

1577_____ The Death of an Inuit Man in England

Autopsy report and comments
of Dr. Edward Dodding (excerpts)

In 1577 Martin Frobisher returned to England from his second voyage in search of a northwest passage around the continent of North America. With him he brought three Inuits from Baffin Island, a man, a woman, and her child, who had been forcibly taken from the island. All soon died after their arrival in England, the man from an untended broken rib that eventually punctured his lung. Dr. Edward Dodding performed the autopsy on the body of "Calichoughe."

_____8 November 1577

When the body had been dissected, the first thing to claim my attention was two ribs; these had been badly broken, in sustaining a fall of some force and impact, and were still gaping apart without having knit together. Either the care of them had been neglected, as tends to happen in such very hectic circumstances and restricted shipboard conditions or (which I suspect is more likely) some contamination, which nobody noticed, had excited inflammation and the contusion of the lung had, in the course of time, become putrified as a result.

This condition, aggravated by the harmful cold outside and intensified by poor diet, was in the meantime neither put right from outside by surgery nor arrested from within by medicines, so that it rapidly developed unchecked day by day into an incurable ulcer of the lung. . . .

When he was among us, his diet was too liberal either for the severity of the disease to tolerate or the man's habitual daily way of life to sustain. This situation was brought about by the utmost solicitousness on the part of that great man, the Captain [Frobisher], and by boundless generosity from those with whom he lodged. Everyone's judgment was deceived rather by the hidden nature of the disease, and by misguided kindness, than by ill will; but when, shortly before his death, the nature of his illness expressed itself in the rather obvious symptom of breathlessness, he was already a victim of dropsy [swelling of any organ or tissue due to accumulation of excess fluid]. . . .

. . . [T]here was, you might say, an "Anglophobia," which he had from when he first arrived, even though his fairly cheerful features and appearance concealed it and gave a false impression with considerable skill. His own actions, however, either betrayed it openly and exposed it (as it seemed to me when I was looking into individual things more closely and mistrusting everything), or else betokened an incipient fatal illness (as I declared often enough, but nobody would listen).



Inuit man, woman, and child
brought to England by Martin Frobisher
(watercolors likely by John White)



These signs became more clearly recognizable and confirmed from the state of his pulse rather than from himself: for this was all the time too small, too sluggish and too weak rather than too slow, although it was also slower than either his youth or his bilious temperament would require.

In the early onset of the illness, I was summoned when his strength was still unimpaired; with much argument I recommended bloodletting, in order that, by quenching the fire of the inflammation and reducing the quantity of matter, they might both subside. But the foolish, and only too uncivilized, timidity of this uncivilized man forbade it, and the judgment of those with whom he was sailing prevailed with me.



Jodocus Hondius, map of the world (*Vera totius expeditionis nauticae*), ca 1595, detail; general route of Frobisher's 1577 expedition indicated by white line

In the end, having been called the hour before the one in which he died, I found everything threatening imminent death—and no wonder, for his speech was impaired and almost cut off, his appetite faded and pulse nonexistent. Quite enough! He summoned up to a certain extent all the energies and faculties which he had abandoned, came back to himself as if from a deep sleep and recognized us as people he knew. But I turned my attention to medication, and he spoke those words of ours which he had learned, the few that he could, and in turn replied quite relevantly to questions. And he sang clearly that same tune with which the companions from his region and rank had either mourned or ceremonially marked his final departure when they were standing on the shore (according to those who heard them both): just like the swans who foresee what good there is in death, and die happily with a song. I had scarcely left him when he moved from life to death, forcing out as his last words, given in our language, “God be with you.”

I was bitterly grieved and saddened, not so much by the death of the man himself as because the great hope of seeing him which our most gracious Queen had entertained had now slipped through her fingers, as it were, for a second time. But the heroes of these new and substantial acts of gallantry are affected by a much greater sadness, for they have been deprived of the rewards and prizes for the truly Herculean labour which they have carried out. To express my opinion, these men can in all justice expect the highest recognition on our part, for they have triumphantly survived those expeditions by sea—tortuous and comfortless that they indeed were, and obviously unachieved before this time. They have undertaken enormous tasks, bringing to the kingdom and posterity advantages greater than the hazards, and to their own names supreme glory; and they have demonstrated that what he has undertaken to do he had succeeded in. . . .

. . . If the libation-vessels of incantation-makers; begged-for effigies, vacuous rituals and magic charms had been of any avail in overcoming disease, this man Calichoughe (for that was his name) would, while he was still alive, have hacked it off quivering like a hydra-head and then thrown it away. For nobody was more practiced than he in this art, and (unless I am mistaken) nobody trusted more deeply in those very superstitions; he made an incantation for every time his pain abated.

I showed the body to the woman, who was troubled at the time with boils (which broke out very densely on her skin next day, when this was written); and at my persuasion she was led with me, albeit unwillingly, to the burial—which I purposely wanted to be carried through without ceremony, lest there be implanted in her any fears about human sacrifice among us. She was kept there all the time until the body had been completely covered over with earth; I showed her human bones which had been dug up, and made her understand that we all were to be buried in the same way. This I did in order to remove from her mind all anxiety about human flesh being eaten (a practice which had become deeply rooted among them), and that she might learn to put aside the fear henceforward.

But that woman either excelled all our people in decorum and stoicism or else was far outstripped in human sensitivity by the wild animals themselves. For she was not in any way disturbed by his death, and, as far as we gathered from her expression, it did not distress her. So much so that, by this most recent behaviour of hers, she has expressed quite clearly what we had long before arrived at by conjecture: that she had regarded him with an astonishing degree of contempt, and that although they used to sleep in one and the same bed, yet nothing had occurred between them apart from conversation—his embrace having been abhorrent to her.

Goodbye.
Yours, as you know,
Edward Dodding
Bristol, November 8th [1577]

“Had hardy Ulysses not seen
Such danger-ridden days,
How happy for Penelope;
And yet how little praise!”



“Englishmen in a skirmish with Inuit,” watercolor probably by John White, who may have accompanied the 1577 Frobisher expedition

Burial records, 1577, in the register of St. