

[Born to die: disease & New World conquest, 1492-1650]

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Within the academy, to say nothing about public life beyond, coming to terms with the disease factor has been no easy matter. Indeed, [Harris] has the courage and integrity to chastise himself in one of his essays – 'Industry and the Good Life around Idaho Peak' – for failing to take it into account years ago. 'My proposition that no Native people had ever lived near Idaho Peak,' he admits of an earlier research endeavour, 'is absurd,' adding that this particular scholarly blind spot 'grows out of the common assumption, with which I grew up, that a mining rush had been super-imposed on wilderness' (p. 195). The ethnographer James Teit, among other diligent observers, helps Harris set the record straight. The hoopla surrounding the Columbus Quincentenary in 1992, warts and all, also advanced the case for more sophisticated understanding of the relationship in the Americas between Natives and newcomers. Not surprisingly, given the surfeit of publications that sought to mark(et) the moment, several worthwhile titles pertaining to disease and empire slipped through the cracks of the review process, at least in geography journals. Meanwhile, other relevant titles continue to appear. A volume edited by John W. Verano and Douglas H. Ubelaker deserves more attention than it has received up to now, and a long-awaited synthesis by Noble David Cook has materialized. These two contributions will assist the reader interested in what Harris has to say in taking stock of an evolving, frequently controversial field of study and relating it to larger debates about the nature and meaning of colonialism.

Verano and Ubelaker take issue, as has William M. Denevan (1992), with the 'pristine myth', pointing to the inconsistencies that exist between literature in the field of demography that portrays the Americas before Columbus as 'a disease-free paradise' (p. 1) and literature in the fields of physical anthropology and paleopathology that reveals 'a variety of disease conditions in ancient America.' The latter scenario is spelled out by Donald J. Ortner, the first of Verano and Ubelaker's almost 40 contributors, who notes, for example, that treponematosi s 'was certainly present in the New World before 1492' (p. 12) but who also observes of syphilis, commonly held to be of American origin, that 'unequivocal cases reliably dated to before 1492 are uncommon in New World archaeological skeletal samples.' An essay by Verano supports Ortner's assessment, with several sources cited for the pre-Columbian existence of tuberculosis, leishmaniasis, and intestinal parasites. Because traces of disease rarely show up on skeletal remains, it is from mummified tissues, not human bones, that we learn most about precontact contagion in the Americas. Arthur C. Aufderheide goes on to caution against 'the peril of extrapolating isolated observations of disease-related demographic changes to the population of an entire region or even a continent' (p. 166). Equally level-headed is the admonition on the part of the research team writing on Florida 'that scholars move away from monocausal explanations of population change to reach a broad-based understanding of decline and extinction of Native American groups after 1492' (p. 35).

Where [Betty J. Meggers] is wary and conservative, and at times disdainful and outright dismissive, [Henry F. Dobyns] is typically bold and assertive, arguing that 'native trading centers inevitably became foci of communicable diseases' (p. 215). Evidence on abandoned settlements that Meggers would consider flimsy at best is manipulated by Dobyns for Indian groups across North America to infer that 'greater demographic decline than occurred during the "killing years" was required to bring down an established native trading center' (p. 220). Meggers recognizes the role that disease played in postcontact depopulation; she seems loath, however, to concede that preinvasion numbers could ever have been of the magnitude that Dobyns champions, not just in

Amazonia but across the length and breadth of the Americas. Clearly, despite Alfred W. Crosby's rosy assessment that Verano and Ubelaker's editorial efforts constitute 'a major answer to the demand for precise scholarship' (p. 277), much remains to be done in the field of Native American population history if we are ever to reach the tolerant understanding that 'details differed enormously from place to place and time to time' (pp. 277-78). Crosby's own view of the situation, I suspect, is not as commonly agreed upon as one would perhaps like to believe.

FULL TEXT

The European conquest of America, it is now increasingly acknowledged, can only be understood properly if the role played by disease transfer is carefully considered in the context of a complex interplay of other key determinants. Within the academic confines of geography, awareness of the catastrophic impact that Old World diseases had on Native American land and life may be traced back to the work of Carl Sauer and his associates at Berkeley. However, for reasons that are rather difficult to fathom, Sauer's innovative, pro-Native views of the dire consequences that European expansion had on the non-European world have often been better appreciated outside the ranks of the discipline than within it. 'There is a dark obverse to the picture,' Sauer (1963, 147) told delegates attending the Social Science Research Conference in San Francisco in 1938, 'which we have regarded scarcely at all.'

