Postgraduate English
www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english
ISSN 1756-9761

Issue 47 Autumn 2025

Editors: Keerthi Vasishta and Annie Zaidi

'He has given all his strength to my weakness': Representations of Cannibalism, Abjection, and Sacrifice on Franklin's Lost Expedition

Nora Schultz

nschultz6@wisc.edu

ORCID iD: 0009-0003-5041-9774

‘He has given all his strength to my weakness’: Representations of Cannibalism, Abjection, and Sacrifice on Franklin’s Lost Expedition

Nora Schultz
PhD Scholar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison

Postgraduate English, Issue 47, Autumn 2025

Nearly 180 years after John Franklin’s 1845 expedition in search of the Northwest Passage left British shores, a human jawbone found in an archaeological site in the Canadian Arctic was identified as belonging to one of the expedition’s most senior officers, James Fitzjames. Furthermore, this mandible was one among dozens of bones at the site to display signs of cannibalism, in particular the appearance of cut marks from a knife. While evidence of cannibalism amongst members of Franklin’s expedition was reported as early as the 1850s, based primarily upon Inuit testimony, it was met with disbelief and horror on the part of such notable commentators as Charles Dickens. By contrast, both the scientific report and newspaper articles disseminating recent genetic findings surrounding the mandible discovery are characterised by expressions of sympathy and appreciation of the suffering that the crew is imagined to have endured.

This essay will examine a lineage of responses to the evidence of cannibalism in the poorly documented final days of Franklin’s 1845 expedition through two particular cross-sections: Dickens and Wilkie Collins’s theatrical collaboration *The Frozen Deep* (1856) and a body of recent non-fictional responses to modern archaeological findings. I seek to contextualise a central question: how and why have reactions to this evidence shifted from disbelief to acceptance and even valorisation, all while maintaining a preoccupation with sacrifice and discipline? In conjunction with my primary texts, I will consider the historical, cultural, and colonial significance of cannibalism in both the nineteenth century and the present, with recourse to criticism on the anxieties it provokes, as Maggie Kilgour describes, in both the ‘establishing’ and ‘dissolution of difference’.[1] First, I will argue for a reading of *The Frozen Deep* that considers the depiction of sacrificing one’s bodily strength to save a

[1] Maggie Kilgour, ‘The Function of Cannibalism at the Present Time,’ in *Cannibalism and the Colonial World,* ed. by Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iversen (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 238-259 (p. 240).

companion as not simply an attempt to rebuke the accusation of cannibalism. Rather, I argue that it presents a form of consumption that eliminates the abject qualities of cannibalism — violence, bodily violation, and 'savagery' — while salvaging the potential for heroic self-sacrifice in giving oneself up to be cannibalised. I will then consider this reading alongside Richard Flanagan's 2008 postcolonial novel *Wanting*, which responds directly to *The Frozen Deep* and illuminates its anxieties around desire and restraint. In drawing an explicit connection between sexual and cannibalistic consumption, *Wanting* reveals the play's fantasy of civilised, bloodless sacrifice by returning attention to cannibalism at its most abject and 'savage', and in the process, the novel critiques Dickens's distinction between civilization and savagery. I will then turn to recent examples of non-fiction writing on the final days of the expedition that acknowledge that cannibalism likely occurred while continuing to avoid its abject and violent associations. I will illustrate how these texts use the evidence of cannibalism to reinforce the boundaries of identity, hierarchy and authority, unlike earlier writings which reject the possibility in the name of those boundaries. Finally, I will conclude by gesturing towards the role that nostalgia plays in the response to the particular act of cannibalism evidenced by the recently discovered mandible.

The first documented evidence that members of Franklin's expedition engaged in cannibalism arrived in the form of a letter written by Dr John Rae to the Admiralty that was published in the *Times* in October of 1854. The letter details what Rae had reportedly been told by an unnamed member of a group of Inuit people he encountered while surveying the Gulf of Boothia. This anonymous interlocutor informed Rae that 'a party of "white men" (Kabloonans) had perished from want of food some distance to the westward'.[2] Rae reports what he had determined 'at various times and from various sources' — that around thirty bodies and a host of supplies were discovered by a different group of Inuit people, and that 'from the mutilated state of many of the corpses and the contents of the kettles, it is evident that our wretched countrymen had been driven to the last resource – cannibalism – as a means of prolonging existence'.[3] In the introduction to the edited collection *Cannibalism and the Colonial World,* Peter Hulme writes:

> The primal scene of 'cannibalism' as 'witnessed' by Westerners is of its aftermath rather than its performance. At the centre of the scene is the large cooking pot, essential utensil for

[2] 'The Arctic Expedition', *The Times*, 23 October 1854 <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS117607255/TTDA?u= cambuni&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=1c7e3893> [accessed 23 March 2025].
[3] Ibid.

