

## **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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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 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.