Learning Hospitality: George Buchan's *Narrative of the Loss of the Winterton* (1820)

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Summary

Shipwreck narratives were a publisher's staple during the eighteenth century. They appeared as pamphlets, chapbooks, broadsheets, and occasionally as more expensive book editions. George Buchan's *Narrative of the Loss of the Winterton East Indiaman* (1820) is a complex text that weaves together a historical account of a tragedy and its aftermath, an ethnography and natural history of Madagascar, and the unequivocal pronouncement of the author's evangelical commitments. This article concerns Buchan's response to the catastrophic interruption of his journey. It argues that the hospitality extended by the Madagascans to the *Winterton* cast aways resonates with the author's prudential efforts to be hospitable to authorial, cultural and ideological difference. Interrupted journeys – even amidst tragedy – can be generative in that epistemological agendas and ontological itineraries are unsettled. Buchan contends with an experience that does not conform to his expectations, which presents an occasion for learning. His narrative illustrates how difficult it is to overcome received notions, even in the face of obvious evidence to the contrary. A persuasive counterpoint to contemporary right-wing rhetoric regarding the possibilities created by disaster, Buchan's narrative illustrates the complexities of accommodating difference, at the same time as it sets out – hesitantly – what a constructive response to violent upheaval might entail.

Opsomming

In die agtiende eeu was vertellings van skipbreukelinge uitgewers se vernaamste produk. Sulke vertellings is meestal uitgegee as pamflette, traktaatjies en vlugskrifte, en het af en toe selfs in duurder boekvorm verskyn. George Buchan se *Narrative of the Loss of the Winterton East Indiaman* (1820) is 'n verwikkelde teks waarin die relaas van 'n tragedie en die nadraai daarvan verweef word met 'n etnografie, 'n natuurstudie van Madagaskar, en mededelings oor die skrywer se ondubbelsinnige evangeliesgesinde verbintenisse. Hierdie artikel handel oor Buchan se reaksie op 'n rampspoedige onderbreking van sy seetog. Daar word aangevoer dat die Malgasse se gasvryheid jeens die skipbreukelinge aansluiting vind by die skrywer se verstandige pogings om rekening te hou met ouktoriële, kultuur- en ideologiese verskille. Onderbreekte reise kan vrugbaar wees in weerwil van rampspoed omdat epistemologiese agendas en ontologiese reisplanne skipbreuk ly. Buchan worstel met belewenisse wat geensins met sy verwagtinge strook nie, maar waaruit hy heelwat leer. Uit sy vertelling blyk dit hoe moeilik dit is om algemeen geldende menings te laat vaar, al is bewyse van die teendeel ook hoe onomstootbaar. As 'n

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oorredende teenpool vir eietydse regsgesinde retoriek oor die moontlikhede wat rampspoed inhou, illustreer Buchan se vertelling hoe lastig dit is om vir verskille voorsiening te maak. Dit toon terselfdertyd – aarselend – aan wat 'n konstruktiewe reaksie op 'n geweldige omwenteling kan behels.

Since 9/11, the tsunami of 2004 and the global financial crisis, a literature has emerged emphasising the inevitability of calamitous events in complex tectonic, weather, financial and political systems, as well as either their corrective or potentially creative consequences. The title of Thomas Homer-Dixon's *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity, and the Renewal of Civilization* represents this line of reasoning. Homer-Dixon is the Director of the Trudeau Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies and in addition to writing regularly for *The New York Times*, *The Financial Times* and the *Washington Post* he is a frequent lecturer to the World Bank and the World Economic Forum. He is also an advisor to such august institutions as the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Council. Homer-Dixon describes the future as "a white wall of fog in front of us" (2006: 308). Each disaster has added to our knowledge of the "progressively more complex and rigid" world we have created (p. 5). We can, he concludes his book, use this knowledge "like a compass – to help us, together, choose our path through a future full of surprises, danger, and opportunity" (p. 308).

Looked at one way, Homer-Dixon might seem the best sort of optimistic pragmatist. Catastrophes are inevitable: let us learn from them. Let us look to Ancient Rome, he advises us often, and ameliorate our excesses and move forward into an exciting future. More cynically, he is Western civilisation's Dr Phil.[1] If we just faced our past mistakes, learnt from our calamities, we could choose brighter and healthier prospects. To heal the world, in Homer-Dixon's understanding, we need to fine-tune global capitalism and finesse American and European foreign policy. This will save us from decline, and keep the barbarians from the gates. Presumably he doesn't suggest to the World Bank and the CIA that they might be agents of the principals (and principles) that cause the disasters he describes as potentially generative.

