

Book Review

Plundering the North: A History of Settler Colonialism, Corporate Welfare, and Food Insecurity. By Kristin Burnett and Travis Hay, University of Manitoba Press, 2023.

Reviewed by Sara Komarnisky

Northern Indigenous people in what is now Canada have long lamented high grocery prices and food insecurity, alongside ongoing advocacy to restore Indigenous food systems and Indigenous food sovereignty. Consider “Feeding My Family,” a Facebook page and movement started by Eric Joamie and Leese Papatsie to draw attention to food prices in northern communities and how they are preventing northern Indigenous people from living healthy, happy, and productive lives.¹ In most small and remote northern communities, there is often only one store in town, and that store is a Northern Store or North Mart. Community members can supplement with country foods, but that’s only if they have the knowledge, equipment, and money for gas and supplies to go out on the land.

Indigenous Peoples in the Canadian North once lived in a context where the land provided everything that was needed to survive. So why has this changed so drastically? This book provides some answers to that question: *Plundering the North* explores the history of federal food policies for Indigenous people and the corporate practices that implemented those policies. Its authors argue that over the last century the state (via the Canadian and territorial governments) has “manufactured food insecurity and retail monopolies in northern First Nations and Inuit communities” (3).

Kristen Burnett’s interest in the North West Company (NWC) and how it came to operate in fly-in Indigenous communities in Northern Ontario was sparked by an unnamed undergraduate student who wanted to understand the high cost of food in their Indigenous community in relation to prevalence of Type 2 diabetes. The price differences the student documented between their community and Thunder Bay were shocking to Burnett, so even after the student

moved on, Burnett continued to explore how the NWC came to occupy such a monopolistic position in many communities in the North (14).

To understand how this happened, and tell that story in *Plundering the North*, Burnett and Hay reviewed publicly available corporate records of the NWC, historical records of the federal government, and historical records for the Hudson's Bay Company (the predecessor of the NWC) to understand past and present policies and practices. They also interviewed community members, government employees, and employees of the NWC and held a series of community conversations about northern retailers and the cost of food. All of this was, the authors say, enriched by "countless informal conversations" (15) that allowed them to read the documentary record "through and alongside the experiences of Indigenous peoples living in the North" (15).

The chapters in the book are organized temporally, starting in Chapter 1 with the criminalization of Indigenous foodways through the imposition of hunting and fishing regulations in the late 1800s. This is in violation of Indigenous sovereignty and Treaty, and created a space for the federal government and the Hudson's Bay Company to introduce market-based foods to Indigenous communities and households (16). Chapter 2 carries forward the story of the HBC before the Second World War to show how the federal government used the HBC to implement policy. Chapter 3 continues after the Second World War with social welfare initiatives like the Family Allowance program, the forced purchasing lists created by the federal Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, and the shifting retail practices of the HBC.

Chapter 4 expands on postwar shifts, specifically the establishment of the Northern Stores Department within HBC and the establishment of stores in the provincial and territorial Norths. Chapter 5 is about the Food Mail Program and how it shaped the choices available to northern Indigenous people about market-based foods. Chapter 6 returns to the Northern Stores Department of the HBC and its transformation to the North West Company. The North West Company is shown to specialize in low-income, northern, and remote places that have high barriers to entry, as a business model that produces enormous profit. Finally, the last chapter charts contemporary policy in the replacement of the Food Mail Program with Nutrition North Canada.

Overall, the book shows how historical patterns of collusion between state and market actors have produced and positioned First Nations and Inuit communities as captive consumers of grocery store foods. Burnett and Hay show how state and corporate influence worked together to encourage northern Indigenous people toward grocery store foods and away from country foods harvested from

the land. The detail and the breadth of how this happened, as described in the book, is expansive and infuriating. Unfortunately, the authors also show how these established patterns continue today.

Burnett and Hay are both settlers and historians, and they position this book alongside the ongoing food security work that they do with Indigenous communities in Northern Ontario—work “which supports resurgent activities engaged in food sovereignty and undertakes policy and anti-colonial/racism work” (15). As such, the “North” in this book is more often the provincial Norths than the territorial Norths, reflecting Burnett’s initial interest. I’d love to know more about how a solid understanding of the public policy and corporate history that worked to disrupt and destroy Indigenous food systems can support the kind of food sovereignty work that is ongoing. I can think of ways, but would love to hear from organizers and activists about how they see projects like this supporting their work—as well as from Hay and Burnett about how these projects are integrated (or not).

Anyone who wants to better understand why the food systems in the provincial and territorial Norths are the way they are will appreciate this book, especially if they are up for a scholarly deep-dive into the topic. Scholars and activists of northern or Indigenous food sovereignty or food systems may appreciate the careful documentation of the historical context and wide-reaching impacts of the harms done by governments and corporations to Indigenous ways of life in the North. The book is a well elaborated and focused analysis of how settler colonialism in Canada works: how it involves state and corporate actors, how it shifts over time, and how corporate profit is made from dispossessing Indigenous Peoples from their Traditional Territories and ways of life. This is a useful study, then, for anyone looking to expand their knowledge about settler colonialism in Canada. Here’s to a future that sees the end of corporate monopolies in northern communities and the re-establishment of Indigenous sovereignty at all levels of the northern food system.

Notes

1. Eric Joamie and Leese Papatsie. (2012, December 4). Feeding my family: A story of grassroots organizing in Northern Canada. Food Secure Canada. [Facebook Presentation]. <https://www2.foodsecurecanada.org/content/feeding-my-family-story-grassroots-organizing-northern-canada>

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