> cannibal illustrations; and surrounding it is the 'evidence' of cannibalism: the discarded human bones.[4]

While Rae notes that neither he himself nor his Inuit interlocutor witnessed this evidence firsthand, in Rae's hands, the recounted story takes the form of a recognisable Western narrative. This type of narrative both provokes the anxiety of the unknown and avoids a direct confrontation of the act by absenting both participants and victims, and centring instead around the objects left behind.

These first claims that cannibalism had occurred amongst Franklin's men did not arrive in a cultural context unfamiliar with the possibility that British sailors might resort to survival cannibalism in desperate situations. A.W. Brian Simpson argues that 'maritime survival cannibalism, preceded by the drawing of lots and killing, was a socially accepted practice among seamen until the end of the days of sail'.[5] As the reference to the 'drawing of lots' indicates, however, the process by which it occurred held ethical and legal significance in nineteenth-century Britain. One 1737 case of shipwreck cannibalism resulted in amnesty on the basis of necessity.[6] However, several decades after Franklin's expedition went missing, another instance of maritime cannibalism would gain public attention and result in a decidedly different legal outcome: that of the *Mignonette* in 1884. In this instance, in which a shipwreck resulted in three men killing and eating a cabin boy, public opinion generally sided with the men who were accused of murder. As Allan Hutchinson characterises this opinion, 'the fact that they had survived such an ordeal was a matter for celebration and condolence, not persecution and prosecution.'[7] The courts of law, however, determined that preservation of one's own life is not in and of itself a viable defence against taking another's.[8] Cătălin Avramescu attributes the difference between the results of the 1737 and 1884 cases in part to the perception that the crew of the *Mignonette* went about the process of survival cannibalism ignobly. Avramescu claims that 'what they are accused of by the court of the first instance […] is the fact that they failed to draw lots to decide on the victim. Instead of doing so, they

[4] Peter Hulme, 'Introduction: The Cannibal Scene,' in *Cannibalism and the Colonial World,* ed. by Barker, Hulme, and Iversen (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 1-38 (p. 2).
[5] A. W. Brian Simpson, *Cannibalism and the Common Law: The Story of the Tragic Last Voyage of the Mignonette and the Strange Legal Proceedings to Which it Gave Rise* (The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 145.
[6] Cătălin Avramescu, *An Intellectual History of Cannibalism*, trans. by Alistair Ian Blyth (Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 23, doi:10.1515/9781400833207.
[7] Allan C. Hutchinson, *Is Eating People Wrong?: Great Legal Cases and How They Shaped the World* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) , p. 25.
[8] Avramescu, *An Intellectual History,* p. 31.

killed the weakest of their number.'[9] Occurring between these two legal findings in the middle of the nineteenth century, then, the evidence of Franklin's expedition resulting in cannibalism could have been interpreted by British audiences in a myriad of ways, especially as the details of the process by which the cannibalism occurred remain shrouded in mystery.

It is worth keeping in mind that this multiplicity of opinion surrounding survival cannibalism amongst nineteenth-century Britons was distinct from the image of the 'savage', non-Western cannibal who consumes others regularly and out of an active desire to do so. With recourse to the work of anthropologist William Arens, Kilgour writes that 'cannibalism is traditionally used to establish difference and construct racial boundaries dividing the civilized from the savage'.[10] Surveying the proliferation of both fictional and non-fictional narratives of shipwreck cannibalism in early nineteenth-century literature, Geoffrey Sanborn observes that 'most writers chose to distinguish between the reprehensible desire of dark-skinned beings and the piteous need of whites'; the former was 'depicted as an inexcusable first impulse' while 'cannibalism among hungry white sailors tended to be represented as a horrible but ultimately comprehensible last resort'.[11] While this distinction between 'first impulse' and 'last resort' was a desired outcome, Peter J. Kitson, in an analysis of cannibalism's appearances in Romantic literature, suggests that these depictions relate to 'anxieties that, at base, Europeans will resort to the same primitive urges that characterize the savage'.[12] Survival cannibalism may have been an acknowledged reality of maritime imperial expansion, and one that could be met with both public and legal acceptance under certain circumstances, yet its association with 'savage' practices nevertheless provoked significant anxiety about boundaries between the European self and the non-European Other.

Charles Dickens's articles defending Franklin's expedition from the charge of cannibalism, published in his own serial *Household Words*, were not the first responses to Rae's findings, but the fame of their author has ensured continued critical attention. The first of these articles, published on December 2, 1854, asserts that 'it is in highest degree improbable that such men as the officers and crews of the two lost ships would or could, in

[9] Ibid.
[10] Kilgour, 'The Function of Cannibalism at the Present Time,' p. 240.
[11] Geoffrey Sanborn, *The Sign of the Cannibal: Melville and the Making of a Postcolonial Reader* (Duke University Press, 1988), p. 41.
[12] Peter J. Kitson, '"The Eucharist of Hell"; or, Eating People is Right: Romantic Representations of Cannibalism.' *Romanticism on the Net*, 17 (February 2000), doi:10.7202/005892ar.