There is a more cynical yet more persuasive view. Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine* presents a detailed study of the ways in which "disasters", both natural and those instigated by governments, militaries, militias or terrorist organisations, have been integral to the global expansion of corporations and to the widespread ascendance of "corporatist" ideology. She demonstrates, in meticulous detail, the ways in which "moments of collective trauma" have been exploited "to engage in radical social and economic

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1. "Dr Phil" is Dr Phillip Calvin McGraw, who rose to fame through appearances on *Oprah* in the late-1990s, but achieved superstardom when his own show premiered in 2002. Many established psychologists consider his media-therapy to be simplistic and ineffective, if not actually dangerous.

engineering" (2007: 41). Catastrophes have been widely regarded, within corporations and the governments which represent their interests, as opportunities. They are imagined to induce – as shock therapy was initially intended to do to psychotic patients – a tabula rasa, erasing historical complexity and opening up the possibility of implementing a coherent and cogent vision. This economic strategy, formulated by Milton Friedman and his acolytes, is "disaster capitalism" (p. 41) and its explicit implementation coincides with periods of accelerated corporate mergers and expansion.

Catastrophe is not, as Thomas Homer-Dixon argues, a benign, cyclic opportunity for renewal; a way of orientating ourselves in a world that is unfolding in new and surprising ways. Rather, disasters have been essential – and have been understood by Friedman and others as indispensable – to the rise of the global corporation, the decline in public spending and the swathe of privatisation initiated in the early 1980s. Catastrophist thinking, in Klein's view, has served right-wing, corporatist interests at the expense of the poor.

It is not at all self-evident that calamitous events are socially, economically or ideologically generative. Contemporary history suggests precisely the reverse: natural, political or economic upheavals have more commonly proved occasions to buttress existing inequalities and to reinscribe abiding prejudices. Violent irruption into the "normality" of the quotidian most commonly leads to the consolidation of the status quo: disruption and interruption incline to making us more ourselves – often more militant versions of ourselves.

Is this inevitably the case?

It may seem whimsical to consider this question by turning to a nineteenth-century shipwreck narrative, albeit it that the ship in question, the *Winterton*, belonged to the English East India Company (HEIC), one of the earliest global corporations. Folkloric shipwreck narratives predate their inscription by Homer and St Paul. They flourished in Europe in parallel with the ascendance of the seaborne empires. In *Manifest Perdition: Shipwreck Narrative and the Disruption of Empire*, Josiah Blackmore describes the origins of the canonical two-volume collection *História Trágico-Marítima* (*The Tragic History of the Sea*) gathered by Bernardo Gomes de Brito and published in 1735-1736. The narratives were originally sixteenth-century pamphlets, "a form of ephemera known as 'string literature' (*literature de cordel*) owing to the practice of hanging them over cords or strings to display them for sale" (2002: xxii). This form of advertisement announced new publications to a readership that had developed a voracious appetite for the genre. Not only, in Blackmore's account, did the narratives suggest an alternative historiography of the Portuguese seaborne empire to that of the "*cronista-mor* (official chronicler of the realm)" (p. 44), they also recounted episodes of inversion, in which castaways experience the loss of power, knowledge and agency. Many trace a "vertiginous psychological

journey" (p. xxii), sounding a discordant note in the general celebration of imperial expansion and its benefits.

The genre in turn was adapted by the Spanish, Dutch, French and British. Carl Thompson maps the proliferation of British shipwreck pamphlets, pocketbooks, broadsides, chapbooks and anthologies during the long eighteenth century, for the duration of which they remained booksellers' and publishers' staple (2007: 64). Apart from being coterminous with the emergence of the English novel (we need think only of *Robinson Crusoe* 1719 and *Gulliver's Travels* 1726), Thompson explores their centrality in later Romantic aesthetics and ideology. These narratives were not of one sort. Respectable, informative accounts spawned sensationalised Grubb Street imitations; many were turned into ecclesiastical and evangelical polemics in which Providence is paramount; they often expressed nationalist identities and ideals (the bravery and loyalty of English castaways are often contrasted with Spanish rapacity and the cowardly, self-serving conduct of French officers); and, they generally endorsed the conservative priorities of hier-archy, obedience and effort. Expurgated, revised and exaggerated versions of English narratives were collected in best-selling anthologies throughout the nineteenth century.

