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To cite this article: Michael Titlestad (2025) The Life and Death, and Life of William Mackay, Life Writing, 22:1, 235-246, DOI: [10.1080/14484528.2024.2326546](https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2024.2326546)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2024.2326546>



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Published online: 06 Mar 2024.



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The Life and Death, and Life of William Mackay

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ABSTRACT

This essay traces my dedication, over two decades, to reconstructing the life of Captain William Mackay of the (English) East India Company. Mackay was second officer on an unseaworthy country ship, the *Juno*, which was wrecked in the Bay of Bengal in 1795. The ship did not sink entirely—the teak cargo in her hold was sufficiently buoyant to keep sections of the upper deck just above the waterline. The seventy-two crew members and passengers, after the main mast was cut down to lighten the ship, climbed into the rigging of the fore and mizzen masts. Only fourteen people survived their exposure to the elements for twenty-three days before the ship, serendipitously, washed up on the Arakan (Burmese) coast. My essay develops this uncanny situation as an extended metaphor for the task of reclaiming and memorialising the life of William Mackay, but also considers my own, perhaps pathological, attachment to his narrative.

KEYWORDS

William Mackay; Shipwreck of the *Juno*; life writing; autoethnography; shipwreck narrative

Nine years ago, I came to in a hospital. When I was admitted, I could—apparently—recall neither my date of birth nor my profession. I had no memory of the days, perhaps weeks, leading up to my hospitalisation. It was as if an absence had approached stealthily from the horizons of my mind, and eventually engulfed me. The world had become slowly more dreamlike, then it disappeared completely. I have had only five or six of these episodes in the intervening years, yet I live constantly in the shadow of their possibility. They have redefined my sense of self and the parameters of my selfhood, so fundamental do they seem. Diagnosis has been difficult; the root cause is either neurological or psychological, but the result is hallucinated dementia. I have set in place a series of practices and rituals to ensure some continuity; I make lists, take notes, map in detail my journey through each day, repeat mantras, depend on friends, write essays such as this one. I also set myself challenges. The most significant of these is that I make sure that I travel far from home at least once each year—to assure myself of my persistence in time and space, to prove to myself that I am a person. In November 2023, I set out from Johannesburg for the Scottish Highlands. My thinking was that, if I could situate the life of William Mackay, an East India Company naval officer, I would also be situating myself.

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Lairg is a village on the shores of Loch Shin, about an hour north-west of Inverness. The population of the parish is around 5000, most of whom are crofters living in houses broadcast across the shire. Along the main road there is a petrol station, a post office, a grocer and the village hall, in which Guild business is conducted and which hosts the annual Crofters Festival and the Church Fete. What stands out, though, is Lairg Parish Church. It is situated on a promontory above the War Memorial, its simple gothic style accentuated by the dark Aberdeen granite from which it is constructed. There were signs, 'Open Again in April', outside the Tourist Information Centre and both hotels. I had rented a glamping pod—a modest wooden hut a few kilometres from the village. It rained most days, as it does in the Highlands in winter, and mist clouded in the valleys. On some clear mornings, though, the world was turned to sparkling crystal which cracked underfoot. On two nights, I saw the Northern Lights, lucent waves breaking across a sea of stars. I had, for more than a decade, harboured an ambition to visit Lairg.

I had made my journey academically respectable by organising presentations at two universities,¹ but I really had a single goal—to find the Mackay family memorial and confirm William Mackay's date of birth. I needed to establish his age when the events which he recounts in his *Narrative of the Shipwreck of the Juno* (1798) occurred. During the last twenty years, I have read and written about dozens of shipwreck narratives, but the image of William, clinging to the catharpings of the *Juno* for twenty-three days, while she drifted around the Bay of Bengal, has haunted me.² Living with him so long—in some uncanny parallel to my own situation—made me treasure each detail I uncovered about his life. But it was still not clear whether the awful events on board the ship were recounted by a boy or a man—the sources contradict one another. So, I travelled to Lairg.