any extremity of hunger, alleviate the pains of starvation by this horrible means'.[13] Dickens constructs his argument on the basis of two primary contentions: the first, that Rae's Indigenous source cannot be trusted, as he writes that 'we believe every savage to be in his heart covetous, treacherous, and cruel.'[14] Secondly, he cites the noble characteristics of Franklin and his crew, 'a body of picked English seamen of the first class',[15] and Franklin's own published account of having survived a similarly arduous Arctic expedition decades previously as further proof against the charge. Dickens describes this earlier account as a 'manly and touching narrative' that records how even amongst those who did not survive the expedition, 'the sufferers had passed the bitterness of hunger and were then dying passively.'[16] Historian of masculinity John Tosh asserts the importance within Victorian conceptions of manliness that 'the man of character was able to practise the self- discipline and self-denial needed to see any great purpose through to its end.'[17] This 'passive' death is therefore a 'manly' and heroic one, as the expedition members did not selfishly give into their hunger and harm and mutilate their companions, but accepted death with discipline and restraint.

Within a couple years of Rae's report, Dickens collaborated with Wilkie Collins to co- write and perform the 1857 amateur theatrical *The Frozen Deep*, a play about a fictional Arctic expedition that goes awry without resorting to cannibalism. The central conflict of the play revolves around two men on the expedition who are in love with the same woman at home. Wardour, enflamed by unrequited love, leads the audience to believe that he will murder the unwitting Aldersley, whom the object of their affection has chosen to be her fiancé. The climactic twist of the play reveals that not only has Wardour not killed Aldersley when given the opportunity, but has instead sacrificed his bodily strength to bring Aldersley to safety. Erika Behrisch views the absence of cannibalism in the text as central to its purpose. She suggests that the 'social drama' that unfolds instead is meant to replace cannibalistic conflict, where 'Aldersley represents not a portable food source but the source

[13] 'The Lost Arctic Voyagers.' *Household Words*, 2 December 1854 <https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/lost-arctic-voyagers/docview/7847247/se-2?accountid=9851> [accessed 16 March 2025], p. 361.
[14] Ibid., p. 362.
[15] Ibid., p. 363.
[16] Ibid., p. 364.
[17] John Tosh, 'Editorial Introduction', in *Masculinity: Men Defining Men and Gentlemen, 1560-1918 : Sources from the Bodleian Library, Oxford: a Listing and Guide to the Microfilm Collection, Part 2* (Adam Matthew Publications, 2002) <https://www.ampltd.co.uk/digital_guides/masculinity-part-2/Editorial-Introduction.aspx>.

of Wardour's broken heart' and 'is valuable to Wardour only if he remains alive, so Wardour can exact his revenge'.[18]

Taking Behrisch's focus on the absence of cannibalism further, I argue that what occurs between Wardour and Aldersley serves as more than an attempt to disprove the accusation that the practice occurred during Franklin's real-life expedition. Rather, the drama seeks to rescue what is potentially heroic about the cannibalistic act— sacrificing oneself to sustain one's companions—while eliminating the abject, 'savage' qualities of literal cannibalism. Wardour explains his change of heart from would-be murderer to saviour as resulting from an act of physical intimacy—intending on leaving Aldersley for dead, Wardour relates that his almost-victim instead 'crept between the Devil and me, and nestled his head on *my* breast, and slept *here*.'[19] Wardour credits this act with 'saving' him from moral disaster, and in turn he commits himself to keeping Aldersley alive and helping him reunite with the rest of the expedition.

Aldersley describes this process as a sort of transferral of life energies, exclaiming that Wardour 'has given all his strength to my weakness; and now, see how strong *I* am, and how weak *he* is!'[20] This transferral, in its bloodless and abstract form, mimics the cannibalistic act while banishing its abject qualities to outside the frame of the text. Kristeva's formulation of the abject as that which 'disturbs identity, system, order' and 'does not respect borders, positions, [and] rules'[21] illustrates the anxieties that cannibalism can arouse. Writing on abjection and early Victorian conceptions of the masculine, Herbert Sussman focuses on the 'terror at the dissolution of the boundaries of the body, fear of its unspeakable excremental and fluid nature'.[22] While becoming subject to cannibalistic consumption would constitute this sort of dissolution, the boundaries of Wardour's body and identity remain intact to the end of the play. A fantasy of heroic self-sacrifice plays out in

[18] Erika Behrisch, 'On the Trail of an Arctic Tale: Tracing Sir John Franklin in Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins's The Frozen Deep', in *Storytelling: Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Perspectives*, ed. by Irene Maria F. Blayer and Monica Sanchez (Peter Lang Publishing, 2002), pp. 58-71 (p.65).
[19] Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens, *The Frozen Deep,* ed. by Robert Louis Brannan, *Under the Management of Mr. Charles Dickens: His Production of 'The Frozen Deep'* (Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 126.
[20] Collins and Dickens, *The Frozen Deep,* p. 159.
[21] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 4.
[22] Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 29.

which Wardour willingly gives his life, and specifically the strength of his body, to his compatriot without losing bodily autonomy or disintegrating into the realm of the abject.