By any definition, shipwreck narratives comprised a popular literature (perhaps, along with other versions of travel literature, the first genuinely popular literature in Europe). Ironically, they dramatised expansionist ideology – hubristic economic, political and scientific aspirations – by dwelling on the occasions of its interruption: when Europeans found themselves on strange shores, powerless, at the mercy of strangers, and even reduced to nakedness, abjection and traumatised asymbolia. They were generally dystopian tales: haunting reminders of the consequences of thwarted colonial ambitions, intimating the possibility that "we" too may be reduced to savagery, even cannibalism. Collectively, though, they present a taxonomy of disaster and potential responses. Unlike their literary adaptations, which were so often utopian, only a few present shipwreck as a genuine, if qualified, occasion for learning. It is one of these narratives that concerns me in this article.

It is already clear that when discussing the possible benefits that accrue from catastrophe we need to proceed carefully. Let me begin by excluding from consideration one order of gain. In 1810, an American sailor, Robert Adams, was shipwrecked on the West Coast of Africa. He was taken captive by "the Arabs of the Great Desert" ("the Moors") and spent three years in slavery before reaching Timbuktu and being ransomed to the British authorities. His tale, told to an amanuensis and published in 1816 by John Murray of London, was just one in a flood of shipwreck and captivity narratives flowing from English presses. *The Narrative of Robert Adams* has several appendices advising the British government on how it might establish and maintain authority among the nomadic clans along the edges

of the Sahara. This shift in mode, from describing one's suffering to suggesting expansionist possibilities in the territories or societies in which one is cast away, is common in these hybrid texts. When castaways found themselves on unfamiliar or (what they thought to be) unexplored shores, they commonly imagined they were the vanguard of their nations or companies. It would be difficult to establish if their advice was ever heeded, but they (or their amanuenses) certainly wrote as if it should and would be. If we conceived of the benefits of shipwreck in narrow political and economic terms, we would be obliged to consider the ways in which their narrators might have advanced colonial and imperial projects. However, this article does not address this order of "benefit". The contemporary equivalent would be describing the corporate profiteering in Iraq and Afghanistan as an "advantage" of 9/11.

This article discusses George Buchan's *Narrative of the Loss of the Winterton East Indiaman*, published in expensive book edition in 1820. The primary question I ask is: what and how did Buchan learn during the seven months he spent on Madagascar? The implied questions, which resonate with the contemporary world order, are more abstract. How is knowledge related to accident? Is there something uniquely productive about interrupted itineraries? Finally, how might we conceive of the conjunction of hospitality and knowledge?

After being grounded for two days off the coast of Madagascar, the listing *Winterton* began to break apart near the fore-hatch. There were still between 180 and 200 people on her upper deck. One of them was the sixteen-year-old, George Buchan. His first thought, in those chaotic final moments, was to retrieve his "letters of introduction, which, to the young Indian adventurer, are as valuable and dear as Magna Carta" (1820: 28). Ever restrained, Buchan points out in a footnote that "though this be a little metaphorical, in truth such letters are of considerable moment" (p. 28). By the time he had reached his cabin, taken the letters from his trunk, wrapped them in a "bathing cap" and stashed them in his waistcoat, the ship was listing so severely to "larboard" (port) that "the deck was nearly perpendicular" (p. 28). A chest of drawers from some other part of the ship came tumbling down, wedging Buchan's cabin door shut. Unable to open it, he beat on it frantically. One of the last sailors running up from below-decks heard him and, he says rather understatedly, "released him from a state certainly not enviable" (p. 29).

Jean Hood, the only contemporary historian to have written about the *Winterton* in any detail, points out that "Buchan had an easy route into the Company" (Hood 2003: 20). Not only was the letter he was so desperate to retrieve countersigned by John Smith Burgess, "an influential holder of Indian stock" (p. 20), but his travelling on a ship captained by George Dundas was far from coincidental given that his mother was the daughter of Lord President Dundas, the incumbent chairman of the Board of Control of

the HEIC. Despite such influential patronage, Buchan was en route to Madras to take up the relatively modest position of "Writer" (although, in his twenty-year Indian career, he would rise to the high office of Secretary to the Government).