I held off going to the graveyard. It felt as though too much rested on the excursion. The third day of my stay was Remembrance Sunday. It was clear, the sky a deep winter blue, when I set out. I left the hired car at the church. Decorating the banister leading up the steep steps to the War Memorial and the church above it were dozens of crocheted red poppies, still dripping from the rain that had fallen during the long night. According to Rev. Duncan McGillivray, who wrote the entry for Lairg Parish in the *Old Statistical Account* (published in instalments between 1791 and 1845), the church was built in 1794, 'to provide a comfortable, bright and airy sanctuary for worship' (1845, 64), although a pamphlet I picked up from the table in the narthex stated that it was built in 1847. There are various objects in a glass case—a brass hand bell, doubters for extinguishing candles, a wooden offertory plate, a crook, a crucifix with a roughly hewn corpus, a hymnal—all dated from the 1770s and 1780s. Presumably, the present, imposing structure was built on the foundations of an earlier church in which John and Thomas Mackay had proselytised.

McGillivray elected to present portraits of only four Lairg men 'whose names are not unworthy' of inclusion in the *Old Statistical Account* (1845, 59). The first is Rev. John Mackay, William's grandfather, 'a man of superior birth and education', who was 'translated to Lairg from his native parish of Durness on the west coast' (59). The reverend had his work cut out for him. There had been no minister in Lairg for several years before he took up the post and the people were in a 'rude uncivilized state, owing, among other causes, to the lingering remains of popish superstition and ignorance' (59). He brought the people of his parish to heel with his sermonising zeal, his intellect (he had attended the Universities of Utrecht and Edinburgh), and by exercising the right

accorded to him by the Earl of Sutherland—administering corporal punishment. He died, after four decades of applying himself to the parish, in 1793. He was succeeded by his son, Thomas Mackay, William's father, 'who laboured fifty years in the parish with great success' (60). Together, John and William Mackay served for over ninety years.

The other two men worthy of McGillivray's mention are William and his older brother, Hugh. Both were employees of the East India Company. Hugh had joined the 4th Madras Native Cavalry in 1784 and had secured—by preferment—a staff post. He oversaw the cattle-drawn supply wagons that followed the Company forces in the second Maratha campaign. Two sources, *The Old Statistical Account* (1845, 60) and the third volume of William Anderson's *The Scottish Nation* (1863, 9)—although the latter is largely a transcription of the former—describe Hugh's death at the Battle of Assaye. On the 23 September 1803, he approached Major General Wellesley (later, the Duke of Wellington), asking to join in the assault rather than remain with the wagons. Wellesley refused, but Hugh nonetheless joined the decisive cavalry charge. He was 'killed at the muzzle of the enemy guns' (Anderson 1863, 9). A note from Wellington to Robert Mackay, the author of the encyclopaedic *History of the House and Clan of Mackay* (1829), casts some doubt on the version of events handed down to posterity.

In general, I object to officers employed in the civil or military departments of the army quitting their charge at a critical moment in order to engage in action with the enemy; but my memory does not enable me to say whether I did or did not state those objections to Captain Mackay's joining his regiment. I rather believe that I did not know he had joined till he was actually engaged, or indeed till I heard that he was killed. (Mackay 1829, 565)

Perhaps it is also apocryphal that, 'On the spot where he fell, his brother officers erected a monument to his memory' (McGillivray 1845, 60).

When it comes to William Mackay, archival sources concur that he went to sea at the age of sixteen and that—presumably as a midshipman—he learned 'the theory of navigation and practical astronomy' both during voyages to the West and East Indies and 'under able teachers in London' (Anderson 1863, 9; McGillivray 1845, 60). He was, even at a young age, 'esteemed as one of the most skilful navigators in the Indian seas' (Anderson 1863, 9; McGillivray 1845, 60). This may be exaggeration—a plaudit for a dead officer. All sources agree that William died on 27 March 1804 and that the cause of death was an 'affection of the liver' contracted during the twenty-three days of exposure in the *Juno* (Anderson 1863, 9; McGillivray 1845, 60). His birth date, though, is vexingly uncertain. *The Bengal Obituary* (1851), compiled by 'Holmes & Co.', comprises an authoritative 'compilation of tablets and monumental inscriptions from various parts of the Bengal and Agra presidencies' (iv–v). It is the Company's book of the dead—more than a third of those who travelled east died in conflicts or succumbed to disease. It includes a transcription of William's epitaph.

