Shanawdithit: A Woman at the End of the World

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From the window, maybe she could watch the harbour: see its tangle of sails and rigging, hear the clamour of men shouting from the wharves, smell the sharp, nose-stinging smell of drying fish and rotting cod oil. Above her, a wall clocked ticked, beneath her, squeaking pine floorboards. To her left, more rooms where visitors came and went; to her right, the windows. Across the water the hills rose, inky green with fir and spruce, which stretched like a wall to where the harbour opened its narrow mouth to the sea. Through the thin glass of the gridded window, she would have been able to hear the river that the white people called Waterford, after their distant homeland. It flowed through the forests of her territory until it spilled its fresh water into the stinking port of St John's, Newfoundland.

There are things I will never know, and some things I know for certain. I know Shanawdithit sat in a room with a window, near St John's Harbour, in the autumn and winter of 1828 and 1829, because she drew the room with her own hands. Roope's Plantation, to be specific; the home of the man who had rescued her or kidnapped her, depending on who you ask. His name was William Eppes Cormack, a dilettante naturalist and middling sort of merchant, who made the saving of her people, the Beothuk, his cause celebre. He had brought Shanawdithit to St John's in the late summer of 1828, after taking her from the home of her white master in a small fishing village further west. Installing her in Roope's Plantation—which was, despite its name, just a modest wooden house and two storehouses with a wharf, Cormack tore pages from his merchant ledger book and asked her to draw him maps, stories, and images about her people, whom he feared were on the brink of total cultural destruction.

I do not know exactly what Shanawdithit saw in St John's, nor much of what she did. I know very little of what she thought. I know for certain that St John's reeked in the 1820s, when the Newfoundland Trade in salt cod was at its height; but I do not know what she made of the smell. Several sources tell me she loved to draw, and to make things: model boats, birchbark bitten into elaborate patterns, sketches of animals, and portraits of loved ones. One servant woman whom she worked alongside in the west of the island reported 'she was always happiest when a pencil was in her hands.' Most of what Shanawdithit created no longer survives. But what she drew with her pencil at Cormack's house beside St. John's Harbour between 1828 and 1829 was extraordinary. Over a few months, Shanawdithit produced the only first-hand accounts of Beothuk history and culture that exist today. Her story-maps, images, and testimony remain the only direct historical sources we have from any Beothuk individual at any point in history.

The stories she drew and told relate dramatic encounters, terrible violence, and epic journeys across some of the harshest terrain on earth. They illuminate a vibrant, resilient culture; a people who were connected to their Indigenous neighbours the Mi'kmaw and Innu, but distinct from them as well. They relay a life shaped by kin, by making, by journeying, by tragedy and resistance. They reveal in their creator an artist of remarkable talents; a rebellious woman who bore witness to the death of her world. But all this is eclipsed by the role Shanawdithit has played since her death, just a few months after completing her drawings.

William Cormack penned her obituary from a rented flat in London in the autumn of 1829. 'This interesting female lived six years a captive among the English,' he wrote. Her people, who were an 'anomaly' in that they 'never held intercourse with Europeans', had 'lived, flourished and become extinct in their own orbit...in one our oldest and most important colonies.' It was the first time this word—extinct—was applied to a group of human beings.

Shanawdithit was dubbed 'the last of the Red Indians', and the history has been recited by rote ever since. I remember it well from my school textbooks back in Newfoundland, from my childhood museum visits, and from heritage plaques that dot the cityscape of St. John's.

The Beothuk were a ‘shy’ people who refused to trade with Europeans, and ‘retreated’ to the interior of the island to avoid violent encounters with white settlers. In this barren place, they ‘slowly dwindled’ from starvation and disease, until they ‘went extinct’ when the ‘last Beothuk’—Shanawdithit, also known as Nancy April--died in 1829. In this version of events, repeated like a litany, a woman’s death looms larger than her life; and a people were fated to disappear, pushed aside by the relentless and inevitable force of settler colonialism. But it is possible to tell a very different story about this woman who, before her emblematic death, lived an extraordinary and important life.

In this lecture, I want to tell you about Shanawdithit’s life story and about her people, who witnessed the end of their world because of colonialism. I want to do this, first and foremost, because so very few people outside of Newfoundland have ever heard of her, or of her people; and both deserve to be far better known. There are challenges here. As Kate Fullagar writes, ‘The task of portraying whole Indigenous lives in all their subtlety and complexity—lives often captured only in fragments by unsympathetic sources—presents a huge philosophical and methodological challenge to the craft of biography...empire and its overbearing archive dismissed Indigenous creativity, marginalized these peoples, imagined them absent, belittled their lives, and rationalised their deaths, so how is their full humanity now to be reclaimed?’