The cause of the wreck was a combination of errors on the part of the captain. The "inner passage" up the Mozambique Channel was notoriously treacherous. On 16 August 1792, the lookout suspected he saw breakers in the distance, and the ship's boat was dispatched to investigate. But when whales were seen nearby, it was assumed that the disturbance at the horizon was their spouting and breaching, and the ship's gun was fired to recall the boat. Further, Captain Dundas had a great deal of faith in the two timepieces he had used on his earlier voyages; these, and his lunar observations the previous night, suggested they were still eighty miles off the coast near St Augustine's Bay.

Dundas made every sensible effort to save the ship after it had struck and he ordered Nathaniel Spens, the Second Mate, and William Dunn to take the yawl to reconnoitre the coast and to see whether there might be a Company vessel moored in St Augustine's Bay that could offer them assistance. With few exceptions, his crew remained disciplined, probably because, immediately after the wreck, the captain ordered all the barrels of liquor staved. Buchan mentions that some sailors managed nonetheless to become inebriated by drinking from the steams of grog that flowed across the deck.

Buchan sketches a melancholic portrait of the captain on the Monday night after two days' exertion. A mature young man, he sought out Dundas to enquire after his well-being.

> [He] was at that time sitting in the part of the round house that had formed his own cabin; and his whole appearance is nearly as much depicted on my mind as if the event had been of recent date. He had thrown over him a piece of sail-cloth, or some such thing, as protection from the wet and the cold, and had all the looks of much exhaustion. I sat by him for some time, but cannot recal [*arch.*] anything material he may have said.
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> (Buchan 1820: 27)

The following day, Dundas displayed particular concern for the ten women passengers on board. When a raft was constructed, he insisted that they be allowed on first (the common assumption is that the ethos of "women and children first" emerged only in the nineteenth century). Given the tide and rough sea, though, they prevailed upon him not to dispatch them, but to let a group of more robust sailors and officers attempt the first crossing. A group of sixty set off and, after a turbulent passage through the breakers, made land. When the ship came apart that night, the inevitable scramble ensued. The poop deck, which had been hacked loose, and the various rafts that had been patchily assembled were launched. Those who could not be accommo-

dated simply threw themselves into the sea clinging to what flotsam they could grasp.

Buchan found himself, along with 30 or 40 other men, on "the starboard raft", 20 feet across, drifting with the current. For the next 72 hours they sat, despondent, in sight of the coast, but without the energy or the means to reach it. In the course of those three days, over 120 of the other survivors, including all those on the floating poop, reached the shore, but Buchan and his companions experienced all the hardships of an open boat. Their only sustenance during that time was the blood and liver of a hog they had taken from the water alive soon after the ship had broken apart. None could stomach the flesh.

Occasionally they saw "native" canoes in the distance, but these never approached too close. But on Sunday, 26 August, a full week after the *Winterton* had run aground, several could be seen heading for the raft. "In vain would I seek words to describe the emotions of joy that we experienced", Buchan writes, "when we saw, from the course they were steering, that we were the object of their view; and that they were the messengers destined to effect our deliverance from the very jaws of the terrible death that threatened us" (pp. 70-71). All the men were transferred to the canoes, which took them safely to shore. They had been dispatched by the "King of Baba" (whose actual name is lost to history).

Buchan's *Narrative* hosts within it another text: the Third Mate, John Dale's account, not only of the wreck and its immediate aftermath, but of his journey in command of the yawl to seek assistance from the Portuguese at Sofala and his subsequent 300-mile trek to Senna, where he was eventually able to charter a rescue vessel to return to Madagascar. Dale never intended "his narrative to go beyond the domestic circle" (p. v.) – Buchan seemed unaware that copies printed by Tegg and Castleman of Birmingham were already in circulation by 1802 – and he gave Buchan permission to cite as much of it as he chose. Dale's narrative describes events which Buchan did not witness. Buchan also defers to the Third Mate's judgment on all matters nautical. He never appropriates through paraphrase Dale's account, citing pages at a time in quotation marks. As a writer, Buchan's inclination was to be self-effacing, a disposition he manifests elsewhere in the *Narrative*.