Sacred to the Memory of
Captain **William Mackay**,
who died 27 March 1804, aged 22 years.
This marble would express,
the affection of relations and esteem of friends,
for him whose characteristics
were unaffected worth and manly fortitude,
in how eminent a degree,

he possessed the latter quality,
 his interesting narrative
 of the Ship-wreck of the *Juno*,
 will testify to future times. (Holmes 1851, 88)

If William was indeed twenty-two when he died, it follows that he was born in 1782 (or a year either side of that). This means that he was only thirteen when the events recorded in his *Narrative* occurred and fifteen when he represented them in a letter to his father—he comments on the two-year delay in his narrative. It was not impossible that he was twelve when he went to sea nor that, despite his age, he was second officer in the *Juno*—midshipmen were commonly this young when they entered the Company and the *Juno* was a small ‘country ship’, one used for transporting goods within Company territories rather than the altogether more robust and illustrious Indiamen. It is also likely that, as the son of a clergyman, he would have been on track to becoming an officer.³

My excursion to Lairg was not my first attempt to resolve this matter. Fourteen years ago, I travelled to Kolkata to stand at the side of William’s grave, to ascertain if the epitaph was accurately transcribed in *The Bengal Obituary*. On a smoggy day in December 2010, I left the Senator Hotel to walk to the South Park Street Cemetery. I had ascertained from the Association for the Preservation of Historical Cemeteries in Kolkata that William’s grave was still extant and intact, and I was assured by Ash Kapur, its president, that it was. I walked down Camac Street, turned left into Shakespeare Sarani, and right into Mother Teresa Sarani. Although it was only eight in the morning, the traffic was already a river of yellow taxis, motorbikes and tuk-tuks. Women in bright saris riding pinion sat decorously side-saddle on motorbikes, their feet on improvised footrests. The entrance to the cemetery was an archway but the wrought iron gates were chained and padlocked. At precisely eight-thirty, opening time, a caretaker walked out of the gatehouse, unlocked the gate, and admitted me. I had decided on a reverent delay—as I would again last year in Lairg. I did not ask for directions to William’s grave for I had contrived in my mind happening upon it, as if coincidence played some part.

I walked down a muddy lane beneath a canopy of banyan and mango trees, disturbed a murder of crows which cawed and clattered their way into the upper branches. The graves on either side were in various states of disrepair. Here a cupola had collapsed, there a decorative urn had toppled onto the path, angels were missing limbs and wings, a sarcophagus was cracked open. I noticed seedlings on the small ledges, their roots cracking the cement on which they grew. Some graves had been forced over by trees. Nature’s endless struggle to dispense with artifice. On most graves, the granite slabs bearing epitaphs were still intact. Those who had buried the dead were loquacious. The epitaphs told of the virtues of the deceased, gave the ranks and regiments of soldiers, the ranks and ships of mariners, gave the cause of death, described the parishes, shires, counties, towns, or villages in which the Company dead once belonged. I transcribed several in my notebook.

At the end of the dank, verdant lane, I reached the perimeter wall. Hundreds of granite plaques were set into it—all that remained of countless bulldozed and collapsed graves. Poorly mounted, some had fallen and smashed, leaving behind rectangle recesses. At a place along the wall, a pile of broken clay chai cups and fragments of marble had been raked together, the latest disposal. On my haunches, I turned over some of the fragments.

After a few minutes, I found a shard of grey granite that was inscribed, as precisely as the day it was unveiled, a date, '1788', and a word, 'Year'. I slipped it surreptitiously into my backpack.