Restoring to Shanawdithit some semblance of her full humanity is the aim of the account that follows, which is drawn from Shanawdithit’s own drawings and testimony, from the surviving papers of William Eppes Cormack, from oral histories and texts collected by the Beothuk’s first historian, James P Howley, at the end of the nineteenth century, and the anthropologist Frank Speck in the early twentieth, from the rich archaeological scholarship, from the papers of the Beothuk’s most recent historian, Ingeborg Marshall, who worked between the 1970s and the 2000s, and from the biased grain of the colonial record, scattered in archives around the United Kingdom: for instance, command papers, reports and order books at the National Maritime Museum; governor’s papers in the National Library of Scotland; and Commonwealth Office files at the National Archives.

Through the story of Shanawdithit and her people, I also want to illuminate the history of their island—a place we call Newfoundland; England’s very first transatlantic colonial possession and the site of one of the most totalising destructions of an Indigenous culture in British Imperial History. I will also entangle Shanawdithit’s story with that of her benighted interlocutor, the imperial merchant and humanitarian William Eppes Cormack; and with the story of my own family, who have been on the island of Newfoundland ever since James Taverner, my seven times great grandfather, was born there in 1635. Through these stories, I want to explore questions about the harms and legacies of empire, the importance of individual lives in history and whose lives are made to matter; and I want to think about how all of us in Britain and its settler empire might use these histories to make better sense of our difficult inheritances.

But I want to do this in a way that might be a little unconventional for a lecture, which is through storytelling. I’ve been interested in storytelling and the power of narrative for a long time but have more recently been informed and inspired by Indigenous storytelling methods. In North American Indigenous worldviews—and in the scholarship of Indigenous thinkers like Harold Johnson, Leanne Simpson, Vine Deloria Jr, Zoe Todd and many others--stories are powerful ways to create meaning, communicate meaning, and explore the connections between people, place, and the more-than-human world across time. I also believe that stories are where people make the best sense of things, and that there is no better way to explore complex histories than through story. I am also drawn to the idea that, unlike some academic work, stories make no attempt to conceal their biases; but nor do they demand that the reader share them. Most academic, more conventional history claims authority in a way that stories do not because a story always suggests another possible story. A thousand more stories.

I also see this storytelling—and Shanawdithit’s incredible story especially—as a counterpoint to trends in scholarship about Empire. I’m sure you’ve noticed the recent surge in books about the British Empire—Alan Lester et al’s Truth about Empire; Sathnam Sangera’s Empireland and Empireworld; Frankopan’s The Earth Transformed; Ghosh’s The Great Derangement; I could go on. I think all these books are incredibly important and I’m glad to see them; but they all take a birds-eye view of imperialism. A kind of whistle-stop tour of different places and peoples who were invaded, occupied, subjugated, and incorporated into the sprawling beast that was the British empire. This can give us a sense of scale and complexity, for sure; but it also flattens the individual human stories, set in specific places, that lie at the heart of everything. What I hope to show through the story I’m about to tell is that each place that was harmed through colonialism was, in the words of Audra Mitchell, ‘a unique and irreplaceable world’.

Winter’s grip on the island of Newfoundland is vicious. Northeasterly winds bring blizzards that bury the

landscape in snow that's measured in feet not inches; freeze-thaw cycles send bands of freezing rain, sleet, and then plain old miserable cold rain, before the snow falls again. The winter begins in November, when the last of the partridgeberries wizen on the rocky barrens, and does not loosen its grip until April, when the first intrepid plants peek through the snow and the Whiskey Jacks—or grey jays—start to build their nests. In Shanawdithit's time, winter conditions were even more demanding because two hundred years ago the Little Ice Age still held the northern regions of the globe in its grasp. Not only this, but the actual Ice Age had left a profound mark on the landscape, when glaciers scraped the rocks near-clean and deposited the soil in the ocean ten thousand years before. To this day, Newfoundland has some of the thinnest topsoil on earth. It took immense skill to survive as a people in such a place, and the Beothuk had done so for at least two thousand years. They were perhaps the very first of North America's Indigenous peoples to encounter white Europeans in the 11th century, when the Norse built a small settlement on the northern tip of the island. And then again when white fishing vessels showed up in the fifteenth century. The English called them 'Red Indians', on account of the ochre they used to stain their skin. They were the first people to whom this term was applied.

Whether Ternua to the Basques, Terre Neuve to the French, Terra Nova to the Portuguese, or Nieuwfundland, to the Dutch; 'New-found-land' was the first (apocryphal) story that these nascent overseas empires told. But to the Irish who supplied the majority of the indentured labour for the English enterprise there, the island came to be known as Talamh an Eisc, or *The Fishing Ground*. It was the better name. Newfoundland's Grand Bank is a shallow ocean shelf, created by the topsoil that was scraped from the island, that stretched more than thirty-six thousand square miles off the north, east and southeast coast.

It was the richest fishing ground for cod in the world and for five centuries, the Newfoundland Grand Bank fishery would remain 'the largest single fishery on the planet'. As Poul Holm argues, the fish revolution and the development of salt cod as a commodity is 'grossly underestimated…under-researched and indeed little appreciated as a major event in the history of resource utilisation and globalization'. Lacking the allure of gold, silver, sugar and tobacco, cod was an unfashionable but extremely profitable product. After all, there was an Iberian market for stockfish (as salt cod was often known) even in times of war, and the profits from cod usually surpassed those of sugar. Outlay costs were also extremely low when compared to these other industries: as the *Cambridge History of the British Empire* put it back in 1930, the Newfoundland fishery, 'in exchange for nothing but the export of labour and some food supplies' greatly enriched the English nation.

