

Was Smallpox Weaponized Against First Nations?

Review of Tom Swanky's "The Smallpox War against the Haida"

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*"[S]ettlers in thrall to colonial ideology saw every unfenced meadow as waste land free for the taking, especially the most fertile land supporting native self-sufficiency." — Tom Swanky, *The Smallpox War against the Haida* (p 67).*

July 1, was recently celebrated in "Canada" as Canada Day by "Canadians." The Dominion of Canada was formed by the joining of three British North American colonies in 1867. It would serve as an Anglo bulwark against the French presence, and a bulwark against the American presence to the south. Over subsequent years, settler-colonialists spread from the Atlantic to the Pacific and Arctic coasts in what was deemed Canada. When the first European natives, the Norsemen, appeared in 1000 CE, Indigenous peoples had already inhabited the land for millennia, or as they often phrase it, since time immemorial. [1]

The Original Peoples in Canada were dispossessed, largely decultured, proselytized, assimilated, disappeared. The founding peoples of Canada, as depicted on [Canada's colonialist coat-of-arms](#), are the English and French. Not the Indigenous peoples. The official languages of Canada are English and French. Indigenous languages are not recognized federally as official; moreover, linguicide of Indigenous languages was an outcome of the Residential School programs. This all amounts, unquestioningly, to cultural genocide.

But the genocide is more than just the annihilation of a group's culture and language.

In [The Smallpox War Against the Haida](#), author **Tom Swanky** (with contributions from Shawn Swanky) amplifies the oral history of the knowledge keepers among The Peoples that hold the administration of **James Douglas**, first governor of "British Columbia" (1858-1864) and second governor of "Vancouver Island" (1851-1864) culpable for a genocide via the spreading of the smallpox virus in 1862-63. The Original Peoples would suffer a horrific number of fatalities and would be rendered unable to withstand seizure of their land nor the

implementation of colonial government and the meting out of colonial law.

Swanky humbly presents himself as conduit for the history of the knowledge keepers. He writes,

“My only contribution is a search of the documentary record for evidence that may reflect on the native narrative, one way or another. I am not writing history. I am reporting how knowledge keepers tell of the history of BC’s founding and considering to what extent that teaching is justified.”

Why mention this? Because while discussing the smallpox genocide with a learned gentleman, he asked who the source of the information was. I replied, Tom Swanky. I was informed that some academics consider Swanky’s thesis as disputed. This was nothing new, and it is to be expected that there would be a pushback. [2] However, while the book’s authorship is by Tom Swanky, the narrative is the [oral history](#) of the Original Peoples. The oral history of First Nations was recognized in 1997 as admissible in court by *Delgamuukw v British Columbia*. However, Alexandra Potamianos, while a third-year JD student at Osgoode Hall Law School concluded that the Supreme Court of Canada’s [Mitchell v Minister of National Revenue](#) (2001) “has made it more difficult for Indigenous claimants to use oral history to counter dominant understandings of Indigenous presence and relationships to land.” [3]

Granting further credence to Swanky was his reporting of the Tsilhqot’in’s oral history about a grievous wrong in which chiefs were abducted by provincial officials in violation of the sacred peace pipe ceremony. Six chiefs were subsequently hanged in Quesnel, BC. This is detailed in his book *The Great Darkening: The True Story of Canada’s “War” of Extermination on the Pacific plus The Tsilhqot’in and other First Nations Resistance* (2012). [4] In 2014, then BC premier [Christy Clark stated](#), “[We] confirm without reservation that these six Tsilhqot’in chiefs are fully exonerated for any crime or wrongdoing.”

Nonetheless, while the source of information is somewhat pertinent, what is unequivocally primary is the factuality of the information and the evidence and logic brought to bear on that information. Swanky listened to the oral history, assessed it and the historical record for verisimilitude, and applied logic to make sense of a narrative. Swanky, who holds a Doctor of Jurisprudence degree (among other academic credentials) connects the dots and builds a compelling case.

The Opening Scene of the Crime

It was common during that time period for First Nation peoples, the Tlingit, Haida, Ts’msyen (Tsimshian), Nuxalk, Tahltan, Heiltsuk, and others, to canoe down the water highway from the north to Fort Victoria and set up camps.