Then the gothic aura—that sense of an all-pervasive dark history—dissipated. Two men were 'reconstructing' a tomb. As I watched, one climbed down the bamboo scaffolding to collect cement powder—visibly rich in lime—from a pile, and then ascended to the platform. He collected water from a half barrel, and then trowelled the aggregate to his fellow. They had no plan, no obvious sense of the original. This was history in the making. It struck me then: the graves I had thought centuries' old had been similarly, and recently, renovated. A few paces away was a brass plaque mounted on the curb—'Sponsored by the Indian Aluminium Company and Dunlop India Ltd'. Modern corporations were investing in their progeniture—the Company had set the pattern for the present.

Eventually, I sought guidance. A caretaker was sweeping the main path—Derozio Way—with a grass broom, although it was already immaculate. I asked him for directions to William's grave, and he kindly walked with me. He asked en route whether I knew the 'Mackay story'. I asked if he had read the narrative. 'No', he said, 'but I know the history', and he began setting it out for me. The *Juno*, out of Kolkata, was carrying teak from the Arakan coast to Madras when she hit a sandbank. They covered the resulting rupture in the hull using oakum and lead sheeting, but she continued to take on water, at an increasing rate. A storm ensued, the crew's pumping became inconsequential, and she sank. But not all the way. Because of the buoyancy of the tons of teak in her hold, she achieved an uncanny equilibrium. Her upper deck settled just beneath the waterline, leaving two masts protruding from the ocean—her main mast had been cut down to lighten the ship when she began sinking. The crew, passengers, and Malay workmen—seventy-two in all—climbed into the rigging of the fore and mizzen masts. The *Juno* drifted in the Bay of Bengal for twenty-three days. Only fourteen people survived the baking sun, monsoon rains and the tempestuous seas. I did not interrupt the caretaker, although I had relayed these events in various lectures and at dinner tables. For the first time, I was being told the story.

We arrived at William's grave. It is an obelisk rising six metres from its sepulchral base into the trees. On two of the four sides, reliefs of anchors wound about with ropes. The tablet on which the epitaph was engraved had been lost. In its place—a small marble plaque gave just name, rank and birth and death dates. 'Capt. W. Mackay 1741–1805'. Stencilled in yellow paint '735' which, on the map of the graves I was shown later by the curator, correlated with 'William Mackay of the *Juno*'. Yet, neither the birth nor the death date is correct. There were, I discovered in *History of the House and Clan of Mackay*, other William Mackays. Four had travelled to the 'East' in the late eighteenth century, two of whom had brothers named Hugh. Presumably, the original epitaph had met the fate of so many—bulldozed, mounted in the perimeter wall or gatehouse, and then smashed. I spent the next few hours walking along the wall looking for William's epitaph. It was nowhere to be found. Despite the curator's protestations that the obelisk marked William's grave, there was no dependable reason to believe that it did.

I sat on the curb to think. The caretaker, who had kept an eye on me during my search, joined me for a cigarette. I explained the irony to him. William's epitaph referred all those who read it to his narrative. Writing in stone, then, deferred to the published work. In the

eighteenth century, shipwreck narratives were popular literature. They rolled off the presses as pamphlets, broadsides, chapbooks or, occasionally, as monographs. They covered a full range of registers—many were sensationalised retellings of more authoritative accounts or were revisions that turned the shipwreck stories to evangelical or political ends (several English narratives, for instance, vilified the French at every turn). There were Grubb Street and Fleet Street versions, with all this implies. During my years of research, I sourced and read over a hundred shipwreck narratives published between 1629 and 1850. Some of these were collected in anthologies, often in expurgated form, which genre flourished in Britain in the nineteenth century. Given that each narrative existed in a variety of iterations and that most proved ephemeral, those who worded William's epitaph seemed to have taken an unlikely step. Yes, his narrative has lasted—it was, after all, published in respectable book form and it was one of the first I discovered. But there was no reason to assume, at the time of William's death, that his account would indeed 'testify to future times'. I formulated this strange triangulation for the caretaker: writing in stone, publication, now word of mouth.

My preoccupation with William's *Narrative* became even more personal after my first episode. As one might say the rosary—the texture of each bead passing through your fingers, from each decade to the next, and the prayer on the corpus—I found myself rehearsing the events of the wreck. I struggled, with so many details obscure, to summon William to mind. My efforts to flesh him out became obsessive, their failure only an instigation to more research, more writing.