Despite the lack of attention to it as a commodity, salt cod quietly fuelled the spread of immense empires and underscored the birth of a capitalist economic system. Cod was not just transformed by the triangle trade into wine, it also fueled the production of sugar. The worst grade of cod (as Eric Williams put it, 'fish that fit for no other human consumption') was used to feed the enslaved-on sugar plantations. Salt cod constituted, as historians like James Candow and Cynthia Kennedy estimate, over 80% of the protein consumed by enslaved people on most plantations in the British Caribbean. Even without counting these interlaced economies, the direct profits from salt cod for most of the colonial period outstripped the profits of sugar as a commodity; and it was the third most profitable commodity in the history of the British Empire, after the slave trade and the opium trade. Surely, for this reason alone, this history should be far better known.

For two centuries between 1600 and 1800, men and boys would sign on as indentured servants in ports around the West Country and the southeast of Ireland. They were shipped in crews of ten or twenty on sailing vessels to Newfoundland, where they traded their labour, their freedom, and sometimes their lives for the promise of good and steady pay for two summers and a winter in between. They would work in small boats from late spring until late summer, catching and processing cod, which was salted and spread across fish flakes built upon the foreshore, where it would dry in the summer wind and sun, producing, at an incredible scale, a high-protein food that had a very long shelf life. Eventually, some of these fish workers began to stay over the winter, including my ancestor James Taverner, who was born on the island in 1635.

I often wonder what my ancestors, who came to Newfoundland from the Westcountry in the 17th and 18th centuries, thought when they first spied Newfoundland's coastline after several miserable weeks crossing the stormy Atlantic. They would have seen a jagged, rocky coastline of granite and shale, ribboned with the silver of quartz and the red of sandstone; coves and inlets with stoney beaches that gave way to grass and wildflowers past the foreshore, and beyond that what must have seemed to them—who had watched the oakwoods of England turn into warships--like an impossibly endless forest of fir and spruce, birch and white pine. These ancestors of mine pitched on the edge of the island and built their houses and workrooms right

on the foreshore, because they were there to do one thing: fish. Over the centuries, they built communities and developed a rich and unique culture. They built belonging through hard work, mutual aid, story, and song. They also occupied—whether they knew it or now—Beothuk land.

I could tell many stories about these settlers, my own family among them; but the story I want to tell tonight begins deep in the interior of the island, at a place known to white settlers as Red Indian Lake, in the biting cold of January 1812.

The lake wound like a snake through the landscape, over sixty-five kilometres long but less than six kilometres across at its widest point. It was surrounded by a forest of birch and fir and rimmed with beaches of sandstone, where straw-legged plovers darted. When the wind blew, which was most of the time, the lake was like an ocean with its waves. When winter came, it would freeze into a vast plain of ice and snow. This was the heartland of Beothuk winter territory, where different family bands came together each year as a tribe, and it was the site of the annual caribou hunt. The Beothuk built immense lengths of deer fence—over forty kilometres long--from felled trees, which corralled the migrating caribou herd into the river and toward the waiting spears of hunters. The whole tribe spent the darkening days of late autumn butchering hundreds of animals and storing the meat, bones, sinew, guts and antlers for future use, including in the construction and insulation of their homes, called Mamateeks.

On the 23rd of January 1812, Shanawdithit was 11 years old, and had settled down for the night in her extended family's mamateek with her mother and father, her brother, her two sisters, and her uncle—the tribe's chief—and his wife. Many dozens of family units like these were perched in clusters along dozens of kilometres of lakeshore. The night of the 23rd of January 1812 was extremely cold, with the wind to the northeast, but Shanawdithit's home was fire-warm when she curled up in her bed beside her family. She was still asleep when the morning of the 24th dawned, bitterly cold, and clear.

That is when the white men came.

Shanawdithit and the others stumbled out of their shelter, to find themselves surrounded by twenty-six armed marines, a middle-age naval lieutenant, and three fur trappers who they recognized immediately. These were John Peyton's men, the self-styled 'first citizen of the North', who had come to Beothuk territory in the 1740s. They say that we should judge historical actors by the standards of their day, so I will: by the 1780s, Peyton had come to be known far and wide as an 'Indian Killer'. We know, from the colonial record itself, that he and his posse of servants mowed down a Beothuk village and set it on fire. We know that he beat a Beothuk man to death with a steel trap. And we can be fairly certain that the Beothuk knew exactly what the men who worked with him looked like.

David Buchan was the middle-aged Lieutenant's name, and as far as he was concerned, he had dragged himself, his 26 Marines, three of Peyton's men and sleds laden with gifts for two weeks through some of the most difficult terrain on earth because he was on a peace mission. His orders from Newfoundland's Naval Governor, John Duckworth, were 'to open up a friendly discourse with the Indians'.

Up until this point, the Beothuk had refused all contact with whites, who were to them unpredictable, avaricious, and often violent. They had been resisting the occupation of their seacoasts for three centuries. In earlier periods, whites were a temporary problem: most of them got the hell off the Island during the winter and left their stuff behind. There was no need to risk violent encounters through trade. The Beothuk simply waited until the great convoy of fishing ships had sailed East in late October, abandoning the fishing rooms that had been constructed the spring before. The Beothuk would then burn the damned things down, salvaging the iron nails and fishhooks for arrowheads and sailcloth for mamateek covers. The guts of ticking watches became necklaces. Steel traps became harpoons.

But by the middle of the eighteenth century, the merchants and planters who had invaded Beothuk territory had figured out that the hundreds of thousands of quintals of salt cod they produced annually could be handsomely subsidized with tierces of salmon and pelts and oil from seals. The salmon weirs began to stretch up to 40 miles upriver into the heartlands of Beothuk territory, dramatically affecting the numbers of salmon that could spawn. The commercial salmon fishery went from 1000 tierces in the 1730s to 2000 by that century's close, almost a million pounds of fish. The ice-hunt, as the annual seal hunt was known, grew from 30,000 pelts per year in 1780 to 690,000 pelts in 1822.

The Great Auk, the most important animal in Beothuk cosmology, was hunted to extinction around 1800, mostly for feathers and bait.

The Beothuk did their best to withstand the invasion of their world. Theft and sabotage, their chief, and

largely peaceful, modes of protest against settlers became the pretext for reprisals marked by horrific, asymmetrical violence. Groups of planters and their posses of indentured servants would go in search of Beothuk camps to avenge some minor theft: armed to the teeth and more than willing to open fire into a mamateek. It did not take many of these people to cause immense harm, not least because they also often destroyed or raided Beothuk food stores, which (as the settlers knew all too well) meant a death sentence for many dozens of people who depended on them in order to bridge the hungry gap in what passed for spring in this sub-arctic climate.

Some of the more humane naval officers, who had been put in charge of law and order in the late eighteenth century, began wringing their hands. As the island's indigenous population clearly dwindled, fingers—as they were in other places with bloody frontiers--were pointed at the motley bunch of poor, indentured settlers. In 1768, John Cartwright, a British naval lieutenant on the Newfoundland station, begged the colonial office to act. 'On the part of the English fishers, it is an inhumanity which sinks them far below the level of savages,' he wrote to the Earl of Bathurst, then Colonial Secretary. 'The wantonness of their cruelties towards the poor wretches, has frequently been almost incredible… [The fishermen] are much greater savages than the Indians themselves.' Another local official begged Bathurst to bring about 'an end to hostilities between our Savages and the native Savages of this Island.'

These pleas were met with virtually no response from the British Government: no patrols were sent to stop the violence, no Indian country was created, no Indian Agent was dispatched, no trading post was established, no missionaries were sent to contact the Beothuk people in the outlying cod abattoir. Instead, inexpensive proclamations were made, threatening anyone who killed a 'Red Indian' with the King's very distant Justice; and declaring anyone who brought a living one to the Governor would receive a reward of £50, then later £100, pounds; thereby incentivizing violent kidnappings. When Shanawdithit was born in 1800, the particular brand of negligent, extractive colonialism practiced in Newfoundland—that kind with 'few responsibilities or costs'—had devastated the Beothuk people.

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After terrifying Shanawdithit and her sleeping family and rousing them from their beds, the marines and the Beothuk faced each other. According to Buchan, the encounter began well. There was handshaking, and the marines distributed some of the gifts they had brought: red cloth, cast iron, knives. Buchan managed to convey that the party had left more gifts behind a days' walk back, because the freeze-thaw conditions meant they had to abandon most of their sleds. Three Beothuk men agreed to join him, and Buchan left two of his marines behind: Corporal James Bouthland and Private Thomas Butler. But as they made their way back to the camp with more gifts, the Beothuk men began to act strangely, and Buchan grew increasingly concerned. His fears were realised when they arrived at the lake to find the bodies of Bouthland and Butler, which lay naked and headless on the ice.

Ordinarily, we would have only a report from a British officer to go on, to tell us about what happened on that cold January day more than two hundred years ago. But because of Shanawdithit's testimony, which she recorded before her death in 1829, we have some idea of the Beothuk perspective as well.

Slide: Shanawdithit Sketch I—explain briefly how it is difficult to interpret when encountering it for the first time; and how it is accompanied by testimony she gave to Cormack as she drew.

According to Shanawdithit, the Beothuk did not consider the encounter to be friendly at all and this is easy to understand, considering they had woken up surrounded by more than two dozen armed soldiers. And they did not trust Buchan, however friendly he seemed, because no trustworthy man would travel with so much firepower and three known murderers.

After Buchan and his men left, a heated discussion followed, as the assembled Beothuk families, some seventy people in all, worked through the complex politics of a persecuted people. Some wanted to flee, some wanted to treat with the whites, who the Beothuk called Bukashamen. Still others called for violent revenge for the violence they had suffered—Bouthland and Butler were in this way seen as avatars for all invaders. The latter won the day. When Bouthland and Butler attempted to flee, the Beothuk shot them in the back with arrows. They stripped them of their clothes, removed their heads, and placed the heads in baskets.

Shanawdithit's drawing of the encounter shows how, with the men's heads in tow, her family travelled up the lakeshore, warning other family camps. Together, the whole tribe crossed the frozen lake and travelled deeper into the forest, where they set up another camp. Here, they mounted the marine's heads on poles and danced around them, celebrating a rare victory.

Back at the lake, meanwhile, Buchan refused his men the vengeance they howled for and ordered a retreat. The party finally saw their schooner that was anchored at the coast on the 30th of January 1812. Their legs were swollen, their feet were bloody, and their skin was purple with frost-burn. One marine, John Weatherall, had become 'deranged in mind' and had to have a guard placed over him. Buchan wanted to return to attempt another peace mission, but the war of 1812 scuppered his plans, and he was redeployed to be the convoy commodore for the Newfoundland fishing fleet. The British colonial government made no meaningful attempt to contact or help the Beothuk again.

We know very little about Shanawdithit's life between the years 1812 and 1818. We can presume that, despite hardships, she got on with the business of living. She began to master artistic techniques and other craftwork; she gathered, caught and preserved food; she danced and sang; she told stories and listened to stories through the long winters with her kith and kin.

Slide: Shanawdithit Sketch VIII

We know these were hard winters for anyone on the island, the coldest on record. Two fires ripped through St John's, decimating the city. Famine threatened, while the commercial exploitation of codfish and seals—and the profits of imperial merchants--increased dramatically. Stories of settler violence against the Beothuk in this period lurk in the shadows of the colonial archives as rumours and accusations: food stores were raided and burned, Beothuk who came to the coast seeking its food resources were shot at with fishermen's duck guns; and some of these men were said to 'prefer killing a Beothuk to a deer.' Shanawdithit's testimony adds further evidence. She showed Cormack the bullet scars in her hand and her leg, from when she was shot by a fur trapper. And in what museum curators have labelled Sketch V, she depicted a scene along the Exploits River from around 1816,

Slide: Shanawdithit Sketch V

which testifies to the murder of an unnamed Beothuk woman by John Peyton and his men. This incident is difficult to read and to place in a specific location and appears to have been drawn in haste or anger: her lines are not as careful, and the scribbles of her red pencil spill like blood. There are hints in the scraps of notes—the only thing that survives from William Cormack's archive—that sometime between 1812 and 1818, Shanawdithit lost her birth mother and one of her sisters to settler violence, and it is possible the map in Sketch V tells this story. In any case, this drawing, which depicts an incident that does not appear in the colonial records, surely stands as a synecdoche for all the other violence—those 'almost incredible depredations' cited by early imperial humanitarians like John Cartwright--whose record has not survived at all.

Perhaps this is why, in 1818 if not before, Shanawdithit joined the resistance. In the autumn of that year, she and other Beothuk travelled up the Exploits River to Notre Dame Bay, where Peyton and other planters and merchants had built their settlements. They slipped beneath the wharf of John Peyton's salmon station at Sandy Point under cover of darkness and waited, bobbing in their canoes, while the men on the wharf finished loading the season's salmon catch, destined for the European market.

It is understandable why this was the target of the raid. The Beothuk had no interest in cod, a lean, deepwater groundfish that they had no means or motivation to get. The pelagic Salmon, on the other hand, was the Beothuk's chief food resource before the caribou herds began to migrate. Peyton's operation, the largest on the River Exploits with over ten weirs on the river and its tributaries, had cut the salmon almost entirely off from their spawning grounds. Not only was the salmon industry threatening the food resources of the Beothuk in the short-term, but it also threatened the very existence of this animal. We can assume that Beothuk world view, like most other North American Indigenous worldviews, made no clear distinction between People and the more-than-human world of which they were a part. An attack on the salmon was an attack on the Beothuk.

Shanawdithit and her fellow raiders waited between the wharf's pylons in dead silence, until the lights from the white men's lanterns stopped shining through the slats of wood above them. Then they emerged and stripped the boat of all useful items—food, sailcloth, iron, and a brass pocket watch belonging to Peyton's grandfather, that had come from Wimbourne Minster, Dorset. They took all the rifles and broke them and threw them in the water—the Beothuk appear to have had the strongest possible cultural taboo against the use of firearms. Then they cut the boat loose, causing it to drift off into the bay, and slipped off into the night unnoticed.

When Peyton discovered the damage, he was incensed and went straight to the Governor, now Sir Charles Hamilton, who gave him permission to go into the interior in search of his possessions and (ostensibly)

‘open up a friendly discourse with the Indians’. In truth Hamilton had little control over the matter either way; and governance in this period was minimal. Colonialism in Newfoundland, like so many other places, was not some kind of organized or rational force but rather, in the words of William Dalrymple, it was an ‘anarchy’. The reach of the law was extremely limited, and settler violence against Indigenous people was ignored and ultimately tolerated; not because there was some organized campaign to eliminate the Beothuk but because to protect them would cost too much money. It was in this context that John Peyton was allowed to lead a heavily armed posse of trappers and fishermen back to the place they called Red Indian Lake in March of 1819.

Peyton and his men snuck up on the Beothuk encampment in the early hours of the morning of March 19th, but before they could reach the cluster of mamateeks, someone sounded an alarm and the people fled across the lake ice.

Slide: Shanawdithit Sketch II

Shanawdithit’s drawing of the incident commits to permanency the temporary mark of their footprints on the snow and the crimes that subsequently unfolded. Again, like with Buchan’s encounter, we usually only have the colonizer’s side of such stories. But because of Shanawdithit’s determination to tell her side, we know far more. Shanawdithit fled with the rest of her family, including her Uncle Nonosabasut and Shanawdithit’s friend, his wife Demasduit. Demasduit was only a few years older than Shanawdithit and had just given birth to her and Nonosabasut’s first child two days before. Together, the families ran. Demasduit passed the baby to a kinsman, fighting to keep up, but a few moments later she stumbled and fell.

The white men were soon upon her, hauling her up from the snow and ignoring her pleas to spare her; they had on their minds, of course, King George IV’s reward of £100 pounds for the capture of any living ‘Red Indian’. Demasduit’s husband ran back, entreating Peyton to let his wife go. He spoke in the Beothuk language; but surely the white men understood his meaning. When words failed, Nonosabasut attempted to physically wrest Demasduit away. One of Peyton's men drove a bayonet into his back, and next Peyton shot him. They left him on the ice to die, bound Demasduit’s arms, and brought her back to a white settlement. They called her ‘Mary March’ after the month in which she was captured. In the end, Peyton and his men did stand trial for murder; but the Grand Jury found them not guilty by reason of self-defence.

Shanawdithit’s drawing of the incident—and her accompanying testimony to Cormack--offers further indictments. A second Beothuk man, she insisted, was also killed that day.

Slide: Shanawdithit Sketch III detail 1

And then, in red pencil, she drew a small red bundle near where the lake met the river: this is the place where Demasduit and Nonosabasut’s baby died, two days after its mother was kidnapped. A year later, she bore witness from the lakeside trees to an expedition of marines led by David Buchan. They pulled a wooden box: Demasduit’s coffin. They could not know it, but Demasduit had died of tuberculosis, contracted shortly after she was taken.

Shanawdithit Sketch III detail 2

This loss heaped upon loss marked the beginning of the end of the Beothuk world.

By 1823, many Beothuk had left the island, as family bands took the difficult decision to abandon their homelands and travel to the territories of the Innu, their closest allies whose territory of Nitassinan stretched across what we would call Labrador and Quebec. Some others joined the Mi’kmaw on Newfoundland’s southern coast, marrying into those families or going even further south, to Mohawk territory. Countless others died from the direct violence of guns or the indirect violence of starvation before they could leave.

For a time at least, Shanawdithit’s family band stayed; but in the spring of 1823, they were facing starvation. Without the whole tribe to maintain the deer fences, the caribou hunt was not successful. Going to the coast for shellfish, seal or sea birds meant risking death by a white man’s bullet. But the cruel hungry gap of April gave them no choice. Shanawdithit drew her and her family’s journey of more than 300 miles, showing how they had cleverly pond and island-hopped to avoid white settlements.

It was not enough. Along the way, another uncle and her cousin were shot dead; and her father drowned, attempting to flee across a half-frozen river. Upon her drawings of these horrific incidents, Cormack scrawled his cruel arithmetic. How many of her people remained? First 27, then 12, then 3: only

Shanawdithit, alongside her adoptive mother and her sister made it to the coast, where they soon found themselves staring down the barrel of a trappers' gun.

The trapper loaded the three women into his boat and took them through the beautiful island-studded bay that used to be their homeland. He brought them to the home of none other than John Peyton, on Exploits, Burnt Island.

Within weeks, Shanawdithit's adoptive mother and sister perished from tuberculosis. She buried the last two members of her whole extended family in graves by the sea. She spent the next five years of her life living with John Peyton as a servant. While at his house, she was apparently free to come and go as she pleased and frequently talked back to her mistress. And she made things: birchbark bitten into elaborate patterns, paper snowflakes, a caribou hide dress decorated in red ochre, dozens, and dozens of long-lost pencil drawings.

It is difficult for me to make sense of this time in Shanawdithit's life. Newer historical narratives, highly suspect of the imperial archive, would emphasize her subjugation, and her clear status as a victimized and oppressed woman who was left with very few choices in life. But I also feel that it is important to see Shanawdithit as an agential human being, who made the most of the limited choices she had and who, despite the violence and tragedy and dispossession she experienced, still kept living and creating, still kept trying to tell her story. We do the past a great disservice when we attempt to flatten complex lives into narratives of victims and perpetrators, of heroes and villains. Simplistic victimhood erases important moments of resilience and resistance; simplistic villainy exculpates the normative systems of which exploiters and murderers were a part.

