

Smallpox War Against British Columbia's Indigenous Peoples: Gussying Up Colonialism?

Interview with author Tom Swanky

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Global Research, August 11, 2023

Region: [Canada](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Law and Justice](#)

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Colonialism has as its aim gaining ownership/control of the land and its resources regardless of whether or not the land was already populated by an Indigenous people. Morality aside, colonialism has been very successful in the context of Turtle Island. This is also true in northwestern Turtle Island, where the colonies designated "Vancouver Island" and "British Columbia" (merged in 1866 to become a province of Canada) were created through the dispossession of First Nations.

Dispossession of a people is a thoroughly nasty business, and it blatantly violates one of the biblical ten commandments, one that is encoded in law around the world, namely, "Thou shalt not steal." Those who have gained property and wealth, and their progeny who continue to profit from the dispossession of Others, would like to paint a prettier picture of colonialism.

Sam Sullivan, a former mayor of Vancouver and former cabinet minister in the BC legislature, is the easy-to-listen-to narrator of Kumtuks, a series of historical videos which are usually interesting and informative. However, Kumtuks often presents a gussied-up narrative around the history of colonialism. Usually omitted from the discussion is that the land that settler-colonialists came into possession of was stolen from Original Peoples who had their own laws, beliefs, economies, and culture.

The Kumtuks video "[1862 Smallpox Epidemic: British Columbia's First Major Contagious Outbreak](#)" claims to be based in the oral history of the Haida. The source given is the book *Raven's Cry* (1966, 1992) by American author Christie Harris. Both versions of the book are interesting and informative for the historical perspective they shine on the Haida and the interactions they had with the Iron Men (as the Haida called the White men). The versions

differ little, but the 1992 version is preferable because of the respect shown for the names and designations used by the Haida. Bill Reid, whose mother was Haida, is a renowned artist who illustrated *Raven's Cry* and was a mentor to Harris. Harris also spent time with the family of Haida artist Charles Edenshaw. Harris, Reid, and Edenshaw are all deceased. So I will refer to Harris's book to ascertain the verisimilitude of what Sullivan says in his narration.

What does *Raven's Cry* indicate about Haida feelings toward the presence and behavior of the Iron Men?

Haida hostility, as well as the stormy moat around the Haida islands, discouraged American miners. Nevertheless, James Douglas, Chief Factor for the Hudson's Bay Company's western district and Governor of the little colony of Vancouver Island, advised Her Majesty Queen Victoria that it would be well to maintain a gunboat on the northwest coast to protect British rights. (p 102) [Emphasis added.]

Harris indicates the priority of Douglas. Douglas is not said to be protecting Haida rights. This was about colonialism: protecting rights claimed by the British, rights that presumably included sailing a gunboat in Haida waters.

The Haida did not acknowledge British rights. When the Company sent its schooner *Recovery* in with a group of Company miners in 1852, it was thwarted. The Haida simply waited for the white men to blast. Then they rushed in and grabbed the treasure. It was their gold. Let anyone else try to take it! (p 102)

Clearly, Douglas's priority was objectionable to the Haida.

The "native chiefs" objected to colonialism:

"What we don't like about the [White man's] government is their saying this, 'We will give you this much land,'" they protested. "How can they give it when it is our own? We cannot understand it. They have never bought it from us or our forefathers. They have never fought and conquered our people and taken the land that way, and yet they say now they will give us so much land — our own land!" (p 134)

Sdast'a'aas Saang gaahl Eagle chief chief 7indansuu felt likewise:

"By what right do the King George men claim this land?" 7indansuu demanded of Governor Douglas. "There are no treaties with the tribes. There was no conquest by warriors." (p 115)

What comes across strongly in *Raven's Cry* is what Raven's cry was about. In Haida mythology humans were brought into the world by Raven coaxing them out from a clamshell; these people were the first Haida. With the arrival of the greedy colonialists, Raven saw his Haida robbed of their land and their lifeways.

In a lighter vein, Harris wrote,

Unfortunately, Governor Douglas retired that year, though not before making a strong case for generous treatment of Indians, or before setting aside many reservations. The Queen had honored him with a knighthood. (p 132)

Harris generally comes across as respectful and sympathetic to the Haida, but she still seems mired in a colonialist mindset. Why is taking the land of a people and setting aside some *reservations* for them considered “generous”? If a thief steals my library and returns a few of the books, is the thief generous?

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Author Tom Swanky has a background having studied journalism, political science, and holding a Doctor of Jurisprudence degree. Therefore, he has the bona fides to listen to the Original Peoples and research what the evidence is for the oral histories. In his latest book, [The Smallpox War against the Haida](#) (review), he relates how the Haida were wary of smallpox.