William Mackay's is, in some respects, unique among the countless shipwreck narratives written and published for the delectation of armchair voyagers. The liminal situation it describes—the ship arrested while sinking—is so unlikely. The cargo of teak in her hold had been floated down rivers from the Pegu (Burmese) interior to the Arakan coast, deft workers guiding the logs by leaping dangerously from one to another. This hard wood was being used increasingly in the manufacture of furniture for the European market, but the *Juno's* load was destined for the shipbuilding yards in Madras. Teak had several advantages over oak, from which most Company and Royal Navy hulls were constructed; it was not only more durable, but it was also more resistant to shipworm, the primary cause of vessels' deterioration, particularly in tropical waters.

At first sight, William recognised the *Juno* for what she was: a leaky country vessel of 450 tons 'very much out of repair and badly provided for sea' (Mackay 1798, 4–5). Despite his misgivings about her seaworthiness, he accepted a berth as second officer. The *Juno* was under the command of Captain Alexander Bremner, who was accompanied by his wife and her *ayah* (Indian maid). The chief mate was Mr Ward. There were fifty-two crew, most of whom were lascars (south Asian sailors), and a party of Malay workmen. In total, there were seventy-two souls aboard. Sailing out of Rangoon (Yangon) on 29 May 1795, the *Juno* ran onto a sandbank and heeled over at low tide. Using anchors to pull her off the bank, she floated on the flood tide, but began to take on water. Pumping began, but the three pumps were constantly fouled with the ship's sand ballast. Six days out of Rangoon, after a storm lasting two days had relentlessly battered the ship, things seemed serendipitously to improve—less pumping was required, and the crew identified the major tear in the hull. They covered the gash with oakum (rope fibres mixed with tar) and lead sheeting. But the

hull was not watertight, and, in the torsions of the next monsoon storm, water began flooding the hold. The *Juno* was sinking.

In the age of sail, when a ship was going down, the standard procedure was to cut down the main mast—to lighten the ship and to prevent her being dragged windward. In the rising chaos aboard the *Juno*, the mast fell within the ship rather than overboard, causing her to broach. Only sections of the upper deck remained above the water when the *Juno* achieved the equilibrium afforded by the buoyancy of the teak in her hold. Surprisingly, all seventy-two sailors and passengers survived long enough to climb up the rigging of the mizzen and few to the foretop.

William's *Narrative* is explicitly and inherently intertextual. While clinging to the rigging, he recalls 'Captain Inglefield's Narrative', in which those cast away in an open boat after the sinking of the *Centaur* 'received great benefit by lying down in turns in a blanket which had previously been dipped in the sea, the pores of the skin absorbing the water, and leaving the salt on the surface' (13). William suggested to those near him that they should climb down to the water line and dip the clothes they wore into the sea, which several did. William, though, concedes that the greatest benefit this achieved was 'occupying the mind, and preventing despondency' (13). The *Narrative* is written as a letter to William's father, but it also convenes a public that is well versed in the conventions of the genre. Thus it is that William, rather prematurely, announces his willingness to engage in cannibalism: 'I confess it was my intention, as well as that of the rest, to prolong my existence by the only means that seemed likely to occur, eating the flesh of any whose life might terminate before mine own' (12). Carl Thompson, author of *The Suffering Traveller and the Romantic Imagination* (2007), observes that cannibalism was the '*ne plus ultra* of horror' in shipwreck literature (68). William assumed that the possibility of cannibalism would be top of mind for his readers, and feels obliged to address it, even though he never gave it another thought.

There are several other ways in which William displays his knowledge of the conventions of shipwreck narratives and his awareness of his readers' expectations. Eighteenth-century shipwreck narratives—the most sensationalised excepted—staged themselves as didactic in two ways. First, they commonly propose that they are practical guides to conduct—as the editor of William's narrative states, '[Shipwreck narratives] may often be useful to sufferers in similar circumstances, by teaching them the means of palliative distress, of averting danger, and of prolonging life' (Mackay 1798, iv). While shipwrecks were common enough, it was highly unlikely that individual readers would find themselves in circumstances like those described. Rather, this rhetorical device draws readers into the narrative by establishing an equivalence—that author and reader inhabit the same limit experience.