Fort Victoria was established by the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1843 as a trading post at the location the Lekwungen People called [Camosack](#) meaning “rush of water.” It is not always easy to nail down the proper Indigenous designation as another moniker has it that the Lekwungen people called it [Kuo-Sing-el-as](#), which means “place of strong fibre,” specifically the Pacific Willow. The WSÁNEĆ, Coast Salish neighbors of the Lekwungen, called Victoria METULIYE. The Haida called it *Micdolly*. (p ix)

The colonialist designation eponymous for an imperialist queen still persists, but probably

one day moral sentiment and a semblance of honest intent toward reconciliation will result in a re-designation of the city that would honor First Nations.

The Genocidaires

Swanky has named the perpetrators of the genocide, many of who have their names applied to various geographic or manmade structures. James Douglas, who allegedly used his position of governor to plan the smallpox epidemic, had his name applied to a mountain (actually a tall hill, since renamed by the WSÁNEĆ as [PKOLS](#) while the park around the "mountain" still honors an alleged genocidaire), schools, main street, etc. Francis Poole, a bizarre prevaricator, played a major role in his peregrinations throughout the province, often connected to where smallpox outbreaks had occurred. In Haida Gwaii, his name was elided and replaced by Haida designations. Racist MLA Robert Burnaby is a capitalist whose name was bestowed on a city in the centre of Metro Vancouver, a mountain, a lake, etc. The same applies to other questionable characters in the smallpox war such as Alfred Waddington who was behind the ill-fated Waddington's Road at Bute Inlet, MLA dr John Helmcken, AG George Cary, HBC insider Ranald McDonald, colonel Richard Moody, and others.

Indigenous characters are portrayed as well: Haida *hyas tyee* (roughly translates as "chief") captain John, *hyas tyee* Gitkun, *hyas tyee* Albert Edenshaw, great Haida *hyas tyee* Geesh, Ts'msyen diarist Arthur Wellington Clah, etc.

Solving the "Indian Question"

Pre-1862-63, the settler-colonialists were vastly outnumbered by the Indigenous peoples and presented Douglas with the quandary of how to solve the "Indian Question." Douglas was fervently against launching costly Indian wars. As a last resort, Douglas decided upon inflicting "cruelty and injustice" on the Indigenous peoples in the case that their suffering "could be given less regard than the 'evils' colonists associated with autonomous communities operating freely in colonizing zones..." (p 123-124) About this Douglas had no compunction since "natives who would not compromise their sovereign dignity should expect collective punishments. Otherwise in Douglas' words, *"the country will become intolerable as a residence for white-settlers."* (p 128)

"Cruelty and injustice" included starvation, ethnic cleansing (clearing The Peoples out of Victoria), and genocide via smallpox.

Smallpox-afflicted persons traveled by ship from San Francisco. Dubious inoculations were given to some of The Peoples. Dubious because, as Swanky relates, multiple eye-witness reported, and the timing of numerous outbreaks tends to corroborate, that Indigenous who were told that they were being vaccinated with harmless cowpox where instead inoculated with smallpox and, in that way, instead of contributing to controlling the disease, they were made into conduits for spreading the disease. Understanding inoculation as a tool of spreading the disease under the guise of vaccination is critical to understanding the "intent" required to prove genocide. The British Parliament's Vaccination Act of 1840 had outlawed inoculation precisely because of the ease with which the procedure produced epidemics. (p 139)

Quarantining is also a tool for controlling the spread of contagions. The Songhees (a Lekwungen people) would ride out smallpox on a nearby island. Tellingly, the Douglas administration would violate British law by forcibly expelling the Northerners, forcing sick

and healthy Indigenous people into close contact and then putting them on the move to carry the disease up the coast and into their home territories. The administration implied that decreasing the risk of infection for Victoria's resident colonists — most of whom had been vaccinated — justified actions that were certain to increase the First Nation death toll.

Swanky, furthermore, furnishes evidence showing that the pliable Poole, who was employed and coached throughout by MLA Robert Burnaby, set out and created his own "trail of blood" (chapters 10-13), thereby magnifying the smallpox epidemic.

