

Smallpox: Killer of Man, Killer of Culture - Effects on Indigenous Populations During 18th
Century New France

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History 1120.01

November 29, 2018

Smallpox had ravaged whole indigenous tribes during the mid to late 18th century in what is now called Canada and they played a substantial role in the progression of the epidemics and preventative measures. Although the general population did not know about the role that hygiene or germs played in the transmission of disease, most did acknowledge the extra threat it posed to the indigenous people. The participation of indigenous tribes during the Seven Years war was heavily dependant on the severity of the epidemic at the time and tribes would often decline to fight alongside allies in war if they felt they would be in danger. The Hudson's Bay Company strived to protect their aboriginal counterparts of the fur trade. Smallpox epidemics during this time period had major cultural and social effects on the indigenous population because of loss of culture due to death, ethnic fusion and delayed societal progression.

Smallpox is a highly contagious and infectious disease caused by the variola virus, the most prominent symptoms include fever and a distinctive skin rash.¹ It left many of its survivors permanently scarred over large area of their bodies, often covering the majority of their faces and causing blindness.² It has since been eradicated and that is largely in part of the contributions made by the Hudson's Bay Company.³ French and British settlers first brought the disease over to New France and New England colonies which then spread rapidly throughout the indigenous population whom had no immunity.⁴ The first recorded epidemic was in 1616, originating near

¹ "Smallpox" Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. June 07, 2016. Accessed November 27, 2018. <https://www.cdc.gov/smallpox/about/index.html>

² *Ibid.*

³ Hackett, Paul. "Averting Disaster: The Hudsons Bay Company and Smallpox in Western Canada during the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 78, no. 3 (February 2004): 575-609. doi:10.1353/bhm.2004.0119.

⁴ "Virtual Museum of New France." Canadian Museum of History. <https://www.historymuseum.ca/virtual-museum-of-new-france/daily-life/>

Tadoussac and the disease hastily spread to tribes in the Maritimes, James Bay and Great Lakes Area.⁵ By 1636 the population of the Huron tribe had declined by 50% and nearly every native tribe in the Great Lakes region had been affected by this gruesome disease.⁶

Many of the indigenous tribes blamed the Jesuits for the spread of smallpox because often shortly after being baptized individuals would contract the disease and many of them believed that it was their divine being(s) punishing them from straying from their cultural beliefs.

⁷ In reality, the main culprit of the spread of smallpox was the the omission of personal hygiene among almost all citizens through all social classes. During this time you were expected to be modest and nudity was looked down upon so thorough washings were rare; many people believed in something called the miasmas theory.⁸ This was the theory that harmful microbes emanating off of decaying matter travelled through the air in the form of a vapour and infected people by coming into contact with their skin.⁹ Because of this belief hot water was considered to be harmful because it opened up the pores of the skin and allowed these toxins into your body much more easily.¹⁰

Smallpox affected more than just the general population, the outbreaks of the disease had a huge influence on the Seven Years War that happened between 1755 and 1763. During this time Europeans and indigenous people developed a mutually beneficial relationship and the Europeans would often enlist their indigenous allies to fight alongside them against rival

⁵ "Smallpox." Museum of Healthcare at Kingston.
<http://www.museumofhealthcare.ca/explore/exhibits/vaccinations/smallpox.html>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.* 4

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ "Brought to Life: Exploring the History of Medicine." Science Museum.
<http://broughttolife.sciencemuseum.org.uk/broughttolife/techniques/miasmatheory>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 4

colonies, but whether or not the indigenous tribes actually decided to fight with them was heavily dependent on the smallpox epidemics during the time.¹¹ Because of their lack of resistance to the disease it affected the indigenous population much more heavily so they would often decline to fight alongside the Europeans if they believed that a large number of their people would become infected, although they didn't fully understand how the disease was transmitted they knew it came from being in close contact with an infected person.¹² Germ warfare was often used during these times to mass infect individuals on the other side, so this posed a huge threat for those without immunity. Historians have found that during times where the epidemic was in full swing was when they had the least amount of indigenous assistance.¹³ This is important because New France was heavily outnumbered by the Anglo-American colonials and they really relied on their indigenous allies to even out the numbers on the battlefield.¹⁴

Furthermore, the conditions of the war created a perfect breeding ground for the smallpox virus.¹⁵ Smallpox became contagious from the time that the very first sore appeared inside of the victims throat or mouth, and when they coughed, sneezed or even breathed in close proximity to a healthy individual they would inhale the droplets and become infected themselves.¹⁶ More than ever before the aboriginal people were in even closer contact with their allies and enemies which made it much easier for the virus to spread. During the Seven Years war death by disease posed a much greater threat than being killed in battle.¹⁷ During the fall and winter of 1755 -56 it was

¹¹ Macleod, Peter D. "Microbes and Muskets: Smallpox and the Participation of the Amerindian Allies of New France in the Seven Years War." *Ethnohistory* 39, no. 1 (1992): 42-64. doi:10.2307/482564.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 1

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

recorded that at the mission of Sault St. Louis one hundred of their three hundred soldiers died of the smallpox virus.¹⁸ Although the indigenous people were not familiar with germ theory or disease yet, they did identify the danger that it posed to their population adapted to their situation in order to survive.¹⁹