The second mode of didacticism pertains to morality. It is common for British shipwreck narratives of the eighteenth century to construct sentimental vignettes which teach moral lessons. These are designed to appeal to readers' sympathetic imagination and, in doing so, to cultivate their sensibilities. There are several vignettes in William's narrative, but the best known—because George Gordon, Lord Byron transcribed it in the Second Canto of *Don Juan* (2008, 123–124)—is William's parable of the two fathers. Amidst the lamentations and ravings of those dying 'in great agony' (Mackay 1798, 22) William observed two fathers in the foretop rigging. The first, 'hearing of his son's illness, answered with indifference "that he could do nothing for him," and left him to

his fate' (22). The second father acted very differently. When he heard of his son's suffering, he 'crawled on all-fours along the weather gunwale to his son, who was in the mizen rigging' (23). He then tied him 'fast to the rail to prevent his being washed away' (23). The father held his son in his arms as the boy retched repeatedly and struggled for life. They remained, for three or four days, in 'this affecting situation [...] till the boy expired' (23). William was so adamant that this vignette be believed that, when he concludes his narrative with a humble admission that some of his memories may have been obscured or distorted by suffering, he asserts its veracity: 'excepting as to the incidents of the two fathers and their two dying boys, of which the impression is too powerful to be effaced' (61).

While William's narrative is, in many respects, formulaic, his individuality is not entirely submerged in the conventions of the genre. William delayed writing his *Narrative* for two years. Shortly after the events that unfolded in the Bay of Bengal, he was summoned by the Company to join a mission to the Red Sea and, soon thereafter, he shipped to the East and West Indies in command of vessels more seaworthy than the *Juno* (McGillivray 1845, 60; see Anderson 1863, 9). He had submitted in 1795 an affidavit to the Company describing the wreck and subsequent salvage of her cargo, but post-trauma prevented his literary treatment of the events. 'I generally found myself so much agitated by the painful recollection, that I have been unable to proceed' (Mackay 1798, 2). It was two years before he was able to write his *Narrative*; 'Time, however, has so blunted the edge of my feelings, that I can now turn my thoughts to the subject with more composure ...' (2). It was not only the passage of time that made composition possible. It is apparent from the regular invocation of his father—Rev. Thomas Mackay—that William's fluency is facilitated by the epistolary mode. One invocation is particularly poignant. On the fourth day, his hands blistered from grasping the rigging, William falls into a fitful sleep, and dreams of his father.

I dreamed that I was in a raging fever, and that you were praying by my side, dressed in lawn [linen], and with a mitre like a bishop; that while you continued praying the fever went off, but whenever you ceased it returned. I then thought you administered the sacrament to me, and just as I was about to put the cup to my lips I awoke. This dream made a deep impression on my mind, and the inference I drew from it was, that you had departed this life, and were in heaven a witness of my sufferings. (13–14)

While the parable of the two fathers is a typical (if affecting) sentimental vignette, the father–son relationship represented in William's dream is distinct, subtle, and profound.

There are several other passages in the *Narrative* which bring William back to life. For all twenty-three days, before the *Juno* fortuitously drifted back onto the Arakan coast, William grappled with asymbolia. He comments repeatedly on the discordant noises that issued from his shipmates: 'shrieks of the women and Lascars' (11), the 'useless lamentations of my fellow sufferers' (12), one survivor is 'seized with violent retchings' (14) and, he hears Captain Bremner's 'ravings' (17) as his death approaches. The abjection—the unadulterated embodiment of the horror—is inexpressible other than in these somatic irruptions. While William observes the death of all but fourteen of the seventy-two, he presents only one death in any detail.