By the time Buchan and the others reached the beach in the canoes, nearly all the survivors had headed off to "the Royal residence". A few from the *Winterton* had remained to await the stragglers, and they reported on their deliverance and the King's invitation. During this exchange, Buchan and his dehydrated, starving and exhausted companions were "accosted by an old man, who, by signs, insisted on our coming with him to his hut, where we experienced a most kind reception. He gave us the best things he had to eat and drink, consisting, I think, of chiefly milk and honey; and at night, he prepared with a sail-cloth, a sort of tent for us to sleep in" (pp. 74-75). By

the next day, the old man's enthusiasm had cooled somewhat (perhaps he feared the men overstaying any sustainable welcome), and they set off on the course taken by their compatriots.

This was the first of many examples of Madagascan hospitality the survivors experienced. There was an occasion on their trek when a small group of clansmen accosted them and – without any particular threat of violence – rummaged through their pockets. Buchan was lightened of his watch and some seals he was carrying. But the next day, they were met by a guide sent by the King, who led them "through wild mountainous places, and deep ravines" (p. 83). At a point, they became suspicious of his intentions, but on Sunday, 2 September, after their "arduous march" (which Dale reckoned to be about 100 miles), they arrived at the King's village of Toleary, which Buchan calls "Tullear" (p. 85).

Seven months later, when Dale eventually returned with a vessel to collect them, half of the castaways had died of disease. Buchan describes them, towards the end of their stay, dying at the rate of about two a day. This occurred despite the King lavishing on the survivors the best care of which he was capable. Their protector was "about 25 years of age; not tall and rather slimly made, but well proportioned" (p. 144). Occasionally he appeared to the castaways with a retinue, at other times he walked among them only followed by a boy, who carried his "pipe and smoking apparatus" (p. 145). His "palace" was no more than a hut on a slightly larger scale. Though venerated by his people and possessed of absolute authority – "I fancy the king's word is pretty decisive of life and death" (p. 146) – most important decisions were made in consultation with his senior clansmen and advisors, a group Buchan refers to as "the King's Council".

His concern for the well-being of the *Winterton* castaways extended well beyond general regal protection. He supplied them, on most days of their protracted stay, with a bullock to slaughter and share, which, given the economic and ritual significance of cattle among the clans of Madagascar, represented substantial and costly hospitality. He sent his doctors to assist them when they became ill. Buchan is effusive in his recognition: "The personal kindness that we experienced from the King is what we never can acknowledge with sufficient gratitude, nor adequately express .... He continued during the whole of our residence in his country, to act on the same generous and humane principle without a moment's deviation" (p. 147).

Buchan also cites two examples of the King's judiciousness. One day a sailor "behaved ill" (p. 147) towards one of the "natives" and corporal punishment was about to be inflicted, when the King intervened, "saying, that he was sure if any of his people has been wrecked in England, King George would not allow them to be punished; and that he could not allow King George's people to be so" (p. 148). The second example relates to the salvage of coins from the *Winterton* by fishermen. When they were

displayed, some of the castaways leapt upon the money claiming it as theirs. The King – following quite closely the universally accepted principles of salvage – seized the money, and divided it into three allotments. The first went to those who had recovered the treasure, the second he kept for himself, and the third he divided among the *Winterton* castaways in terms of his sense of their hierarchy.

In the eighteenth century, European ships represented not only capital and microcosms of European society, but also a vast epistemological enterprise. In its most explicit form, we can identify this project with the Enlightenment naturalists. Foremost among them was the Swede, Carl Linnaeus (also known by his ennoblement, Carl von Linné), who dispatched apostles across the globe to collect botanical and zoological specimens. His global taxonomical project expressed the priorities of eighteenth-century science: to observe, collect, record and organise a world unfolding everywhere a ship anchored and a naturalist headed to shore with his specimen jars and a notepad. Yet, the protocols of observation and description, and the habits of induction and hypothesis, extended well beyond those who were explicitly tasked. Letters, journals, diaries and narratives demonstrate the prevalence of this "scientific turn". It became a widespread gentlemanly pastime.