By contrast, the abject qualities of cannibalism are taken up and confronted directly, albeit briefly, in Richard Flanagan's 2008 novel *Wanting*. The novel's focus travels back and forth between two narratives, that of John Franklin's tenure as Lieutenant Governor of Van Diemen's Land, and in particular his adoption and abandonment of an Aboriginal Tasmanian girl named Mathinna, and Dickens's personal frustrations during the writing and performance of *The Frozen Deep*. In both narratives, the novel challenges what it perceives as a Victorian celebration of the restraint of desire. In the case of Dickens, this is seen in his ultimately unsuccessful attempts to resist extramarital romantic and sexual desire. While writing his *Household Words* essays at the request of Franklin's wife, Flanagan's Dickens is reminded of an early sexual transgression. Contemplating Franklin's published account of his earlier Arctic expedition, Dickens reflects on the virtue of self-denial:

> He thought of how such great spirits as these would always endure stoically to the end, as would he in his marriage. […] Had he not yearned to bite into Maria Beadnell's thighs as keenly as the Esquimaux had wanted to feast on old Sir John's gentlemanly drumsticks? But the mark of wisdom and civilisation was the capacity to conquer desire, to deny it and crush it.[23]

The fictionalised Dickens's reflection displaces the cannibalistic urge onto an imagined bloodthirsty Inuit population, occluding the possibility of British sailors 'wanting to feast' on each other's 'drumsticks', despite British cannibalism being the charge he is attempting to disprove. Flanagan's Dickens equates his own sexual fantasies and urges with the violence and consumption of the cannibalistic act, but these urges must, to borrow the words of Kitson, be 'abjected onto that which [becomes] other to quell the anxiety that the self [is] prey to savage desires.'[24] In drawing out this parallel within Dickens's imagination between cannibalistic and sexual consumption, Flanagan directly challenges the distinction between the urges and actions of the 'civilized' man and the 'savage'. While Dickens attempts to contain this thought with the notion that it is the denial of consumptive desire that redeems the European subject, the effect on the reader is one of an uncontained subversion. The images of sexual biting and cannibalistic consumption are now linked, as well as the figures of Dickens and the imaginary Indigenous subject. Dickens's attempt to break this linkage by

[23] Richard Flanagan, *Wanting* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2008), pp. 46-47.
[24] Kitson, '"The Eucharist of Hell"', doi:10.7202/005892ar.

affirming the power of restraint is also severely undermined by the novel's ending, in which Dickens does not ultimately choose to 'endure stoically to the end' but rather to leave his wife and engage in an affair with the actress Ellen Ternan. The final line of Dickens's narrative in *Wanting* serves as a direct callback to this earlier meditation: 'And he, a man who had spent a life believing that giving in to desire was the mark of a savage, realised he could no longer deny wanting.'[25] Placing these two moments into conversation with one another, the reader is encouraged to see the limits of self-restraint and the shared human condition of desire. As a result, a question is indirectly raised: would Dickens, or indeed any other Victorian British subject, exercise the restraint necessary to not engage in an act of survival cannibalism when compelled to by hunger, or, far more uncomfortable to imagine, a deeply taboo *wanting*?

In *The Frozen Deep*, consumption of the other is rendered as an invisible transferring of energy, involving physical intimacy but comfortably contained within a platonic act of duty. *Wanting* pushes back against this containment to draw an explicit connection between gastronomically and sexually consuming the other, questioning the possibility of perpetual self- restraint on the part of the 'civilised' subject in the process. *Wanting*'s linkage between 'savage' cannibalism and sexual consumption thus calls attention to the anxiety that Sanborn and Kitson describe: not only that British sailors might eat each other, but that they might do so out of desire, and an inability to resist that desire, rather than sheer necessity. Having considered *Wanting*'s probing of this anxiety, I will now turn towards recent non-fictional responses to the evidence of cannibalism during Franklin's expedition, in which I argue this anxiety can still be sensed. Across these texts, an increased acceptance of scientific evidence nevertheless tends to reify the boundary between a 'civilised' cannibalism, fuelled by necessity, which inspires sympathy for the perpetrators and admiration for the victims, and a 'savage' cannibalism that remains outside the frame of interpretation.

In her analysis of cultural responses to Franklin's expedition, Heather Davis-Fisch examines an account collected in 1864 by Charles Francis Hall of an Inuit woman who reportedly took a watch from the corpse of an expedition member by chipping away at his frozen body. Davis-Fisch suggests that the moment is akin to the cannibalistic act, uniting the woman and the expedition member: 'Both saw human bodies not as corpses to be treated with respect but as potentially valuable commodities:

[25] Flanagan, *Wanting,* p. 241.

each committed a deliberate act of misrecognition, mistaking a human body for a thing'.[26] I raise this reading of the cannibalistic act because I find Davis-Fisch's formulation of 'mistaking' between a human body and a thing to be fruitful for the following analysis of recent archaeological findings and how they have been presented in both the academic and popular press. A trend appears across these texts of avoiding an interpretation of the evidence as a marker of social collapse, akin to Kilgour's description of cannibalism as 'involv[ing] the complete and utter loss of difference', where 'the body is made symbolic, the literal the figurative, the human reduced to mere matter'.[27] Rather, the scientists who work with these bones and the journalists and writers who craft further narratives out of their findings overwhelmingly call for compassion for the individuals involved, attempting to convert the 'thing' back into the 'human body' of an individual whose identity is now recoverable with modern technology. Furthermore, these narratives tend to fill in the epistemological gaps of the expedition's final days through a nostalgic lens, imagining individuals such as Captain Fitzjames as fitting into a Victorian model of self-sacrificing heroism that avoids confronting the abject qualities of cannibalism.

A series of scientific investigations and discoveries in the past few decades have corroborated the most controversial of the claims derived from Inuit testimony: that cannibalism occurred in the late days of the expedition. A large quantity of bones and other artifacts were discovered on King William Island in 1992, with a 1996 report finding that 'cut marks on approximately one-quarter of the remains support 19th-century Inuit accounts of cannibalism among Franklin's crew.'[28] The report describes the Inuit accounts as 'the only evidence that cannibalism occurred on the expedition until 1981, when [Owen] Beattie discovered cut marks on the shaft of a right femur recovered from a Franklin site'.[29] The report, in presenting its scientific evidence as a sort of complement to Inuit testimony, sharply contrasts Dickens' *Household Words* articles in its valuation of Indigenous oral accounts. However, there is nevertheless an undercurrent of scientific supersessionism in its presentation of the evidence. The oral testimony was once the 'only' proof of cannibalism, the report appears to say, but now the purportedly objective, reliable, Western domain of archaeology has overwritten the need to rely on such testimony. Now that the bones themselves have been discovered, modern scientists can 'speak' to them directly, eliminating the need to collaboratively construct a narrative with those who were present at the time.

[26] Heather Davis-Fisch, *Loss and Cultural Remains in Performance: the Ghosts of the Franklin Expedition* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), p. 164.
[27] Kilgour, 'The Function of Cannibalism at the Present Time,' p. 240.
[28] Anne Keenleyside, Margaret Bertulli, and Henry C. Fricke, 'The Final Days of the Franklin Expedition: New Skeletal Evidence', *Arctic*, 50.1 (March 1997), pp. 36-46 (p. 36).
[29] Keenleyside, 'The Final Days', p. 42.

The methods used to obtain information from these bones have since diverged even further from nineteenth-century ways of knowing—a cut mark on a bone, after all, might be visible to the naked, untrained eye, but modern techniques such as DNA testing open up new epistemological horizons. Reports from 2021 and as recently as September of 2024 have utilized DNA identification to make biographical claims about the bones. The first of these identified the remains of an engineer through comparison with DNA evidence from a descendant.[30] The latter report announced the identification of a mandible, marked with cuts from a sharp blade, as belonging to one of the expedition's ship captains, James Fitzjames. The report presents a simplified characterisation of the contemporary response to Rae's original findings: 'Such news was especially distressing to 19th century Europeans, who shared a view that all cannibalism was morally reprehensible, and some therefore rejected it.'[31] A contrast is then set up between that imagined nineteenth-century attitude and its modern counterpart, stating that by the time 'modern archaeological and osteological research' was brought to bear upon the remains, 'we understood much more about what is known as survival cannibalism or starvation cannibalism'.[32]

The 2024 report also suggests a certain response to the evidence that it provides, arguing that 'the most compassionate response to the information presented here is to use it to recognize the level of desperation that the Franklin sailors must have felt to do something they would have considered abhorrent'.[33] The emphasis on 'desperation' and 'abhorrence' forecloses the possibility of competing experiences of desire and pleasure, suggesting that to propose that such affects may have been involved would be uncompassionate. It raises the question of whether the authors of the report would still consider this compassion to be merited had those competing affects been present. The report concludes by highlighting that Fitzjames's high level of authority 'shows that neither rank nor status was the governing principle in the final desperate days of the expedition as they strove to save themselves'.[34] However, this is not the only conclusion that one can derive from the cannibalisation of a

[30] Douglas R. Stenton, Stephen Fratpietro, Anne Keenleyside, and Robert W. Park, 'DNA identification of a sailor from the 1845 Franklin northwest passage expedition', *Polar Record*, 57.e14 (March 2021), pp. 1–5, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247421000061.
[31] Douglas R. Stenton, Stephen Fratpietro, and Robert W. Park, 'Identification of a senior officer from Sir John Franklin's Northwest Passage expedition', *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports*, 59 (2024), pp. 1-6 (p. 5), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jasrep.2024.104748.
[32] Ibid., p. 5.
[33] Ibid., p. 5.
[34] Ibid., p.5.

senior officer, as the following texts will demonstrate, particularly those responding directly to this report.