One of the Lascars, whose body broke out in ulcers of a very disgusting appearance, died in the catharpings just under the mizen top. His next neighbour tried to throw the body into

the sea, but it had got so jammed in among the ropes, that he could not disengage it, and it remained there a day or two longer, until the stench became intolerable. Many such occurrences I could relate, but must pass them over in silence, as the bare recollection of them, even at this distance of time, is too powerful for my feelings. (20–21)

Other than this depiction of cadaverisation and putrefaction, William is painstakingly decorous. He speaks of the horror of the events but eschews graphic details. The body of the lascar is, in one sense at least, metonymic—it stands for the general suffering, to quote T. S. Eliot, for ‘the skull beneath the skin’ (Eliot ‘Whispers of Immortality’). We see William reaching, with various rhetorical devices, for the inexpressible suffering of those at the threshold of both death and language.

The conclusion of William’s *Narrative*, the ‘land phase’, is, perhaps, surprising. First, he constructs another sentimental vignette. His ‘boy’ (servant), who was more robust than William, refused to leave him alone on the shore when the other members of the party progressed towards the Company station along the coast. Mrs Bremner had organised, in a rather imperious turn, to be carried by ‘natives’ on a hastily constructed bier. William’s ‘boy’ remained with him until they were approached by the ‘Chief of the Muggs’ (41–42). ‘Muggs’ was the colonial name of the Rohingya, the Islamic minority of southern Burma who, in the last decades, have been subjected by the Burmese military junta to genocidal violence. The ‘Chief of the Muggs’ treated William with empathetic hospitality: he

gave me of the best victuals he had, and, observing that I ate in a ravenous manner, cautioned me to restrain my appetite at first, assuring me at the same time that he would give me a plentiful supply for my journey. (44)

William was so profoundly moved by this kindness, that he ‘could hardly bid him adieu’ (45). Once rested and fed, William set out to catch up with the other survivors, but the ‘Chief of the Muggs’ caught up with him.

I had not gone many yards when he came running after me with a pair of trowzers, which he desired me to put on before I reached Ramoo, that my feelings might not be hurt by appearing there without clothes. (45)

There are several moments in the *Narrative* at which William employs a biblical register or frame of reference, which is unsurprising given that his clergyman father is the primary addressee. The gift of the trousers evokes Matthew 25:36, ‘I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you visited me’.

The party of survivors was temporarily detained by a local Zemindar (a landowner), who was anxious that the Company might hold him to account for the fact that some of his men had taken metal from the wrecked *Juno*. This gave William an idea—he could capitalise on the tragedy. It is a strange fact that submersion in sea water is held, in the laws of salvage, to wash away the institution of private property. The teak cargo, now washing ashore from the wreck, would count as salvage. William realised that he could claim the cargo as flotsam and could then sell it back to the Company—to both his and the Company’s advantage.

Judging it a duty I owed to my employers to do my utmost for their interest, I had early formed the design of returning to the wreck, to save as much as possible of their property without any view to my own advantage; and I was now informed that the law would entitle me to a certain salvage: for, having quitted the ship after doing my duty as long as any

chance remained of saving her, I must now be considered in the light of an indifferent person. (58)

It is remarkable that William could, within just three days, put the trauma of the preceding twenty-three days sufficiently behind him to act in an entrepreneurial spirit. But we need to consider this more carefully. His decision to make a profit from the salvage, while also benefitting the Company, betokens a return to function and his (re)immersion in (corporatized) history. His experiences in the *Juno* represented an interruption of the order of things, which could only be restored by acting in relation to the flows of capital on which the Company was based.

I decided to walk from the Lairg Church up to the graveyard, a few kilometres distant up a steep hill. I passed, on my right, the Manse. It is an imposing and austere double-storey block of granite, built in 1795, the year in which the *Juno* disaster occurred. As I mentioned, we know that soon after the shipwreck, William was appointed second officer on a voyage to the Red Sea and, soon thereafter, captained respectively vessels to the East and West Indies. It is suggested in the *Narrative* that he lived in Kolkata during this time; there is no indication that he returned to Lairg before his death in 1804. I nonetheless found it impossible not to picture him in the uppermost room, staring out over Loch Shin, still struggling to come to terms with all that had occurred in the *Juno*.

