoples of the prairies. First, the European fur traders infected them with contagious diseases – smallpox, measles, influenza – to which they had no immunity. Then climate change, the building of the CPR and the near-extinction of the bison, on which they depended for food, left them hungry and desperate.

They turned to Ottawa, expecting Macdonald to honour the [treaties](#) he had signed with them, guaranteeing food in times of famine and a livelihood in the thriving agrarian economy he envisaged for the western plains.

But he spurned their request. He ordered officials at the Department of Indian Affairs in Prince Albert to withhold food from First Nations until they moved to federally designated reserves far from the path of the CPR. Once they complied, they were trapped. They could leave only with the permission of the government’s Indian agent. Aboriginal women were raped. Men could not farm or hunt because they had no land and no freedom. If they complained, their rations were cut. Even if they were pliant, the food was substandard. One contaminated shipment triggered a mass outbreak of tuberculosis.

None of this was accidental. Daschuk found the directives Macdonald sent to federal officials telling them to deny food to them to First Nations. He found public statements in which Macdonald boasted about keeping the indigenous population “on the verge of actual starvation” to save government funds. He tracked the infected food shipment to its source, an American company in which a senior official of the Canadian government had a large financial stake.

His conclusion: “The uncomfortable truth is that modern Canada is founded upon ethnic cleansing and genocide.”

These are shocking phrases – not ones Canadians associate with their peaceful, tolerant country; not ones mainstream historians are eager to incorporate in their accounts; not one that educators want to plant in young minds; and certainly not ones to burnish the image the government seeks to project.

If these record-keepers are successful, the sanitized official version of Canadian history will prevail. Sir John A. Macdonald’s 200th birthday (Jan. 11, 2015) will be celebrated in fine style. Our children will be taught that their nation’s founding father was a hero. And we won’t have to reflect on what Daschuk’s discovery says about our forebears or ourselves.

Carol Goar’s column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

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Bob Beal

Few seem interested in commenting on this story, so after this I won't either, unless someone has questions.

Daschuk's book is an important one. People should buy it or take it out of the library. It is, though, a difficult book for general readers, and one from which it is too easy to jump to conclusions.

My major concern is that in a simplistic search for individuals to blame, people will misunderstand what Daschuk has accomplished and entirely miss the context that gives meaning to... » more

1 day ago 0 Likes



jnbgood

I'm glad for this column and this book -- mature adults should want to know the real story, noble fairy tales and national myth-making are for the weak-minded and insecure. The aboriginal people were cheated and plundered by our European ancestors. Who is surprised? And so many people have grown

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comfortable with plundering the planet itself. This is what human beings are. Civilization remains a fragile work in progress, a thin veneer on a violent history -- and underneath it all, as in... » more

1 day ago 1 Like



StinkingToe

May I suggest to the readers that they visit: danielnpaul.com to be further enlightened. Mr. Paul is a Mic Mac from Nova Scotia who wrote the powerful book, WE WERE NOT THE SAVAGES. In Halifax today, sits the statue of Lord Cornwall, the very man who ordered the bounties on scalps of all Mic Mac. Why is this man looked upon as a hero? He is a murderer and school children should be taught the truth. What messages are we sending to our children? His statue should be removed. I blame... » more

1 day ago 1 Like



Bob Beal

@StinkingToe Don't try to go down too many roads at once. This is a long way from what Daschuk writes about, though one can make connections if one does the work and is careful about the context.

Edward Cornwallis did not murder anyone. His scalp proclamation of 1749 had no practical effect. The colonial Nova Scotia government never bought a single scalp. Things were entirely different elsewhere. In New England and later in the area south of the Great Lakes, scalp proclamations were rather... » more

1 day ago 0 Likes



Easter of Eden

Yes, we know all of this. Now, can we move into the present and stop rehashing the past?