If anyone transcends the villain-hero binary, it's William Eppes Cormack. Cormack was the Newfoundland-born son of a Scottish merchant and had returned to Britain's western Atlantic colonies in 1818, to resettle dispossessed highlanders on stolen Mi'kmaw land in the newly named Prince Edward Island. He arrived back in Newfoundland in 1822, after the death of his mother, to settle the family affairs there, and somewhere turning that time grief and imperialism combined to make him hatch a plan to be the first (white) man to walk across the island's interior.

As a mineralogist who trained under the famous Professor Robert Jameson in Edinburgh, Cormack wanted to prove that the Newfoundland interior was indeed 'improveable': potentially rich in mineral resources like gold and coal and boasting plenty of arable land. Like many 'natural historians' of the day, Cormack was interested in flora, fauna, rocks as well as other—supposedly primitive—cultures; so, another part of his mission was to find the 'Red Indians'. This first walk, performed in 1823 (the same year that Shanawdithit and her family made the journey to the coast) gained him some degree of renown, but he did not find the Beothuk.

Over the ensuing five years, he became more obsessed with them, amid growing fears of their 'extirpation'. This was the dawn of 'imperial humanitarianism', an intellectual and philanthropic movement that advocated for the rights and well-being of 'Aborigines in British Settlements' (without advocating for the end of the occupation of Indigenous lands of course), and Cormack fits within this contradictory context well.

He founded the Beothuk Institute in 1827, one of the first in European associations in history to consider the rights of an Indigenous people. He declared that ''we now stand on the nearest point of the New World to Europe… to consider the condition of this invaded and ill-treated first occupiers of the country. Britons have trespassed here to be a blight and a scourge to a portion of the Race…a defenceless and once independent tribe of men have been nearly extirpated from the Earth without hardly any enquiry How or Why.'

The institute funded a second walk, this time down the Exploits to Red Indian Lake, but all Cormack's found was 'abandoned tents and vapour hunts, and long expanses of deer fence going to decay.' He also found the graves of Nonosabasut, Demasduit, and their infant, which had been placed there some seven years before. Always desperate to impress his social betters, Cormack, thinking of his former tutor Robert Jameson, removed the skulls from their bodies and put them, alongside the grave goods, into his rucksack like chunks of granite. He returned to the coast, half dead and nearly defeated, but still clinging to his belief in the fundamental goodness of Empire. ''It is to be lamented that now', Cormack wrote in his report of his second expedition, 'when we have taken up the cause of a barbarously treated people, so few should remain to reap the benefit of our plans for their civilization'.

Upon his return, he learned of one Beothuk woman who might yet become the object of his noble rescue. They called her Nancy April, after the month she was first captured. Her real name was Shanawdithit.

Cormack spirited Shanawdithit away from Peyton's home when he was away, against his wishes. There is no record of what her wishes were, or whether anyone thought to ask. There is also no record of when she first began coughing the blood that was the hallmark of tuberculosis.

Cormack was incensed that she had not been taught better English or asked about her people and, bringing her to his home in St John's, he sought to remedy this. For more than six months, he interviewed her and encouraged her to draw. A huge amount of the material he collected—her responses to questions; her artwork—is lost and presumed destroyed; a story I don't have time to get into right now. We do not know whether Cormack was kind or coercive; whether he treated Shanawdithit as a human being or as a curiosity; though from the scraps that remain we can see he was incensed that Shanawdithti had been allowed to labour in obscurity as a servant, this was as much because he wanted to study her as it was out of concern for her rights and wellbeing. Cormack left Newfoundland for the final time a few months before she died; and before he did, he told the colony's surgeon general to dissect her body after death, to remove her skull, and to ship it to London. If it were not for Cormack's work with Shanawdithtit, we'd have no first hand account of her people and their history. We would know so much less and the Beothuk would be even more gone. We have to hold this truth together with the stolen skulls and desecrated bodies. Both are imperial inheritances.

When Cormack left, he sent Shanawdithit to the Attorney General's house and when she grew too ill to be cared for there, David Buchan came and brought her to the naval hospital on the harbour's south side, at a place called Riverhead, not far from Roope's Plantation. Tuberculosis is a disease that stalks the poor. It thrives in bodies weakened by hard work and poor nutrition; it spreads in crowded and unsanitary conditions; and it kills slowly. Dr Carson transferred Shanawdithit to the Riverhead Hospital in June of 1829, after she grew too ill to remain in the home of the Attorney General. The Hospital had been built only fifteen years before, designed to serve the ailing poor of the city after the overcrowded naval hospital began bursting at the seams. But only fifteen years later, Riverhead was also too full, and understaffed and underfunded. Shanawdithit was almost certainly packed in a crowded room with other patients coughing blood. Dr Carson came only sometimes. There was little he could do for any of them.