Prior to this discovery, some hypotheses as to how cannibalism occurred on the expedition optimistically framed it as a call made by a figure of authority, the fundamental hierarchal structure preserved in those 'final desperate days'. Scott Cookman's work of narrative non-fiction *Ice Blink* is particularly illustrative of this optimism. With Captain Francis Crozier positioned at the head of a group of survivors struggling to reach mainland Canada, Cookman states that 'Crozier was forced to make a horrible and repugnant decision, the only one left him. It was certainly Crozier who made it: he was the ranking officer and among the few officers the native Inuit later reported seeing alive.'[35] The conclusion that Crozier must have been the one in control of the cannibalistic situation is derived primarily from the fact that he was a ranking officer and alive. However, this conclusion relies on the assumption that rank continued to matter in the face of extreme desperation, an assumption that the 2024 report would later challenge. Not only is this imagined 'decision' to commit cannibalism attached to a figure of authority, but Cookman also frames the act itself as one of heroic sacrifice: 'The dead man, who had served so long and faithfully, could serve his shipmates again.'[36] Becoming the victim of cannibalism is not interpreted here as being violently abjected into a 'thing', but rather as participating in an active process of 'serving' one's companions, as the anonymous victim is imagined to have done in life.

Following the example of the scientific report, journalistic responses to the 2024 discovery overwhelmingly attempt to humanise the crew and restore Fitzjames's identity and authority to the archaeological object. For instance, an article by Bob Weber in *The Canadian Press* focuses on the emotional response of the living relative of Fitzjames who provided the DNA sample that made identification possible. The article leads with an image of this relative as opposed to one of the publicly available photographs of the mandible itself, indicating a visual attempt to shift attention away from the 'thing' of the artifact and towards the human element of this story. Fitzjames's relative is favourably compared to his ancestor for his 'adventurous spirit,' and Fitzjames himself is praised for having 'joined the Royal Navy at the age of 12 and voyaged to Central and North America, Malta, Syria, Egypt and China before the Arctic,' a history meant to provide evidence for the claim that 'he was known for

[35] Scott Cookman, *Ice Blink: The Tragic Fate of Sir John Franklin's Lost Polar Expedition* (Wiley, 2000), p. 176.
[36] Cookman, *Ice Blink*, p. 176.

his bravery'.[37] The bone is transfigured back into a human being whose involvement in imperialist and militaristic pursuits is testament to his courageous character. 'The marks on that jawbone,' writes Weber, 'indicative of cannibalism among the starving men, offer mute testimony to their desperation.'[38] Desperation remains as a method of managing the evidence of cannibalism in order to provoke sympathy and compassion, not disgust or moral judgment, not dissimilar to Sanborn's description of nineteenth-century authors as tending to represent cannibalism amongst white sailors as 'a horrible but ultimately comprehensible last resort'. While the testimony remains 'mute', a narrow range of language emerges for speaking on behalf of the crew and filling in the epistemological gaps with satisfying conclusions. The jawbone simultaneously represents Fitzjames, the courageous military man, and also the suffering that the crew endured, and the cannibalisation of his body is rendered as an act of pure necessity, a 'comprehensible last resort' and not a sign of the breakdown of order or a taboo indulgence.

By contrast, Russell Potter's *Canadian Geographic* report lingers longer on the evidence of cannibalism and actively uses this evidence to corroborate a narrative of heroism and self- sacrifice that echoes Victorian ideals of masculinity, seeking to return agency to Fitzjames. From the fact that Fitzjames's remains were found far from the ship he captained, Potter hypothesizes that Fitzjames made a retreat while marching south to supervise and care for those who were too sick and weak to go on in a sort of 'hospital camp'.[39] At this juncture, the language of the article becomes nearly as poetic and sentimental as one of Dickens' *Household Words* essays:

> And if so, it must have been there that, as all the coils of expectant life were loosed, he himself became a kind of final sacrifice to their dwindling hopes of survival. If so, then his death, like his life, was an embodiment of his deep and abiding love for his men.[40]

Phrases such as 'the coils of expectant life were loosed' and 'their dwindling hopes of survival' emphasise the imagined hopelessness of their situation with a hefty dose of pathos: there was nothing to be done, and therefore little ability for us, as modern commentators, to

[37] Bob Weber, 'Pride, sorrow mix for Franklin expedition descendant after DNA match with Erebus captain', *The Canadian Press*, 26 September 2024 < https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/franklin-expedition-descendant-dna-1.7334770> [accessed 13 March 2025].
[38] Ibid.
[39] Russell Potter, 'Finding Fitzjames: the search for Sir John Franklin's senior officer', *Canadian Geographic*, 27 September 2024 <https://canadiangeographic.ca/articles/finding-fitzjames-the-search-for-sir-john-franklins-senior-officer/> [accessed 13 March 2025].
[40] Potter, 'Finding Fitzjames'.

judge. Furthermore, akin to the role that Cookman imagines for Captain Crozier as making the cannibalistic decision, Potter grants Fitzjames some autonomy in 'bec[oming] a kind of final sacrifice', a reflection of his 'love for his men', as opposed to raising the possibility that Fitzjames was cannibalised against his will.