Needless to say, societies in the "New World" were swept up in this taxonomical project. Linnaeus distinguished four races by colour (white Europeans, red Americans, brown Asians and black Africans) and, in the tenth edition of *Systema Naturae* (2 vols., 1758 and 1759), described the characteristics of each based on the classical temperaments (the sanguine, choleric, melancholic and phlegmatic). He retained a category for the "monstrosus": those who were human in form, but too abnormal or savage to be considered members of the species. Evidently spurred by this spirit, the second part of Buchan's narrative comprises ethnography, a "Short Account of the People of Madagascar" (pp. 97-165). He was well aware of the compromised history of his host society. He writes at some length of the internecine conflicts among the clans and their connection with the slave trade, the abhorrence of which he sets out in eloquent abolitionist terms. Relying on the earlier histories by Ettiene de Flacourt (*Histoire de la Grande Isle Madagascar*, 1658) and Robert Drury (*Madagascar, or Robert Drury's Journal, during Fifteen Years' Captivity on That Island*, 1729), he surveys the island's fractious past, and discusses, among other acts of violence perpetrated by the Madagascans, the massacre of over 100 French settlers at Fort Dauphin in 1674. He goes on to argue that "these evils appear to have been unhappily much increased by the effects of European intercourse" (p. 98). Rather than simply blaming the French, as so many English writers were inclined to do in the eighteenth century, Buchan concedes that "there is no modern nation which has taken any active part in such pursuits, that can claim an exemption from a long catalogue of imputed wrongs, or that has not been the author of many calamities to unoffending

millions" (p. 98). He impugns his homeland directly for its involvement in slavery; "it rends the heart to think of the miseries ... which Britain has had a large share in inflicting" (p. 102).

In his account of Madagascan social organisation, its militarism, language and religion, Buchan combines sources and his own observations and reflections. Judged against a contemporary history of the island (such as the excellent one by Solofo Randrianja and Stephen Ellis (2009)), most of his observations are accurate, although they inevitably repeat some of the myths that were dispelled by later research. Throughout his *Narrative*, Buchan is at pains to fall prey to neither the Romantic utopianism of "noble savagery", nor to the prevailing racism that dismissed indigenous cultures as "savage" or "barbaric". "On the one hand", he asserts, the Madagascans "have been extolled as much beyond limits"; on the other "they have been loaded with opprobrium as treacherous, cruel, and full of vice" (p. 13). He endeavours to tread a careful path; to engage the muddy middleground of social realities, lauding manifestations of justice, insight and democracy and criticising cruelty and violence.

It does not follow that Buchan is a neutral observer. First, his spirited defence of Providence and his emphasis on prospective missionary work among the Madagascans reveal his strong Christian commitment. In his introduction, he states that all proceeds from the sale of his narrative will go to "Missionary Establishment now formed on Madagascar, and which will probably be extended" (p. viii), and it should be noted that, when he returned to Scotland after his long Indian career, he played a major role in the deliberations of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Second, Buchan accepts the conventional racial taxonomy of the Enlightenment: he describes Madagascans as "inferior to the general population of Sumatra and Java" but as surpassing "the Hottentots, (at least what the Hottentots were before the late great improvements effected by the missionaries) the Bosjesmans, and other such tribes in southern Africa" (p. 143).

He proposes the need for the "advancement" of the Madagascans, at the same time as he considers this prospect to be contingent upon the exemplary conduct of the British and the French: if "the European character should appear under a more inviting aspect", he suggests, "it will not be long before [the Madagascans] climb high in the scale of being" (p. 144). This assertion is simultaneously racist, a deeply felt recognition of the virtues of his host community and a critique of the evils of colonialism as it had been practised.

Postcolonial analysis has bequeathed us a politics of blame. We can spot colonial turpitude at the drop of a pith helmet. We have been trained to read texts such as Buchan's as simply elaborate propaganda for European domination. What, though, if we shifted the register of our engagement by rehearsing two interventions in intellectual history? Sir Karl Raimund

Popper (1902-1994) is regarded as one of the great philosophers of science. He was a prolific writer, as remarkable for the consistency of his convictions as for the lucidity of his prose. In *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (1963), Popper addresses the "optimistic epistemology" of Plato (1963: 12), Bacon's theory of induction – which "distinguishes between a true and false method" (p. 13) – and Descartes's veneration of the intellect and denigration of the "lower part which constitutes our ordinary selves" (p. 17). This philosophical lineage, Popper argues, bequeaths us empiricism: the conviction, which seems axiomatic, that all scientific claims should be based on observation and that knowledge is irrefutable only when we are convinced of the validity of its sources.

Yet, Popper (who loved italics) tells us that empiricists' questions "*are entirely misconceived*" (p. 25). Authoritative sources of knowledge legitimised by their pedigree and settled on by experts in specific subjects and methods are as likely to mislead us as anything else. What we should ask is, "*How can we hope to detect and eliminate error*" (p. 25). His answer to this question is deceptively simple: "By *criticizing* the theories or guesses of others and – if we can train ourselves to do so – by *criticizing* our own theories or guesses". The second is not indispensible, "for if we fail to criticize our own theories, there may be others to do it for us" (p. 26).