From the window of the hospital, maybe she could watch the harbour. Maybe she could hear the river. Maybe she spoke its Beothuk name. She died at the end of June, the month when spring arrives, sudden and beautiful, to the island and ethereal icebergs visit its coasts. Dr Carson did as Cormack suggested and sent her scalp and skull to the Royal College of Physicians in London.

The rest of Shanawdithit's body was buried in a pauper's grave on the south side of the harbour. The exact location has never been found.

On May 11th 1941, the Royal College of Surgeons was hit by a German incendiary device, collapsing most of the building and destroying at least two-thirds of the institution's specimen collection. The damage was photographed by the museum's staff the next day black and white images in the College's archive show dozens of crania scattered amid the fallen bricks, floorboards, and rubble. When viewed as a whole, the image that the museum staff took that day in 1941 is a testament both to the destruction of war and to the deeper violence of imperialism.

I have searched in vain for Shanawdithit's remains amongst the Royal College of Surgeon's salvaged archival records, where strings of numbers tell me that only one seventh of their human crania collection was destroyed that day. But that's where the trail ends. There are things I will never know. Shanawdithit's partial remains may have been among the rubble of a bombed medical museum. They may lie in pieces beneath the streets of twenty-first century London. Or maybe they still exist somewhere, uncatalogued or misidentified, among the collections of the empire's institutions today.

Shanawdithit's physical remains are not the only remnants of the Beothuk people and their territory that sit in boxes, in drawers and on shelves in Britain and her former colonial possessions. Some of the grave goods that Cormack stole are housed at the British Museum, including the fringe of Nonosawbasut's belt, and a beautiful meat dish 'taken from the chief's tomb'. It still smells of the birch it was made with, that rich spicy smell of old wood.

Until recently the skulls of Demasduit and Nonosabasut sat in boxes in the National Museum of Scotland's crania storeroom, until a repatriation campaign in 2020, led by a Newfoundland Mi'kmaw man, Chief Mi'sel Joe, saw them returned to their island. The other grave goods that Cormack sent with them—a doll, a canoe—remain in Scotland. There are currently no plans or legal mechanism through which they can be returned.

The beautiful pendants that Shanawdithit's people made, carved in intricate patterns from caribou antler, are scattered every which way. There are some at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, at the British Museum, at the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and dozens of other places. Scrapers, arrowheads, awls, and harpoon heads are held in more than twenty museums around Britain, the Commonwealth and United States, mostly in boxes and not on display.

And near the river in Greenwich, under a warm downlight in the National Maritime Museum's Atlantic Gallery, sits the most precious of Shanawdithit's surviving creations: a model, about a foot long, of a Beothuk canoe.

One could be forgiven for walking past it, overshadowed as it is by much larger and more detailed gunships and frigates. Unlike so many indigenous artworks collected by the amateur ethnographers of Empire, this piece bears its maker's name.

Shanawdithit stitched the gunnels and stem of this model with spruce root sinew, pliable like leather and red like blood. Upon the gunnels she put a delicate border of wood, fixed down with drawing pins from the household sewing box. It is difficult to say if she was the one who lacquered the model or if this was done by the sea captain who asked her to make it or by Somerset House or the Royal Naval Museum, as it passed through their hands. But we do know that before she gave it to Captain Jones, she rubbed it with ochre, likely mixed with seal fat, so that the canoe has a deep red colour and a lovely sheen.

However extraordinary and wonderful it is that Shanawdithit's canoe still survives, it is painful to see how it—and so much other material scattered in the archives and museums of Britain--have been ripped from their stories. No one would know the epic tale of violence, tragedy, resilience and resistance that Shanawdithit stitched into this beautiful model boat. And one of the things I would argue, as this lecture draws to a close, is that we need to work to restore these stories as much if not more than we need to work to repatriate the objects.

Shanawdithit's story is one among millions in the history of North America's empires alone. Give statistics about the ravaging of north America…And as extraordinary as it is that—thanks to Shanawdithit and (reluctantly) thanks to Cormack too—we have Shanawdithit's story; knowing hers demands that we acknowledge those that did not survive the avarice and violence of imperialism as well.

But the history I've told you here is not just synecdoche, it is an important story in its own right, even if few know or care about Newfoundland. Shanawdithit's island was a site of incredible over-extraction, and it was one of the earliest spaces to experience the environmental costs of this avarice. Shanawdithit's story is also the story of these imperial entanglements, the violence and greed that underwrote them, and the price that people and planet paid. Newfoundland was one of the earliest sites for what Audra Michell would call 'the systematic destruction of bioplurality' that became the hallmark of imperial capitalism.

Shanawdithit experienced losses and injustices so great that she would be forgiven for never being able to appreciate, let alone create, beauty again. And yet, at a desk in William Cormack's house by the harbour and the river in the months before her death, Shanawdithit created a beautiful and vitally important elegy for the world that had been taken from her. She single-handedly ensured the survival—however fragile and slight—of an entire culture of people. She reminds us of what an act of hope it is to tell a story, even at the end of the world.