

Robert Boyd. *The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence: Introduced Infectious Diseases and Population Decline among Northwest Coast Indians 1774-1874.* Vancouver and Toronto: University of Washington Press, 1999. xv + 403 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-97837-6; \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7748-0755-5.



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Plagues and Peoples on the Northwest Coast

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The student of early American history sometimes needs to be reminded that “American” history occurred on the Pacific Coast as well as the Atlantic. Although events on the western edge of the continent barely register on the grand scale of American history before 1849, by the 1770s a deadly momentum was already beginning to transform the Far West, setting the stage, or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say, “clearing the way,” for the development of American civilization on the Pacific slope. While American patriots were making their stand against the British Empire, Native Americans on the Northwest Coast were waging their own battle against invading European microbes.

As we learn in *The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence*, the 1770s smallpox epidemic would be the first offensive in a vicious and lopsided one-hundred years’ war initiated by microorganisms against “epidemiologically virgin” populations whose immune systems (and cultural systems) could offer little resistance. From the 1770s until the 1860s, successive epidemics of smallpox, malaria (surprisingly), measles, tuberculosis, influenza, dysentery,

and syphilis brought once thriving native populations to the edge of collapse. While Boasian anthropology and modern tourist literature have romanticized Northwest Coast Indians (who are best known for salmon fishing, potlatching, and carving cedar canoes and totem poles), Robert Boyd contends that by the late nineteenth century Northwest Coast societies had been “shattered” by their interaction with Europeans and their plagues: “populations had plummeted, some groups had become extinct, and others were shadows of their former selves. From a precontact population conservatively estimated at over 180,000, only about 35,000 to 40,000 were left” (p. 3).

Certainly this is not news to scholars or general readers. It is by now a familiar story that European diseases, rather than European guns, were primarily responsible for the calamitous demographic devastation of indigenous societies in the Americas. So why, besides the opportunity to publish much of his previous research in book-length form, would Boyd revisit this pox-marked ground? For one, aboriginal population history is a hotly contested scholarly territory. While consumers of general histories are now accustomed to reading of the tragic

population decline that thinned the North American pre-contact population to barely 250,000 by the turn of the twentieth century, scholars are still debating the number of North American inhabitants in 1492, with estimates ranging from as low as one million to as high as eighteen million.

The varying answers suggest not only differences in historical methodology, but also imply political and ideological differences. A higher number assumes that Native peoples were technologically advanced enough to support large populations, while also dramatizing the epic scale of their losses. A lower number implies the opposite – that Indians were more primitive and that the population decline initiated by European colonization was not so severe. Boyd does not burden his research with any such political baggage, and, while obviously aware of the larger debate over New World population levels, he refuses to directly engage in this discussion. Even so, Boyd realizes that the significance of his research derives from what it adds to the great numbers debate, and therefore, he contends that the Northwest Coast provides scholars with a clearer picture of disease and population decline than is available for the eastern part of the continent, where “most of the details of the phenomena have been lost” (p. 5). Because of the late date of contact between Indians and Europeans on the isolated Northwest Coast, “the disease and depopulation experience is particularly well-documented,” providing the reader with “an unusually graphic example of a process which has happened in many other parts of the world at much earlier times” (p. 5).

The “graphic examples” are drawn primarily from the ethnographic record. We learn of various epidemics from European and American ship captains, travelers, doctors, writers, government officials, and others who took an interest in the region’s native peoples. These accounts are methodically presented, cross-referenced, and corroborated by census data where possible. From the ethnography he not only reconstructs the populations of all the region’s Indian peoples over the course of the nineteenth century (which he summarizes in tables), but he also sleuths the origins and the diffusion of each outbreak, sometimes locating the vector on a specific European trading vessel.

Boyd’s research appears thorough and impressive, and his eighteen tables seem clear and accessible. Yet, some might wonder, are his figures deceiving or misleading? Could he have presented his findings in a more effective way? Since I have spent most of my life studiously

avoiding statistical reasoning, I will leave these questions to others with more expertise. My criticism is an obvious one: can we really trust European observers to give us an accurate picture of disease-induced depopulation and its impacts upon Native peoples? Boyd does question the accuracy of some accounts and openly notes the limitations inherent in his sources. However, he avoids analyzing or contextualizing the observations of his non-Indian informants, taking them primarily at face value.

To his credit, Boyd enhances his ethnographic source material with Indian mythology, even while acknowledging its drawbacks as historical evidence. These oral traditions provide insight as to how Northwest Coast Indians interpreted epidemics through their own cultural lenses. Some legends correctly trace the origins of sickness to European ships, so called “disease boats” or “Pestilence’s canoe[s]” (p. 54). Other tribal stories focus on internal explanations for catastrophe. Some Tlingits apparently interpreted the smallpox epidemic of the 1770s as punishment for their fratricidal warring. One Squamish tale has Qa’is (the sun) destroying the people with smallpox “as punishment for their wickedness,” while another tells of an epidemic that occurred after hungry villagers ate diseased salmon that were “covered with running sores and blotches.” (p. 55)

Native accounts also convey a sense of the human horror of epidemic disease, helping us to remember that the multiple thousands of Indian peoples who lost their lives were individuals rather than abstract numbers. A Shaman on the lower Fraser river tells of an unwitting hunter returning to his village to find “All his kinsmen and relatives lay[ing] dead inside their homes; only in one house did there survive a baby boy, who was vainly sucking at its mother’s breast” (p.43). There are numerous other stories like this one, in addition to those which describe the futility and anguish of affliction, as in this versified myth from the lower Columbia: “In vain he would try to bathe; in vain he would try to shake off what he wears, and his flesh would be pulled. Sometimes he would roll about on rocks; he would think, perhaps it will break apart; he would abandon hope. Now again he would cry out, and he wept” (p. 59).

If Native American history can be divided into three camps – those works which chronicle the destruction of Indian cultures at the hands of whites, those which depict the process of native resilience and survival, and those which do both (such as James Merrill’s *The Indian’s New World*), Boyd’s book most decidedly falls into the first camp. *Pestilence* is a story of decline, not just of

population, but of culture. Boyd notes that epidemics forced Indians to abandon their villages and reformulate residential patterns and kinship ties. Disease also helped to discredit Shamans, destroy indigenous religion, and make tribesmen receptive to Christian missionaries. Certainly, as Boyd suggests, and African writer Chinua Achebe would agree, "things fall apart" for aboriginal people after the whites arrive. In his conclusion, Boyd even suggests that future scholars should study how Native American cultures may have "devolved" as the result of their contact with Europeans and their diseases.

Looked at in a different light, however, changing settlement patterns, the rise of syncretic revivalistic religions, and Native acceptance of Christianity and capitalism, suggest not only cultural destruction (which they do), but they also speak to the ways that Native Americans actively responded to such calamitous events and began to remake their lives, reassign meaning to their

world, and reconstruct their cultures. Unlike James Merrill, whose magisterial work simultaneously chronicled both the unmaking and the remaking of a people, Boyd focuses primarily on population declension, and from this he draws conclusions of cultural declension as well.

Boyd's particular strength is the compilation of massive amounts of data. In minutes, one can check the population statistics for any Northwestern tribe over a one-hundred year period. In fact, his entire book can be summarized by two charts in the final chapter: a population of 183,661 reduced to 37,153 in little more than one century. One hopes that such grim statistics will convey to students of history the breadth of human tragedy borne from epidemic disease, as Boyd's scholarship seeks to do.

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