Another smallpox epidemic broke out between 1779 and 1783, everybody in New France knew that something needed to change if they wanted to see the population stop declining. It wasn't only the help of doctors and scientists that made it possible to develop a vaccine, but was also largely in part from the assistance they received from the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC).²⁰ The HBC had a strong relationship with the indigenous people because they were essential to the success of the European's in thriving in an unfamiliar location and climate and in return provided "aid and assistance" to them.²¹ Historians estimate that the new outbreak of the disease has killed up to 75% or more of certain indigenous tribes.²² "Too weak to move, the dying lay with the dead, and the British and Canadian fur traders stationed at posts along the river witnessed mortality on a scale that they could hardly imagine".²³ As the disease made its way to the Hudsons Bay area the employees of HBC geared up for a different type of war, a war against smallpox.²⁴

Early in June of 1782 a man named William Tomison arrived at HBC's chief post at York factory where Matthew Cocking was stationed in charge of trade operations at the post.²⁵

¹⁸*Ibid.* 11

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.* 3

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.* 3 p578

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ McIntyre, John W.R., and Stuart Houston. "Smallpox and Its Control in Canada." *CMAJ* 161, no. 12 (December 14, 1999): 1543-547. <http://www.cmaj.ca/content/161/12/1543>.

He was followed by 6 canoes of indians looking to trade furs and three were found to be ill with an unknown virus that Cocking deduced to be smallpox.²⁶ Although Cocking knew that it was almost certainly too late to save the Uplanders he believed if he acted quick enough he could help preserve the lives of the lowland Cree.²⁷ He knew that they had very little time to decide which approach they would take to protect their Cree allies and concluded they only had two courses of action, inoculation and quarantine.²⁸

Inoculation was a procedure in which one was infected with a mild form of the disease, in this case smallpox, in order to acquire immunity against the disease.²⁹ The problem with this approach was if it was done under uncontrolled conditions by someone who was untrained death was almost certain.³⁰ Although inoculation had already been used in America and Britain for decades by this time, the medical professionals hired by the HBC likely did not feel confident enough in their skills to attempt such a procedure.³¹ Additionally, if they had performed the procedure wrong it could very likely contribute to the spread of smallpox in their region. This could cause many to point the blame at the HBC and damage critical relationships with the aboriginal tribes that the HBC relied on. Accusations were already been thrown at the HBC for their part in the disease before they had decided on any course of action.³²

A much more practiced act of prevention was quarantine, and that is the route the HBC decided to take during this particular epidemic. Cocking devised a “three pronged” approach to quarantining the lowland Cree from getting infected. He send out employees of the HBC to

²⁶ *Ibid.* 3 // *Ibid.* 25

²⁷ *Ibid.* 3

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.* 25

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.* 3

³² *Ibid.*

intercept traders travelling to the York factory who could be infected with the disease and keep them from susceptible individuals.³³ The second step was eliminating any contaminants lingering on healthy people, he knew that his men could not contract the disease, but spread it through the clothing that they wore.³⁴ Lastly was to care for individuals who had already contracted the disease because they could no longer work to feed themselves and many were dying of starvation, employees of the HBC were instructed to “do all in [their] power for their preservation”.³⁵

Cockings plan worked for a little while until York factory was invaded and attacked by three french vessels in 1782. The HBC men were dispersed and decided to shut down forts in the area in attempt to avoid another attack, after that individuals wandered freely and eventually the disease spread to the lowland Cree population.³⁶ Evidently the HBC held the relationship with the indigenous peoples with high regard and showed them much compassion. Matthew Cocking and his men wanted to do everything in their power to stop the spread of the smallpox disease to susceptible indigenous tribes and keep the ones that were infected with the disease as comfortable in their quarters, fed and cared for.³⁷

“... One [man] digging a Grave and burying an Indian that Died in the Night after having been taken care of in the House for these ten Days past. There is something very malignant, that we are not sensible of, either in the Constitution of the Natives or in the

³³ *Ibid.* 3

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Houston, Stuart C., and Stan Houston. "The First Smallpox Epidemic on the Canadian Plains: In the Fur-traders Words." *Canadian Journal of Infectious Diseases* 11, no. 2 (March/April 2000): 112-15. doi:10.1155/2000/782978.

Disorder, those that Die before the small pox breaks out is tormented with great pains and many of them Die within 48 hours. ...”³⁸ (Cumberland House journals of 1781 and 1782)

It is evident from the entries in the Cumberland House journals that the HBC men genuinely cared and had great concern for the indigenous people that they were helping.

Various smallpox epidemics during the 18th century ravaged indigenous tribes throughout New France leaving large numbers of the population infected, starving, and dying. With such large amounts of people dying groups needed to coalesce to find new marriage partners and this caused ethnic fusion.³⁹ Often times individuals with hereditary leadership rights had them stripped away when joining with another group which can often cause a divide between the new relationship.⁴⁰ When two groups of people merge some of the traditions and culture are inevitably lost and this is definitely true with the indigenous peoples because they had kept oral records rather than physical ones so it is impossible for historians to ever fully know how much culture was lost during this time from ethnic fusion. With everyone sick and dying urbanization and economic growth would surely be put on hold until the epidemic passes.

Historically smallpox has been one of the greatest killers of the indigenous population and it was no different during the 18th century. Personal hygiene was nonexistent at the time so it created a perfect environment to spread the disease. Certain groups during the war used the disease to their advantage to infect groups intentionally while other groups such as the Hudson’s Bay Company did everything in their power to protect their allies against the disease. The HBCs efforts eventually failed and the disease spread throughout the lowland cree causing even more

³⁸ *Ibid.* 37

³⁹ Taylor, John F. *Sociocultural Effects of Epidemics on the Northern Plains*. PhD diss., University of Montana, 1982.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

decimation. The impacts that the smallpox virus had on indigenous culture is immeasurable but no doubt massive.

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