Popper advocates a scientific practice that he calls "critical rationalism" (p. 26), which refutes the existence of authoritative methods of enquiry, acknowledges that all types of argument may be relevant, recognises that all acts of observation are determined by the theoretical orientation of the observer, and that "every solution of a problem raises new unsolved problems" (p. 28). His reflections lead him to a prudent conclusion:

> What we should do is to give up the idea of ultimate sources of knowledge, and admit that all knowledge is human; that it is mixed with our errors, our prejudices, our dreams, and our hopes; that all we can do is grope for truth even though it be beyond our reach. We may admit that our groping is often inspired, but we must be on our guard against the belief, however deeply felt, that our inspiration carries any authority, divine or otherwise.
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> (Popper 1963: 28)

As the register of this suggests, Popper's concerns were as much political as scientific. In his two-volume *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, (Vols. 1 and 2, 1962 and 1966 respectively), and in subsequent articles, he advances a version of liberalism based on contesting the social engineering envisaged by Plato, Hegel and Marx. These thinkers developed blueprints for society, setting out who should rule and by what principles. They were strategists possessed by utopian ambitions. (We should recall that Popper's hyphenated nationality was Austro-British and that he wrote *The Open Society* before and during the Second World War.) True to the circumspection of critical

rationalism, the pressing question for Popper is, "*How can we organize our political institutions so that bad or incompetent rulers* (who we should try not to get, but whom we might so easily get all the same) *cannot do too much damage*" (*The Open Society*, v.1, 1962: 25). We need a framework for an egalitarian and just society, and then we need to ensure that there are as many opportunities as possible for critique and refutation; for correcting the errors that are inevitable in all quotidian human affairs. We should not pose as prophets, indulge nostalgia or seek the safety of the apparently beneficent authority of others. To remain human, we must not "shrink from the task of carrying our cross, the cross of humaneness, of responsibility" (*The Open Society*, v.2, 1966: 201). Our burden is the prudential reality of our muddled world. Instead of striving for "the realisation of abstract goods", we "should work for the elimination of concrete evils" (p. 201).

We can set alongside Popper's scientific and political advocacy a widely contested, but nonetheless landmark account of intellectual history. Perhaps the most invidious consequence of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) is its introduction of the phrase "paradigm shift", which is now passed around like a worn coin. Like most clichés deriving from philosophy it is commonly misused. Paradigms are sets of principles and protocols that emerge over time and "gain their status because they are more successful than their competitors in solving a few problems that the group of practitioners have come to recognize as acute" (p. 23). "Normal science" proceeds *within* a paradigm. A group of scientists accepts the same general set of principles and assumptions; they publish in journals alongside those they recognise as their peers; they write textbooks to initiate students into their way of thinking; they supervise graduate students and then recommend them for employment; and they sit on professional boards, funding committees and research councils. Generally speaking, the combination of epistemological, professional and financial investment means that paradigms are inherently conservative. Like most communities of practice, scientists (both natural and social) are not inclined to rock the boat.

Then discrepancies begin to arise. At first, even stubborn ones respond to normal practice. But eventually a crisis ensues. "All crises begin with a blurring of a paradigm and the consequent loosening of the rules for normal research" (p. 84). A different framework emerges, which not only requires scientists to change their methods, but also places existing data in new relations. Kuhn describes as "revolutionary" the science which induces a shift from one paradigm to another, which effects "a displacement of the conceptual network through which scientists view the world" (p. 102). The succession of paradigmatic revolutions tells us the story of human understanding; it's not one of incremental gains (what is often referred to as a "teleological" progression), but a history of lurching from one set of cognitive and normative assumptions and practices to another. Whether

these lurches are caused by the incremental accumulation of inconsistencies within formations of knowledge or by flashes of intuition, they change our world view.