A half-century later, farther up the coast from where Sauer lived and worked, Cole Harris has wrestled hard and engaged long to produce a stunning collection of essays on how Europeans reached, penetrated, settled, and imposed both themselves and their ways on what is now Canada's westernmost province, British Columbia. Harris reveals himself very much disposed to examine 'this Pacific corner of North America' (p. xi) through the lens of Sauer's 'dark obverse', a perspective that allows him to marshal the disease factor not merely to inform but, more importantly, to shape his project and, by so doing, to lend it a compelling, persuasive coherence. He is assisted in his labours on two occasions by co-authors Robert Galois and David Demeritt, and throughout by the splendid cartography of Eric Leinberger. The historical premise that anchors the project, yet at the same time propels it forward, does not assume British Columbia at European contact to have been an untamed wilderness but instead (p. xvi) 'an erased Native world'. From this vantage point, Native encounters with colonialism assume a markedly different resonance than those found in more conventional, pro-European portrayals. Informed also by judicious reflection on recent developments in social theory and postcolonial literature, this provocative book is one of the most cogently argued, most elegantly crafted, and most intellectually stimulating contributions to historical geography in recent decades.

Harris lays the foundation by constructing how an outbreak of smallpox in 1782-83 – one regional episode in a pandemic of continental dimension – depopulated much of the area around the Strait of Georgia prior to systematic European colonization. Though he concedes that 'Native accounts of the arrival of smallpox are scattered and fragmentary' (p. 4) Harris takes pains to ensure that they get a fair hearing, often in words recorded by European eyewitnesses. David Thompson, for example, recalls being asked: 'Is it true that the white men ... have brought with them the smallpox to destroy us? Is this true, and are we all soon to die?' (p. 14). Native oral testimony is reinforced time and again by written European observation. Captain George Vancouver states: 'This deplorable disease is not only common, but it is greatly to be apprehended is very fatal among them' (p. 13), for Native Americans were immunologically defenseless to Old World contagions and thus extremely vulnerable to maladies such as smallpox.

Harris considers Native and European sources 'mutually reinforcing' (p. 17) on the subject of disease transfer and its disruptive repercussions. While the precise rate of mortality associated with the precontact epidemic of 1782-

83 is impossible to calculate, Harris reckons that 'given evidence from the Plains that this was hemorrhagic smallpox, and the dense, previously unaffected populations it encountered' (p. 18) Native depopulation in the order of three-quarters, a figure that Diamond Jenness recovered from oral testimony a century and a half later, 'may well be conservative.' Harris contends that depopulation from this epidemic, and others that followed it, created a spatial vacuum, facilitating not only European appropriation of Native land and resources but also the illusion that the immigrant society that British Columbia eventually became put down its roots in unoccupied terrain. As 'beautiful' B.C. today grapples with the thorny issue of Native redress, Harris (p. xvii) puts the matter succinctly thus: 'Our luck has been built on others' misfortune, and we should appreciate the havoc our coming has wrought.' There are, metaphorically speaking, many British Columbias in the Americas.

With the disease factor established as an interpretive touchstone, the stage is then set for eight subsequent essays to highlight particular elements of the resettlement process, including (1) European forays into the interior to start a cordilleran fur trade and exploit gold deposits; (2) the consolidation of British authority, and strategies of domination, in the Lower Mainland; (3) the emergence of distinct population groupings around the year 1881, when a census reveals Chinese immigrants occupying spaces alongside a growing number of whites and a greatly diminished number of Indians; (4) the human struggle with, and technological conquest of, season, scale, time, and distance, as integration into the world economy transformed natural resources into economic assets; and (5) patterns of agricultural and industrial activity. Harris concludes by asserting: 'If we better understand the tensions inherent in an immigrant society, and realized that immigrant opportunities in this remarkable place have always rested, and continue to rest, on the displacement of Native peoples, we would, I think, live here more thoughtfully and much more gently' (p. 275). How many of his fellow British Columbians – and, one wonders, the offspring of immigrants all across Canada, especially in Quebec – are prepared to see it and feel it through the moral prism that Harris does?

Within the academy, to say nothing about public life beyond, coming to terms with the disease factor has been no easy matter. Indeed, Harris has the courage and integrity to chastise himself in one of his essays – 'Industry and the Good Life around Idaho Peak' – for failing to take it into account years ago. 'My proposition that no Native people had ever lived near Idaho Peak,' he admits of an earlier research endeavour, 'is absurd,' adding that this particular scholarly blind spot 'grows out of the common assumption, with which I grew up, that a mining rush had been super-imposed on wilderness' (p. 195). The ethnographer James Teit, among other diligent observers, helps Harris set the record straight. The hoopla surrounding the Columbus Quincentenary in 1992, warts and all, also advanced the case for more sophisticated understanding of the relationship in the Americas between Natives and newcomers. Not surprisingly, given the surfeit of publications that sought to mark(et) the moment, several worthwhile titles pertaining to disease and empire slipped through the cracks of the review process, at least in geography journals. Meanwhile, other relevant titles continue to appear. A volume edited by John W. Verano and Douglas H. Ubelaker deserves more attention than it has received up to now, and a long-awaited synthesis by Noble David Cook has materialized. These two contributions will assist the reader interested in what Harris has to say in taking stock of an evolving, frequently controversial field of study and relating it to larger debates about the nature and meaning of colonialism.