Because the narrative in “1862 Smallpox Epidemic: British Columbia’s First Major Contagious Outbreak” is starkly at odds with the narrative in The Smallpox War against the Haida, I turned to Swanky to discuss the different narratives. I also reached out to Sam Sullivan through the Global Civic Policy Society which produces the Kumtuks videos, but have yet to hear back.

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Kim Petersen (KP): Sullivan narrates, “Dr John Helmcken vaccinated 500.... Douglas had Helmcken send vaccine around the province.” Yet, from a reading of your book, there is so much more to say about Helmcken and how “vaccination” was carried out.

Tom Swanky (TS): *The Police Commissioner advised a journalist that Helmcken personally had administered a procedure to 500 natives on April 26, 1862, in a context where multiple observers reported that the disease – as of that date – remained confined to just one of the People represented at Victoria and these observers believed the disease still could be contained among that one People.*

However, within a few days after the disclosure of Helmcken’s program, witnesses then began reporting that some noticeable number of the natives who he supposedly had “vaccinated” were seen to have the disease. Also, within ten days of Helmcken’s vaccination program being disclosed, that is, within the time usually required for an infection to become visible, the disease suddenly exploded so that it was now no longer visible among only one People, it was everywhere. This evidence is consistent with Helmcken’s program having been all or in part, not “vaccinations” but inoculation with actual smallpox. And thereby creating the opportunity for the disease to become rooted among new Peoples and spread widely as a result of inoculation epidemics. It was because of the risk of inoculation creating epidemics that Parliament had outlawed inoculation in 1840. To administer inoculations in 1862 was a violation of British law, and so any use of the procedure would have to be concealed.

There is substantial other evidence of inoculation being used to spread the disease in the North Pacific during 1862. The Oweekeno said in 1862 that the medicine the colonists sold them started the disease. Numerous other cases can be documented where doctors administered what was advertised as a “vaccination” program, but after which the disease exploded among the targeted population. In fact, there is little to no evidence that “Douglas had Helmcken send vaccines” around the colonies. At Kamloops, the HBC post manager reported administering a procedure to the surrounding natives all summer – however, by

late fall, independent observers were reporting that the indigenous residents in the Kamloops area had been virtually exterminated.

One can draw two lessons from Helmcken's advertised "500 vaccinations." The first lesson is that each stage of the disease undergoing an advance – beginning with its original importation in 1862 – was accompanied by some sort of public relations campaign that subsequent events would show was misdirection by those advancing the disease. The second lesson is that historians who come to this material unaware of their own colonial predispositions, or of the phenomenon of confirmation bias, seize on the first thing they read without doing the painstaking work of then seeing how events actually unfolded.

KP: The Kumtuks video mentions numerous conflicts among the Northern First Nations and the Southern First Nations, but he omits mention of any conflicts between First Nations and settler-colonialists. Instead the colonial administration of Vancouver Island is portrayed as a peacemaker in having the Northerners towed up island past Nanaimo. In *Raven's Cry*, Harris wrote:

More than ever before, futile rage against the overpowering white man turned on fellow Indians. Understandably, it turned most fiercely on the Haida, the lords of the coast. Centuries of resentment burst out, especially among the northern neighbors.

The native people raged with resentment at these white men; but the rage turned on their ancient rivals. On June 12th, a thousand Haida reinforcements arrived at Victoria. (p 117-118)

The Kumtuks video seems not in concordance with *Raven's Cry* or what you have written of the oral history presented to you by knowledge keepers of The People?

TS: *If a researcher is unaware of the issues concerning the means through which the Crown asserted control among many of the indigenous Peoples – which diverse knowledge keepers allege was through a smallpox assisted genocide – then the researcher is unlikely to be attuned to the challenges presented by the sources.*

On the one hand, among the colonial sources are the multiple efforts at misdirection – which were an integral part of the smallpox program executed by the colonial authorities – and, after 1862, there followed the usual post-genocide or post-criminal activity of denying the shameful or wrongful thing done.

On the other hand, among the indigenous sources there is the necessity of coping with having been purposefully targeted for destruction by the colonial authorities and the incoming colonial community. For the indigenous Peoples, the post-1862 task became walking a fine line so as not to offend a community that has shown a propensity to destroy you and yet wanting to work on the political task of undoing the loss of control brought about by what is understood to have been a smallpox genocide. So, for example, one will see praise offered for Douglas – politely overlooking his smallpox policies to focus on the time before April/June of 1860 when he had set a precedent of colonial respect for indigenous customs in inter-community relations and before he had begun the process of displacing indigenous authority. In addition, in things published primarily for the benefit of a colonial audience, one will see a desire not to be offensive but to cater to the colonial mythology concerning indigenous relations.