I am not arguing that Buchan's *Narrative of the Loss of the Winterton* is either a faultless example of critical rationalism, or represents a definitive paradigm shift in British ethnography. Popper and Kuhn's terms, though, provide a different idiom in which we might approach the text. Buchan embeds his reflections in detailed research into the prior representations of the Madagascans and sets about detecting and correcting errors in the existing literature. These corrections generally entail ameliorating hyperbolic claims (dystopian *and* utopian) and placing in counterpoint the moral failures of Europe and Madagascar. His missionary zeal and broadly Linnaean theoretical orientation both influence his account considerably – knowledge, as Popper argues, is always mixed "with our errors, our prejudices, our dreams, and our hopes" (p. 358). Yet, unlike many eighteenth-century shipwreck narrators, Buchan manifests a significant effort to be hospitable to difference; to respond to his hosts with intellectual and ethical generosity. He neither reduces the Madagascans to specimens, nor does he pretend that his observations are dispassionate. He sets out to collapse the differences between his world and theirs, to strive for a genuinely comparative ethnography.

The *Narrative* is infused with liberal sentiments, not only in its abolitionist commitments, but also in its veneration of the political checks and balances within the Toleary community. Buchan praises the consultative practices of the King, and points out that, given the diversity of the surrounding kingdoms, the King of Baba could never be despotic, for his subjects would simply wander off to join a neighbouring clan. At points, Buchan suggests that Europe could learn from the political practices and ritualised consultation of his Madagascan hosts.

What the wreck meant for the sixteen-year-old was that the world was more relative than he could have imagined. He critiqued both his own society and the Toleary community, urging the elimination in each of those social inequities he saw at the root of violence and suffering. The cross he imagined himself carrying was not the burden of secular refutation advocated by Popper. Yet we cannot doubt Buchan's sense that "concrete evils" in societies need to be identified and addressed (Popper 1963: 361), and that each individual is ethically compelled to recognise the humanity of others. He strives, in some sense at least, for Popper's ideal, although he reaches it by a different route. Perhaps one can always go home by another way.

Buchan's prudential sense of striving for knowledge and social improvement never lapses into the utopian thinking Popper so abhorred. He reveals, rather, a Protestant commitment to constant effort. Protestantism, rationalism and scepticism have an imbricated history. Each was born of challenging authority and each redefined the path to "truth". Other than

Providence, Buchan accepts no authority; he countenances all arguments, phenomena, representations and practices. He evidently learned a great deal from the hospitality of the King of Baba and his subjects.

I suggested that one uses "paradigm shift" as a metaphor at one's analytical peril. But if we take eighteenth-century ships as representing paradigms of sociality, on predictable courses, following the expected itineraries for generating capital and knowledge, then shipwreck is their catastrophic interruption. The wreck of the *Winterton* left Buchan stranded, reaching for ways to understand his new context. It is not, as I have argued, inevitable that disaster unsettles an individual or a society's ways of knowing the world. It is perfectly possible, in the face of violent upheaval, to cling to one's existing understanding, to continue only in terms of the blindingly familiar.

The history of shipwreck narratives abounds with examples. Their first novelistic elaboration summarises this disposition. In Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* ([1719]1995), when Crusoe saves one cannibal from two members of another clan who are pursuing him, the man approaches him "kneeling down every Ten or Twelve steps in token of acknowledgment for my saving his Life ... at length he came close to me, and then kneel'd down again, kiss'd the Ground, and laid his head upon the Ground, and taking me by the Foot, set my Foot upon his Head; this it seems was in token of swearing to be my Slave for ever" ([1719]1975: 174).

One can assert mastery by subjugating difference. The alternative is to admit or, at best, welcome difference. In their interruption or inversion of the existing order of the world, disasters commonly induce a crisis in interpretation and understanding. We can respond to this crisis with a reinvigorated, iron-fisted inhospitality, or we can attempt another course. The *Winterton* survivors were fortunate to be wrecked near a kingdom in which the English were venerated. Many of the royal household of Toleary even took on the names of English royalty, past and present. Other communities in Africa or the Indian Ocean rim, particularly those decimated by the (genocidal) slave trade or threatened with violence or displacement, were much less hospitable to shipwreck survivors, particularly when they arrived in large numbers. One could argue that Buchan's situation afforded him the luxury of tolerance. Yet, we can also read the *Narrative of the Loss of the Winterton* as a prudential attempt at recognising and practising intellectual and cultural modesty. The "normal" way of seeing things in any community is always the default option, which results in inscribing and defending the limits of your world view. We might describe Buchan's narrative as evidence of a quiet, personal revolution of understanding. At the same time, it illustrates both why it is such a challenge to learn from disasters and perhaps how we are currently failing to do so.

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