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A nuanced, spatially sensitive analysis is that of Jane E. Buikstra on 'Diet and Disease in Late Prehistory.' Corn, she observes, was 'of central dietary importance throughout the Americas' (p. 87). Given that extreme dependence on corn often results in nutritional deficiencies and disorders, such overreliance at the time of contact 'may have influenced conditions conducive to depopulation in the face of new, imported pathogens' (p. 88). Buikstra concludes that 'marked dependency' (p. 98) in such areas as the Ohio Valley and the Nashville Basin means that 'compromised health status among late prehistoric people is a significant factor in understanding post-Columbian depopulation.' The research team reporting on New England and the Maritimes finds no such compromise there; the peoples living in that region were 'largely hunter-fisher-gatherers,' and they were 'generally healthy' (p. 149).

Ubelaker then furnishes an essay on 'North American Indian Population size,' a useful feature of which is tabular summaries of estimates of contact numbers and postcontact decline. Divergent views abound, from the Kroeber (1939) low of 900 000 Natives alive at contact to the Dobyns (1966) high of almost 10 million. Ubelaker sticks with his own (1988) earlier estimate of 1 894 280 Natives alive in 1500, a continental figure he breaks down into ten different regional components and then charts through the next four centuries, and beyond, to 1970. Table 5, 'Variability in Population Reduction among North American Culture Areas,' indicates a range of contact numbers from 454 200 in the Southwest to 37 500 in the Great Basin, with nadir levels being reached earliest in the Southeast (around 1800) and latest in California (in 1940). Ubelaker's continental overview is fleshed out with detailed analyses at the regional level by Dean R. Snow on the Northeast, Steadman Upham on the Southwest, Robert Boyd – with whom Harris has some quibbles over the timing and identification of certain disease outbreaks – on the Northwest Coast, Michael K. Trimble on the Missouri River Valley, and Russell Thornton, Jonathan Warren, and Tim Miller on the Southeast.

Next, Betty J. Meggers and Henry F. Dobyns square off and raise the heat of debate considerably. Meggers, who characterizes the Amazon Basin as 'a counterfeit paradise' (p. 203) that has 'severe limitations for human exploitation,' has long favoured archaeological, ecological, and ethnographic data over the historical record. The latter's eyewitness accounts, she claims, 'exaggerate the indigenous population density,' which Meggers reckons would have been approximately 0.3 persons per square kilometre, resulting in a contact-period estimate of between 1.5 million and 2 million inhabitants 'for Amazonia as a whole.' This estimate is far less than the figure of 5 million recently suggested by Linda A. Newson (1996) in a comprehensive critique of the work of Meggers and other Amazon Basin specialists.

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While the geographical sweep of Verano and Ubelaker is decidedly hemispheric, they and their contributors pay more attention to North America than to other parts of the New World. The opposite applies in Cook's case, for while Native experiences in the United States and Canada are addressed, it is on diverse Latin American settings that his text concentrates. Five crisp, informative essays – Cook's footnotes and bibliography alone warrant perusal – (1) discuss the demise of Native Americans in the Caribbean in the immediate aftermath of Columbus; (2) trace the spread and impact of the first pandemics, most likely smallpox and then measles, between 1518 and the early 1530s; (3) document how these, and other, Old World diseases accompanied New World conquests; (4) reconstruct regional outbreaks of disease from the 1530s to the end of the 16th century; and (5) evaluate disease scenarios up to the mid-17th century, by which time European intrusion had had a profound effect on Native American welfare, or the lack of it. Cook is especially critical in his introduction and conclusion of 'the proponents of cruelty' (p. 12), who he claims continue to emphasize the Black Legend in their analysis of colonial relations. If one is perhaps not surprised to see the name of David E. Stannard (1993) singled out, the inclusion of Ronald Wright (1992) appears curiously off target. The matter will never be resolved, as Cook well realizes, so he can expect his share of flak. As we negotiate our way across this particular minefield, it may serve a useful purpose to recall the sober assessment of the late Charles Gibson (1964, 403):

The Black Legend provides a gross but essentially accurate interpretation of relations between Spaniards and Indians. The Legend builds upon the record of deliberate sadism. It flourishes in an atmosphere of indignation, which removes the issue from the category of objective understanding. It is insufficient in its awareness of the institutions of colonial history. But the substantive content of the Black Legend asserts that Indians were exploited by Spaniards, and in empirical fact they were.

There are times when, in trying to imagine how it all must have looked through Indian eyes, it seems to me that the Black Legend indeed resembles more a Black Reality. It behooves us, surely, to do something about what happened in history by making room, in our works and in our lives, for those who considered America their home long before the arrival of Europeans.

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