Very early in my work, I was advised by more than one elder that if I truly wanted to learn about the teaching in indigenous communities, I would learn by listening to what elders and knowledge keepers told each other or their communities and not by asking questions for someone to tell me some thing – for members of the colonial community often are told what they want to hear or a version satisfying some political need.

KP: The video depicts Douglas lamenting that some Indigenous peoples did not accept the preventative measures against smallpox. However, in your book, you noted how Douglas had tried to scare Haida by warning of a fake outbreak of measles. (Swanky, p 84-86) Harris in *Raven's Cry* wrote:

Alarmed at the thought of what might happen next, Governor Douglas tried to banish all the natives with a measles scare, which had often worked before. But the native people weren't frightened by it now. (p 118)

TS: This is all just fiction by someone who is not very familiar with the actual record. Nowhere does Douglas do any such lamenting. In fact, Bishop George Hills reported that the indigenous Peoples where the smallpox first broke out at Victoria were ready to do anything asked of them. Nowhere were natives reported to resist vaccinations – at least until the problems associated with inoculation began to emerge – but there are several accounts of natives going out of their way to become vaccinated.

Douglas used the false threat of an imminent outbreak of measles in June of 1860, in conjunction with his first attempt to assert control over the autonomous indigenous Peoples operating around Victoria. Dr. Helmcken proposed this plan and the hope was that all the autonomous communities would flee and then, when they returned, they would be assigned to spaces and come under the Police Commissioner's control. Helmcken made this proposal in the Assembly and it was reported in the newspapers. Since Capt. John, the Haida leader who led the resistance to Douglas's policies – and some other natives – were fluent in English, they would have learned from the newspapers that the threat was part of a dishonest plan to assert control over them. There was every reason not to be frightened and to be resentful of this dishonest trick.

KP: Douglas is portrayed as a defender of First Nations. The video gives Douglas a pass for having been away on the mainland when police towed Northerners into the ocean to return home. But the Kumtuks video states that the oral history of elders tells of Douglas trying to save lives by having the Haida towed home.

TS: This is not true. In another case of what turned out to be misdirection, the Police Commissioner advised the newspapers that he and a colonial gunboat would accompany north the Haida expelled on June 11 so that they would have safe passage past their enemies in Georgia Strait. British law in 1862 was that those with the custody of smallpox carriers had a legal duty to keep a safe distance between the infected people and any nearby healthy people. On this trip north, the Cowichan fired on this convoy to keep it from leaving infected people among them, the convoy did leave infected Haida at Nanaimo, and, rather than safe passage, the Police Commission delivered the Haida to the doorstep of some enemies at Cape Mudge who could be expected to kill them. This plan failed only because the enemies of the Haida at Cape Mudge already had attacked a previous Haida convoy, became infected and were dying.

The actual oral tradition is of Douglas executing a smallpox genocide “holding hands with

the HBC.” This tradition is conveyed in “The Story of Bones Bay” and the next generation of knowledge keepers was instructed in the oral tradition during a formal ceremony and pole raising in 2008. The “Story” can be found in the March 2009 edition of Haida Laas, an official publication of the Council of the Haida Nation.

KP: This brings up many questions. Why did the video mention that the police removed the Haida when Douglas was away in the lower mainland? How could he attempt to save lives from the other side of the Salish Sea? Was it an eviction or a life-saving attempt? Also, I could find no mention of the oral history of Haida elders (in either the 1966 or 1992 edition of *Raven’s Cry*) that testifies that Douglas was trying to save Haida lives by having them removed. After all, this is illogical at best, or at worst genocidally racist, given that 1) the video relates a Victoria newspaper editorial that settler lives were at risk from the camps, in which case gathering all Haida together without discerning who was ill or not would put some Haida potentially at risk from each other, and 2) the question of why the Northerners should be removed all the way up the long water highway, especially since the video stated that it takes 12 days for signs of smallpox to manifest and become infectious. Why send them 800 km to Haida Gwaii and not to a nearby uninhabited island of which there are many around Vancouver Island?

TS: Most serious people recognize that Douglas’ 1862 smallpox policies in the ordinary course would have been considered as criminal offences under British law. That is, everyone recognizes that it was easily foreseeable that his policies would increase dramatically the native death toll. Douglas’ apologists are left to contend that his policies – and these additional deaths – were justified because the presence of smallpox among even one of the autonomous Peoples operating in the Victoria area constituted an emergency threatening the colonial population. On examination, this turns out to be another case of misdirection. The Police Commissioner planted the theory of an emergency in the newspapers at Victoria and Douglas planted the theory at New Westminster. Douglas already had used the concept of an emergency in 1860 to justify his first attempt to assert control over the autonomous Peoples operating in the Victoria area, rather than to deal through the existing native leadership as British policy usually required. The theory of an emergency would be advanced again in a bizarre way when colonists advanced the disease to the Nuxalk and Tsilhqot’in territories.

