DELIBERATE OR ORGANIC – THE SMALLPOX EPIDEMICS IN COLONIAL BRITISH COLUMBIA 1862 - 1864

*The True Story of Canada’s ‘War’ of Extermination on the Pacific Plus the Tsilhqot’in and Other First Nations Resistance,* By Tom Swanky, Dragon Heart, 2012.

*The Smallpox War in Nuxalk Territory* By Tom Swanky, Dragon Heart, 2016

It has long been held as a common belief amongst North American Natives that the plagues of disease that engulfed them following European contact were not the result of simple transmission of the diseases by Columbian Exchange – the introduction of diseases not naturally found in the Americas – but of deliberate action taken by Europeans. The only documentary proof is an exchange of letters between General Amherst and one of his officers in the New York Colony that suggests the idea of biological warfare against Natives, but no proof that the idea was ever put into practice. Nonetheless, as European settlement pushed west the survivors of tribe after tribe attributed the arrival of smallpox to deliberate acts; the American Seventh Cavalry is often cited as giving infected blankets to the Indians in order to clear the lands for European settlement.

In Canada, James Daschuk has presented a complex weave of contact, starvation, government inaction, malnutrition, and disease to explain the decimation of the prairie Indians.[[1]](#footnote-1) He does not support the “infected blankets” concept but attributes the spread of illness to an organic process, with Europeans assisting the process via inaction as opposed to deliberate acts. Two books by Tom Swanky present an alternative argument for the spread of smallpox, and the resulting massive deaths amongst the First Nations of British Columbia – that smallpox was deliberately used by the [Governor James] “Douglas Regime” to clear the lands for European settlement with massive profits potentially accruing to those who did so.[[2]](#footnote-2) His first book – *Darkness –* merges his findings with the Chilcotin War of 1864; his second – *Smallpox War –* centers on the proposed roadway from Bentinck Arm to the Fraser River, the First Nations of the Nuxalk Territory (now Bella Coola and surrounds), and the nefarious scheme of George Cary, BC’s first Attorney General, and others to clear the lands of natives in order to profit substantially. Daschuk’s book has received praise from his fellow academics; Swanky’s two books have received only one slighting review from academia but massive support from First Nations throughout British Columbia.[[3]](#footnote-3) Given the present interest in reconciliation in Canada, it is time to appraise Swanky’s findings in an academic manner, notwithstanding Swanky’s non-scholarly credentials (he holds B.A. and J.D. degrees).[[4]](#footnote-4)

The Proclamation of George III in 1763, following the Seven Years’ War, set out the terms for claiming lands from the Indians. It recognized Aboriginal title and required any transfer of that title to be to the Crown and secured by treaty before transfer to European settlers. In order for Canada to obtain Rupert’s Land from the Hudson’s Bay Company, Canada had to agree to negotiate such treaties and did complete a series of 11 Numbered Treaties with the Natives between the Lakehead and the Rocky Mountains. The separate Crown Colony of British Columbia under Governor James Douglas did sign fourteen small “agreements” on Vancouver Island around present day Victoria and Nanaimo, where perhaps 775 non-natives had taken up residence by 1855.[[5]](#footnote-5) Madill holds that a lack of both population and funds prevented further treaties on the Island prior to 1858. Thereafter, for reasons that have been debated for decades, the policy of Douglas was not to recognize Aboriginal title. Indeed, the lack of treaties in British Columbia presented an issue when BC was about to enter Confederation and, from the 1970s to today, presented major problems for the British Columbia government in attempts to redress the lack of such treaties.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Swanky’s argument, in its’ simplest terms, is that the early BC colonial government did not enter into treaties as it had developed a plan to rid the Colony of Aboriginals by the spreading of smallpox and thus there would be no Aboriginal Title of consequence to bar settlement, the survivors being too small in number to oppose British laws and authority. Least one think this is far fetched, consider the elimination of the Beothuks of Newfoundland, President Jackson’s *Indian Removal Act,* the virtual extinction of California Indians, and the Indian Wars of the American West from Minnesota to Washington State. Deliberate acts to eliminate Aboriginals were not uncommon in the history of the United States and Canada.

While each of Swanky’s books present similar arguments, differing in the central locus under consideration, I found *Smallpox War* more cohesive in its approach and easier for a reader to follow and shall confine most of my remarks to the most recent title.

By 1862, the Fraser River Gold rush had ended and the Caribou Gold Rush, centered on Barkerville (“the biggest city west of Chicago and north of San Francisco”). The difficulty was access, limited to long and difficult trails from the mouth of the Fraser and an “American” route through the Okanagan. Bute Inlet was proposed as a faster and shorter alternative with Alfred Waddington proposing a highway to link Bentinck Arm to the Fraser River. Miners would take ship in Victoria, enjoy a pleasant passage up Georgia Strait, to Bute and Bentinck Arm (present day Bella Coola) and pass through the Chilcotin Territory to Fort Alexandria and Quesnel and then to the goldfields in the Barkerville area, the route from Quesnel to Barkerville being common to most routes. Bentinck Arm would blossom as an entry-port, trading and supply area with the lands rapidly escalating in value providing a handsome profit to those who controlled them. The problem was that those lands were occupied by First Nations peoples, with two villages having a combined estimated population of two to four thousand, to say nothing of the tribes in the Chilcotin Territory through which the highway must travel. Even the colonial government of the time required that lands for settlers be vacant of Aboriginal settlements.