As if directly responding to Dickens's refusal to accept the suggestion of cannibalism on the basis of the 'improbability' of the crew 'alleviat[ing] the pains of starvation by this horrible means', Potter accepts the terms of Dickens's romanticisation of the 'body of picked English seamen of the first class'. What Potter challenges in Dickens's account, however, is the valorisation of 'dying passively', instead granting Fitzjames an active role in the process of his own demise and celebrating his heroism in stoking the 'dwindling hopes' of his beloved men through the ultimate act of sacrifice. Potter's framing of Fitzjames as a 'final sacrifice', and his death as 'an embodiment of his love for his men', mobilises an understanding of brotherhood and duty not dissimilar to that which motivates Dickens to reject the possibility of cannibalism outright. Imagining cannibalism not as an inherently violent practice, but rather as a means of sacrificing oneself and providing for a crew one has sworn to protect, arises as a solution to the problem of the growing body of evidence that cannibalism did occur. In order to still believe in the masculine heroism of the members of the expedition, the act must be reframed as consensual and self-sacrificial. The expedition can be mourned as one in which order was upheld to the end and duty triumphed over self-preservation, despite the ultimate lack of evidence supporting any particular narrative of how cannibalism occurred over another.

In transforming the cut-marked mandible into Victorian gentleman hero Captain Fitzjames, Weber and Potter engage in a nostalgic pursuit. Analysing the role that cannibalism plays in contemporary thought and culture, Kilgour draws a connection between cannibalism and nostalgia as longings for a reintegration with a broader social fabric. In describing its potential to 'become an image for an intense and ambivalent hunger for liberation from a discrete individual identity through reabsorption into a greater corporate identity',[41] Kilgour suggests there is something comforting and alluring about the threat of being consumed by another. 'The cost of modern autonomy is solitary confinement,' she writes, 'isolation in the prison-house of the self, in contrast to which cannibalism becomes an

[41] Kilgour, 'The Function of Cannibalism at the Present Time', p. 246.

ideal of a Golden Age of a larger corporate social identity'.[42] One way of reading the treatment that Weber and Potter give the evidence of cannibalism, then, is that for them the evidence serves as an expression of being a part of something larger than oneself. Perhaps Fitzjames and his 'adventurous spirit' fit this nostalgic project particularly well because, as Richard Phillips observes in his analysis of adventure literature, the turn of the twentieth century 'seemed to herald the conclusion and the end of geography; there was nowhere left to go'.[43] The twenty-first century globe has no direct equivalent to the uncharted Northwest Passage, where a man can prove his courage by dying heroically and serving his crewmates even after death.

Not only is the prospect that Fitzjames was cannibalised no longer considered to be a sign of total social collapse on the expedition, racialised as 'savagery', it can also be used to nostalgically imagine the prospect of an officer so devoted to the cause of exploration and expansion, and to the body of men he commanded, that he would willingly give himself up to be physically reincorporated into that body of men. However, I contend that these articles still work to individuate and protect the boundaries around Fitzjames-as-individual. The abject qualities of cannibalism's total infiltration and dissolution of the body are de-emphasised in favour of celebrating Fitzjames as an individual hero. What these recent writings on Franklin's expedition ultimately produce, then, is a modern iteration of the fantasy that motivates Wardour's self-sacrifice at the climax of *The Frozen Deep*, one that embraces the cannibalistic act only so far as it is predicated upon necessity, extremity, and consent. While the scientific reports are more measured in their appraisal, with the announcement of the discovery of the mandible indicating that the cannibalism of Fitzjames suggests a breakdown of authority, writers such as Weber and Potter demonstrate the affective pull of this self-sacrificial fantasy. Perhaps fiction, then, is where we must turn to for a more subversive reckoning with the inherited nineteenth-century distinction between civilisation and savagery, the disciplined and restrained West versus the impulsive, selfish Other. Flanagan's explicit comparison between a sexual affair and a murderous act of pleasurable cannibalism, perhaps made more palatable by its appearance in a work of fiction, asks us to directly confront the very real, historical possibility that desire, violence, and violation were involved in the leaving of cut marks upon that mandible.

[42] Ibid., pp. 246-47.
[43] Richard Phillips, *Mapping Men & Empire: A Geography of Adventure* (Routledge, 1997), p. 6.

