

# DID SITTING BULL DIE FOR CANADA'S SINS?

LITTLE BIGHORN, MT -- SOME SAY **GEORGE CUSTER** DIED FOR THE WHITE MAN'S SINS. WHAT I HADN'T HEARD BEFORE WAS THAT SITTING BULL, THE GREAT HUNKPAPA LAKOTA SIOUX CHIEF AND AUTHOR OF VICTORY AT THE BATTLE OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN, HAD LATER DIED BECAUSE OF CANADA'S SINS. YET THIS SEEMED TO BE WHAT THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE RANGER, A FORMER HIGH SCHOOL HISTORY TEACHER AND ADJUNCT UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR, APPEARED TO BE TELLING US AS WE SAT LISTENING IN THE SHADOW OF LAST STAND HILL.

WHEN HE CONCLUDED I APPROACHED, SAID I WAS FROM ONTARIO...AND ASKED WHAT EXACTLY HE HAD MEANT.

**"THE TRUTH IS, CANADA DID NOT REALLY WANT SITTING BULL AND HIS PEOPLE ON THEIR SIDE OF THE BORDER," WAS THE REPLY. "THERE WERE TOO FEW BUFFALO TO SUSTAIN LIFE, THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT WITHHELD FOOD RATIONS AND THE SIOUX WERE ESSENTIALLY STARVED OUT."**

**BUT DID THIS MEAN CANADA KILLED SITTING BULL?**

HE OFFERED A WAN SMILE. "WELL, TO BE HONEST, THAT'S JUST CONJECTURE. THE FACT IS SITTING BULL WAS KILLED IN 1890 AT THE STANDING ROCK INDIAN RESERVATION IN SOUTH DAKOTA BY AN INDIAN POLICEMAN ATTEMPTING TO ARREST HIM. YOU COULD THEREFORE ARGUE THAT, HAD HE BEEN ALLOWED TO STAY IN CANADA, HE WOULD HAVE ESCAPED THAT FATE."

THIS DID NOT FIT MY VIEW OF CANADA AS A KINDER, GENTLER PLACE WHEN IT CAME TO RELATIONS WITH FIRST NATIONS OR, FOR THAT MATTER, REFUGEES.

NOR DID IT QUITE JIBE WITH WHAT I THOUGHT I REMEMBERED FROM SEEING ONE OF THOSE HERITAGE MINUTE VIDEOS ON TV. CALLED "SITTING BULL", IT PRESSED HOME THE POINT THAT SITTING BULL AND HIS FOLLOWERS WERE SAFE AND UNDER THE PROTECTION OF "THE GRANDMOTHER'S PEACE" (A REFERENCE TO QUEEN VICTORIA) AND THE NORTH WEST MOUNTED POLICE, ESPECIALLY MAJOR JAMES M. WALSH, WHILE IN SASKATCHEWAN.

WHAT I HAD EVIDENTLY FORGOTTEN, UNTIL I REVIEWED THE VIDEO RECENTLY ON THE HISTORICA DOMINION INSTITUTE WEB SITE, WAS A VOICE-OVER AT THE VERY END SAYING **"I DIDN'T KNOW THEN THEY'D BE STARVED OUT OF CANADA...AND SITTING BULL MURDERED."**

IT TURNS OUT SITTING BULL AND HIS FOLLOWERS WEREN'T ALONE IN FEELING HUNGER PANGS. IN A NEWLY PUBLISHED BOOK, "CLEARING THE PLAINS: DISEASE, POLITICS OF STARVATION AND THE LOSS OF ABORIGINAL LIFE", UNIVERSITY OF REGINA PROFESSOR JAMES DASCHUK MAKES A COMPELLING CASE THAT THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT SYSTEMATICALLY WITHHELD FOOD TO FORCE ABORIGINAL PEOPLES OFF THEIR LANDS AND ONTO RESERVES. NOR WAS THIS THE WORK OF SOME NAMELESS ROGUE BUREAUCRAT - NO LESS A FIGURE THAN SIR JOHN A. MACDONALD DIRECTED THE POLICY IN HIS DUAL CAPACITY OF PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER OF INDIAN AFFAIRS.

DASCHUK'S BOOK DESERVES ATTENTION, NOT JUST AS A WORK OF HISTORY, BUT AS A NEEDED BACKDROP TO CURRENT POLICY DISCUSSIONS. INDEED, IF ONE TAKES THE TIME AND DIGS HARD ENOUGH, THERE ARE OTHER INFORMATIVE WORKS WORTH A LOOK, INCLUDING THE MORE IMPRESSIONISTIC "A GEOGRAPHY OF BLOOD" BY SASKATCHEWAN WRITER CANDACE SAVAGE; "SITTING BULL'S BOSS" BY FORMER MOUNTIE IAN ANDERSON; AND "THE DAY THE WORLD ENDED AT THE LITTLE BIGHORN" BY LAKOTA HISTORIAN JOSEPH M. MARSHALL III, TO NAME JUST THREE.

THE AMERICANS, TO THEIR CREDIT, HAVE TENTATIVELY BEGUN TO FACE THE AWFUL REALITY OF THE AGGRESSION THEY VISITED ON THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF THE GREAT PLAINS. NOT THAT MANY YEARS AGO, FOR INSTANCE, THE LITTLE BIGHORN BATTLEFIELD NATIONAL MONUMENT WAS CALLED THE CUSTER NATIONAL MONUMENT - SOMETHING AKIN TO CALLING THE SITE OF THE BATTLE OF STALINGRAD THE FRIEDRICH PAULUS NATIONAL MONUMENT, AFTER THE DEFEATED GERMAN GENERAL. TODAY THE INDIAN POINT OF VIEW REGARDING NOT ONLY THE BATTLE, BUT THE EXISTENTIAL THREAT TO THEIR ENTIRE WAY OF LIFE, IS GIVEN AMPLE, IF TARDY, EMPHASIS BY PARK RANGERS.

**WE IN CANADA WERE PERHAPS NOT AS OPENLY VIOLENT TOWARDS INDIGENOUS PEOPLES -- OUR STYLE WAS, TO USE MODERN PARLANCE, MORE PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE. BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN WE SHOULDN'T FACE UP TO IT, WHETHER THAT MEANS WATCHING THE LAST TEN SECONDS OF THAT HERITAGE MINUTE...OR SITTING DOWN WITH A WELL-RESEARCHED BOOK ON THE SUBJECT.**

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