Why Resort to Biological Warfare?

The settler-colonialists wanted the land. Land is regarded with deep reverence by most First Nations. [5] For colonialists, land is money, and private property is a key cornerstone of capitalism. If a people are disappeared, then the empty land is for the taking. Smallpox was a means to weakening the ability of the First Nations to resist dispossession.

Swanky had as his starting point the oral history of The Peoples. Swanky found that the oral history is supported by the written record. That history, according to knowledge keepers as reported by Swanky, reveals that, starting in 1862, the colonialist administration of James Douglas engaged in biological warfare by spreading smallpox throughout First Nation territories. That measures such as inoculations/vaccinations and quarantines were obviated or ineffective suggests the criminality of the colonial administrations.

Thus today, the once numerous Indigenous peoples constitute [5.9% \(2016 census\)](#) of the BC population. Where smallpox has not ended the existence of First Nations sovereignty in their unceded territories, colonial governments still resort to militarized RCMP and colonial courts to maintain colonial law. And when it suits the authorities, colonial court decisions anathema to politicians and corporations will be ignored. Thus today, the Wet'suwet'en are resisting [an assault on their unsundered territory](#) which is being scarred for a pipeline.

When the Indigenous peoples and the land they exist on is disregarded and hence disrespected, then *reconciliation* is diminished to a mere buzzword. It feels good to talk about it, but where is the action to back up the rhetoric?

That is why Swanky's *The Smallpox War Against the Haida* is important. It is an extraordinary historically based opus resulting from detective work that combs the historical record, names the criminals, and points out legal redress to the grave crimes committed against the Haida by settler-colonialists.

If the admonition against forgetting history is a precautionary wisdom, then *The Smallpox War Against the Haida* ought to be promulgated in media; be taught in educational institutions, including in public schools; and should set in motion appropriate steps at atonement, beginning with a sincere apology. Indirectly, the book also provides a template for some steps for settler-colonialist society to achieve genuine reconciliation with The Peoples who were appallingly wronged, such as:

1. listening to the Original Peoples,
2. taking into account the evidence supporting the oral history,
3. listening to one's conscience and what one's sense of morality dictates,
4. publicly exposing history's dissemblers and their disinformation and recasting the information and the dissemblers in an honest light,
5. educating people about the racism/supremacism that underlies the crimes of

- colonization,
6. recognizing the sovereignty of Original Peoples on their unceded territory,
 7. recognizing the inherent humanity of all human beings, and
 8. living according to the [golden rule](#). [6]

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Notes

1. See, e.g., Arthur J. Ray, *I Have Lived Here Since the World Began: An Illustrated History of Canada's Native People*, 1998.
2. There is a colonialist mindset that what has been achieved by the dispossession and depopulation of the Original Peoples is history and as such a *fait accompli*, and many such people will not be deterred from a stubborn mindset despite their education, sense of morality, and what critical thinking would postulate. For an example of a seemingly inflexible colonialist mentality see Melvin Smith, *Our Home or Native Land?* 1995.
3. "[The Challenges of Indigenous Oral History Since Mitchell v Minister of National Revenue](#)," *Appeal*, 26, 2021, p 22.
4. [Review](#) of *The Great Darkening*.
5. See, e.g., Joe Sacco, *Paying the Land*, 2020. The comic-styled non-fiction relates the inextricable relationships to the land for the Dene. Anthony J. Hall, *Earth into Property: Colonization, Decolonization, and Capitalism*, 2010.
6. Despairingly, as reported on 23 January 2023, of the 94 Calls to Action the Truth and Reconciliation Commission put forward, [only 13 have been completed in seven years](#).

The Smallpox War Against the Haida

By Tom Swanky

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In Sept. of 1861, frustrated by the refusal of native communities, including especially the Haida, to submit for rule by the foreign power that he represented, "Hyas Tyee" James Douglas of the "Yaatsxaaydagaay" at "Micdolly" turned to, in his words, "injustice and cruelty." This book documents Gov. Douglas' resort to injustice and cruelty, especially in the Crown's relationship with the Haida, and Francis Poole's career as a foot soldier delivering cruelty to the Haida, Tsilhqot'in and Nuxalk.

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