Bibliography

'The Arctic Expedition', *The Times*, 23 October 1854, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS117607255/TTDA?u=cambuni&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=1c7e3893> [accessed 23 March 2025]

Avramescu, Cătălin, *An Intellectual History of Cannibalism*, trans. by Alistair Ian Blyth, (Princeton University Press, 2009), doi:10.1515/9781400833207

Beattie, Owen, and John Geiger, *Frozen in Time: Unlocking the Secrets of the Franklin Expedition* (Western Producer Prairie Books, 1988)

Behrisch, Erika, 'On the Trail of an Arctic Tale: Tracing Sir John Franklin in Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins's *The Frozen Deep',* in *Storytelling: Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Perspectives,* ed. by Irene Maria F. Blayer and Monica Sanchez, (Peter Lang Publishing, 2002), pp. 58-71

Burley, Mikel, 'Eating Human Beings: Varieties of Cannibalism and the Heterogeneity of Human Life', *Philosophy*, 91.4 (2016), pp. 483-501, doi:10.1017/S0031819116000322

Collins, Wilkie, and Charles Dickens, *The Frozen Deep,* ed. by Robert Louis Brannan, *Under the Management of Mr. Charles Dickens: His Production of 'The Frozen Deep'* (Cornell University Press, 1966)

Cookman, Scott, *Ice Blink: The Tragic Fate of Sir John Franklin's Lost Polar Expedition* (Wiley, 2000)

Davis-Fisch, Heather, *Loss and Cultural Remains in Performance: The Ghosts of the Franklin Expedition* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2012)

Flanagan, Richard, *Wanting* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2008)

Hulme, Peter, 'Introduction: The Cannibal Scene,' in *Cannibalism and the Colonial World,* ed. by Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 1-38

Hutchinson, Allan C., *Is Eating People Wrong?: Great Legal Cases and How They Shaped the World* (Cambridge University Press, 2010)

Keenleyside, Anne, Margaret Bertulli, and Henry C. Fricke, 'The Final Days of the Franklin Expedition: New Skeletal Evidence', *Arctic*, 50.1 (March 1997), pp. 36-46.

Kilgour, Maggie, 'The Function of Cannibalism at the Present Time,' in *Cannibalism and the Colonial World,* ed. by Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 238-259

Kitson, Peter J. '"The Eucharist of Hell"; or, Eating People is Right: Romantic Representations of Cannibalism.' *Romanticism on the Net*, 17 (February 2000), doi:10.7202/005892ar

Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 1982)

'The Lost Arctic Voyagers.' *Household Words*, 2 December 1854, pp. 361-65, < https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/lost-arctic-voyagers/docview/7847247/se-2?accountid=9851> [accessed 16 March 2025]

Phillips, Richard, *Mapping Men & Empire: A Geography of Adventure* (Routledge, 1997)

Potter, Russell, 'Finding Fitzjames: the search for Sir John Franklin's senior officer', *Canadian Geographic*, 27 September 2024 <https://canadiangeographic.ca/articles/finding-fitzjames-the-search-for-sir-john-franklins-senior-officer/> [accessed 13 March 2025]

Sanborn, Geoffrey, *The Sign of the Cannibal: Melville and the Making of a Postcolonial Reader* (Duke University Press, 1988)

Simpson, A. W. Brian, *Cannibalism and the Common Law: The Story of the Tragic Last Voyage of the* Mignonette *and the Strange Legal Proceedings to Which it Gave Rise* (The University of Chicago Press, 1984)

Stenton, Douglas R., Stephen Fratpietro, Anne Keenleyside, and Robert W. Park, 'DNA identification of a sailor from the 1845 Franklin northwest passage expedition', *Polar Record*, 57.e14 (March 2021), pp. 1–5, doi:10.1017/S0032247421000061

Stenton, Douglas R., Stephen Fratpietro, and Robert W. Park, 'Identification of a senior officer from Sir John Franklin's Northwest Passage expedition', *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports*, 59 (2024), pp. 1-6, doi:10.1016/j.jasrep.2024.104748

Sussman, Herbert, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge University Press, 1995)

Tosh, John, 'Editorial Introduction', in *Masculinity: Men Defining Men and Gentlemen, 1560-1918: Sources from the Bodleian Library, Oxford : a Listing and Guide to the Microfilm Collection, Part 2* (Adam Matthew Publications, 2002), https://www.ampltd.co.uk/ digital_guides/masculinity-part-2/Editorial-Introduction.aspx [accessed 25 March 2025]

Weber, Bob, 'Pride, sorrow mix for Franklin expedition descendant after DNA match with Erebus captain', *The Canadian Press*, 26 September 2024 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/ canada/north/franklin-expedition-descendant-dna-1.7334770> [accessed 13 March 2025]

Woodman, David C., 'Inuit Accounts and the Franklin Mystery', in *Echoing Silence: Essays on Arctic Narrative*, ed. by John Moss, (University of Ottawa Press, 1997), pp. 53-60, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1812790&site=eh ost-live&scope=site.>