1 day ago 2 Likes

View 2 more replies



sciencguy

@Easter of Eden : It's people like who who would deny history and paint the conquerors as heroes. It's your kind who would abrogate all treaties and cheat First Nations peoples out of what little your ancestors have not already cheated them out of. It's people like you who proudly stand on mounds of skulls and fancy themselves better than everyone else. Let me tell you, sir; you're not better than anybody.

1 day ago 1 Like



workshardforhermoney

@sciencguy

Why do you jump down someone's throat for saying yes we know about all of this already. It was never said that we shouldn't know about it...All Canadians are beaten with the club of shame about what happened so many hundreds of years ago. Are you really suggesting that Canadians aren't aware of the atrocities committed against FNs? What should we do after we are educated on this facts? Give them free education to any and the best schools? Exempt them from having to contribute to... » more

1 day ago 0 Likes



kate38ca

Say what you like about Carol Goar's column. Whether she has all the facts accurate or not, the truth is it was our white ancestors who savaged our First Nation's people. Much has been said about the abuse their children suffered in residential schools. That's only part of the problem. And you know what, it continues to this day. Our paternalistic attitude towards them is still one of our greatest offences. Many say "we keep throwing money at them - what more do they want!" Maybe it's time we... » more

1 day ago 3 Likes



Easter of Eden

@kate38ca: Please do not speak for "we". You speak only for yourself. You sound pretty much on a high horse in your comment.

1 day ago 3 Likes



Bob Beal

@kate38ca One of the most significant contributions Daschuk makes in his book is his analysis of the way TB became endemic among western Canadian Indians.

TB was one of the major problems with the Indian Residential Schools system. I made much of this in my work during the residential schools litigation, especially of the fact that successive governments did nothing to slow the spread of the disease when obvious and inexpensive measure were at hand.

Daschuk, though his book is not about... » more

1 day ago 0 Likes



Koki Williams

"never taught this version of Canadian history"

For at least the last fifty years Carol, this is exactly the history taught in our schools.

"His conclusion: "The uncomfortable truth is that modern Canada is founded upon ethnic cleansing and genocide."

What country wasn't founded on the death of other nations?

2 days ago 5 Likes

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Koki Williams

@StinkingToe: Thank you for the reply.

I appreciate your reading recommendation and I'll look up, 'We Are Not The Savages'.

Regardless of country, most founders have at times, behaved admirably and at other times with dishonour.

The bad and good, history needs to be accurately remembered, for contributions to our present life.

1 day ago 2 Likes



workshardforhermoney

@Koki Williams
Thank you for that.

1 day ago 0 Likes



Bob Beal

There are several serious problems with this piece, including factual errors.

Daschuk's book is excellent. I do not disagree with very much that is actually in the book. But, with the greatest respect to the author and the publisher, this is not a very easy book for someone without considerable background in the history to follow and understand. I urge caution in reading it, and in drawing conclusions from it.

Daschuk's great contribution is his analysis of the role of tuberculosis over the... » more

2 days ago 2 Likes

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Bob Beal

@wayloose Yes, George Woodcock took some shots at us in that review. He was one of very few reviewers who was negative.

I think it is because Macleod and I, as another reviewer put it, "gently removed the mantle of heroism" that surrounded Gabriel Dumont, who was one of Woodcock's heroes and about whom Woodcock wrote a biography, Gabriel Dumont: The Metis chief and his lost world."

In particular, we firmly debunked Dumont's subsequent claims that had it not been for Riel's restraint, he... » more

1 day ago 0 Likes



Bob Beal



@jmacda Thanks for the reprint suggestion. I have been intending for a long time to scan the book and post it free on the Net, along with other materials. It is just hard to find the time to get this done.

1 day ago 0 Likes



Leon Arp

Aboriginal people in Canada and the US were treated horribly by many of the white settlers. This is a fact. And it should be recorded in the history books that children read in school.

2 days ago 6 Likes



workshardforhermoney

@Leon Arp

It is.

1 day ago 0 Likes



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