Now comes the villain of *Smallpox War,* the eccentric George Cary, first Attorney General of British Columbia. Not much of Cary has survived over the years. His escapades in Victoria, his legal victory which decided that African-Americans arriving in the Colony were free under British law and could not be captured and returned to their “owners” as Americans had demanded, his bizarre behavior on Vancouver Island and later Barkerville, to his return to Britain and death in an asylum, perhaps due to the mercury based cure for syphilis. He builds the “Cary Castle” in Victoria, an extravagant edifice that occupied the lands now forming the formal residence of the Lieutenant Governor of BC (the Castle having burnt down). Swanky has delved into all existing colonial records to follow the strange career of Cary in British Columba and gives him the leading role in the scheme that follows.

Swanky follows the record of Cary and his cohorts in surveying and claiming the lands along Bentinck Arm during which he repeatedly states in official records that the lands are unoccupied which other records and diaries from the time clearly show was false. Cary is part of the group that pressured a steamship company to service the colony, the first voyage of which brought two smallpox carriers to Victoria to start the smallpox epidemic. It is Cary that is head of the “New Caledonia” consortium that wishes to feast on profits from the Bentinck Arm lands and who writes his successor in office to confirm the lands are unoccupied, a letter that still survives. Most importantly, it is Cary who leads the consortium which hired a young and inexperienced Francis Poole to lead a group of forty men to blaze the road to Fraser which – as Poole himself writes – spread the smallpox from tribe to tribe which resulted in the total extinction of First Nations villages and an overall death rate of 75% or more.[[7]](#footnote-7) Poole does not state the actions of his group were deliberate but acknowledges that his band of forty did start the epidemic. Through all of this, Swanky provides extensive citations to colonial correspondence and other primary materials.

There is certain word usage that might grate on scholarly readers. The Aboriginals who are swept away Swanky calls “the Ancestors” in keeping with Native tradition; the “Douglas *Regime*” stigmatizes the colonial government and provides reinforcement to Fisher’s claim that Swanky’s conclusion is unsupported by the evidence. Still, such critical comments on style amongst academics ignore the meat of Swanky’s argument. The claim, also advance by Fisher, that Swanky’s evidence (in *Darkening*) “is marshaled and manipulated to prove a predetermined point” ignores the practice of many well-regarded historians that do just that. A prime example is Carlo Ginzburg - the “founder of microhistory” - in his works *The Cheese and the Worms* and *Ecstasies. Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* although it must be admitted that Ginzburg more clearly delineates fact from supposition. Swanky has a mind trained in legal niceties that at times seems a tad overwrought. Still, those are points of style, not of substance. Fisher’s claim that *Darkening* places too much acceptance on First Nations oral tradition and newspapers of the day is certainly met by the copious citations in *Smallpox War* to colonial documents and letters and the memoirs of those who participated in the events. Perhaps Swanky fails to consider academic historiography on the subject but that is not his purpose in writing; rather, such a task falls to professional historians who might care to rebut Swanky’s conclusions.

In a series of talks with First Nations communities in British Columbia, Swanky’s two books have received overwhelming acclaim. With the increasing interest in First Nations history in Canada Swanky’s two books and theory deserve a more considered criticism than thus far awarded. Nor is the matter of minor import, certainly not to the First Nations of British Columbia and, perhaps, the continuing treaty process in that province. If indeed First Nations history is to become a standard, if not a required course for undergraduate students as has been advanced in some academic circles, the instructors of such courses shall have to be prepared to confront students, especially First Nations students, with more than a casual dismissal of Swanky’s conclusions– and to do that with an understanding of the arguments he raises. In my opinion, Swanky presents a convincing argument.

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1. James Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation and the Loss of Aboriginal Life,* Regina, University of Regina Press, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tom Swanky, *The True Story of Canada’s ‘War’ of Extermination on the Pacific Plus the Tsilhqot’in and Other First Nations Resistance,* Dragon Heart, 2012, and

   *\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_The Smallpox War in Nuxalk Territory,* Dragon Heart, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Robin Fisher, Review of *The True Story of Canada’s ‘War’ of Extermination on the Pacific Plus the Tsilhqot’in and Other First Nations Resistance,* *BC Studies* 182 (Summer 2014). Accessed at http://www.bcstudies.com/?q=book-reviews/true-story-canadas-war-extermination-pacific-plus-tsilhqotin-and-other-first-nations on Dec. 3, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Swanky has a long history of working with BC Natives and has various awards for his work on behalf of BC First Nations people. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dennis F. K. Madill (Research Branch, Corporate Policy, Department of Indian and Northern Affairs), *British Columbia Indian Treaties In Historical Perspective,* Accessed at http://www.aadncaandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100028952/11001000-

   28954#chp5 on Dec. 2, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See British Columbia Treaties Commission website at http://www.bctreaty.net. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Francis Poole, *Queen Charlotte Islands,* Vancouver, J. J. Douglas (reprint), 1972. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)