The day was still clear, the sky a dark azure with the sun low on the horizon. The cemetery is pleasantly placed. It overlooks the village and looks out towards the sea at Scourie. I shuffled through the kissing-gate, near to which two large crocheted red poppies hung on rusted nails. It was Remembrance Day, eleven o'clock. Two small groups stood at family graves, reminiscing. A woman broke off from one of the parties and introduced herself. 'It's important to ask people why they are in the cemetery'. Her kindness seemed misplaced, and the reason for my being there too abstruse. 'I'm doing research ... an East India Company officer ...', my account tailed off. She was there with her grandson who, she said, insisted on visiting his great-grandfather's grave on this day every year—he has been killed in North Africa, fighting in Montgomery's Eighth Army. For all its isolation and modest size, Lairg had sent soldiers and sailors across the globe into one war after another.

The Mackay memorial does not stand out. It is square, rises about three metres and is topped with an ornamental urn. Moss, lichen, and a robust maidenhair fern flourish on all its surfaces in the damp sunlight. The four tablets are inscribed with dedications, in turn to the Rev. Thomas Mackay, Rev. John Mackay, and Captains Hugh and William Mackay. I held my breath as I edged around the memorial to the face bearing William's dedication. There is a modern information board attached to the palisades on the side dedicated to William. It was the work of the Lairg Historical Society, now defunct. It depicts a ship going down, as the *Juno* never did, and sets out the events of the shipwreck in skeletal form. It gives William's birthdate as 1771, although from whence this is derived is anyone's guess. The date cannot be correct, for William could not have been twenty-four during the tribulations in the *Juno*—first, the *Bengal Obituary* notes that he was twenty-two when he died, and we know that he had only recently arrived in Kolkata, at the age of sixteen, when he shipped to the Arakan coast.

While his grandfather, father and Hugh's dedications are wholly or partly legible, William's is covered by light-green crustose lichen, which has eaten away the

granite substrate on which it is growing. I could not judge whether the inscription would be legible if the lichen were to be removed, and anyway this would be a delicate and complex undertaking. The *Old Statistical Account* (1845, 61) and *The Scottish Nation* (1863, 10) both claim that the inscription reproduces that on William's Kolkata grave—that it too refers readers to the *Narrative*, but there was no way of being sure. I would visit the Mackay Memorial on two successive days, the second in misty rain. I was alone in the cemetery the second day and leaned over the palisading and traced the words beneath the lichen with my fingertips. Surely, I could discern enough to confirm that this was the epitaph on which I had counted for so long. I convinced myself, now and again, that I was making out a letter or number, but eventually resigned myself to the silence of the lichened granite. I had been so close to William, but his life would remain forever half-submerged, unanchored, with me clinging to its rigging.

It is impossible for me to salvage the events that occurred during my episodes, the places I visited, the people I met and spoke to. There will be forever gaps, some lasting only weeks, a few months, one almost a year. There is, though, a persistence beneath the surface of my consciousness, a disposition that remains intact. During an episode, this is hardly reassurance enough, but, looking back, I know that something of me remains irrevocable—a half-life that takes care of itself, which others take to be presence. Perhaps this accounts for my preoccupation with William Mackay, whose selfhood we can recognise and memorialise even though we only see him only momentarily when he emerges from the sea of sources. What we know of him constitutes only a half-life, but at least, in this essay, he lives again, text once again coming to the rescue—William's and mine.

Notes

1. I would like to thank the members of the Centre for History, the University of Highlands and Islands in Dornoch, and of the Research Institute for Irish and Scottish Studies, at University of Aberdeen for their helpful comments on the first draft of this paper.
2. I have published on the *Narrative of the Shipwreck of the Juno* twice before, see 'Preservation by shipwreck: the memory of William Mackay' (2013, 2021), and my monograph *Shipwreck Narratives: Out of our Depth*, 47–59.
3. For a detailed account of the Company networks in Scotland, see Andrew Mackillop's (2021) *Human Capital and Empire: Scotland, Ireland, Wales and British Imperialism, c. 1690–1820*, 83–118, and T. M. Divine's (2003) *Scotland's Empire: The Origins of the Global Diaspora*.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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