However, there was never any emergency that constituted an existential threat to the colonial community – vaccine was readily available from San Francisco or the Catholic missions in Oregon, and most of the colonial population already had been vaccinated before the theory of an emergency had been raised. The threat to the colonial community was economic. The fear in the colonial community was that prospective miners or settlers would stay away because ordinary human beings prefer not to witness suffering on a grand scale.

If the Douglas administration had wanted to decrease the death toll from smallpox in 1862, it would have carried out the three control measures that it advertised in the newspapers: vaccinations, a pest house for isolating carriers and sanctuaries to quarantine the disease among infected communities. Instead, the administration perverted each control so that it became another means by which the disease would spread.

KP: The character of James Douglas is wrapped up very much in the colonial history of Vancouver Island and British Columbia and the attempts to extinguish Indigenous title. There are plenty of quotations that attest to Douglas being a morally centered person, but they are several quotations that point to a racist streak. Few humans are white or black. In

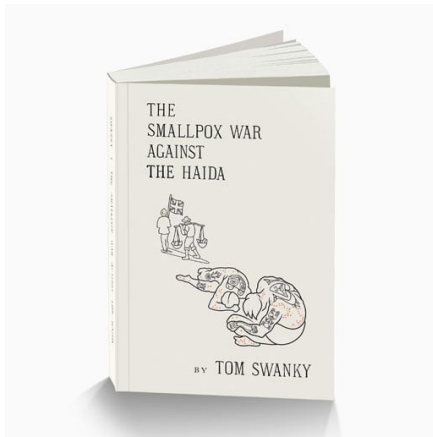
To Share, Not Surrender: Indigenous and Settler Visions of Treaty Making in the Colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia (UBC Press, 2022), the contributors have varying viewpoints on Douglas. Keith Thor Carlson, Canadian research chair in Indigenous and Community-Engaged History at the University of Fraser Valley captures the lack of consensus in his piece, “‘The Last Potlatch’ and James Douglas’s Vision of an Alternative Settler Colonialism,” pointing out that Douglas is less racist than others. This is neither laudatory or condemnatory. Nonetheless, relying on quotations seems to contravene the admonition that actions speak louder than words. Overall, Douglas appears lauded by contemporary academia, cultural depictions, and wider society. With the emerging acceptance of First Nations oral history, will a purported genocidaire such as Douglas continue to elude an honest rendering of history?

TS: In his correspondence with the colonial office in London, Douglas freely refers to the Haida as barbarians and savages. He seems an average representative of the British colonial culture in the North Pacific, which culture imagines anglo-saxons as a superior race – to use Dr. Helmcken’s words. However, it is a distraction to use “race” as a point of departure when seeking to understand the transition of sovereign authority that accompanied colonialism in the North Pacific. The problem facing Douglas and the colonists was to dispossess the indigenous Peoples of their communal or “national” resources through the most cost-effective means. Douglas and others make frequent references to the “great number” of natives occupying strategic locations, pointing to the projection of overwhelming political power that is inherent in great numbers. The implicit motive for this genocide, then, is not reducing another race per se, but reducing the native voice and the capacity of native authority to defend the integrity of its sovereign control.

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The Smallpox War Against the Haida

By Tom Swanky

Paperback: English, 352 pages.

PDF: English (11.9MB), viewable on any computer or E-book reader tablet.

Haida knowledge keepers often introduce their history of British Columbia with *The Story of Bones Bay*. This *Story* teaches that Governor James Douglas executed an intentional mass killing during 1862 using smallpox as a tool for displacing native authority.

This book explores the written record as it touches the Haida experience leading to the Crown's assumption of authority over the Haida and over Haida Gwaii from 1863. Beginning in 1860, Douglas answered the Haida's prior refusal to submit unconditionally for rule by the Crown with a program of increasing violence that culminated in spreading smallpox as a political tool.

After colonists knowingly imported smallpox in 1862, the Douglas administration violated British law to pervert standard disease control measures while reducing the population underpinning native authority in numerous autonomous territories. Officials concealed their true intentions at each stage by supplying the public with misdirection.

This book also documents the role of Francis Poole, a foot soldier employed to advance Douglas' smallpox program from Victoria to the Nuxalk, Tsilhqot'in and Haida territories. *MLA* Robert Burnaby coached Poole in the administration's preferred means of obscuring the public record concerning what Poole's memoir refers to as "a sorrowful trail of blood."

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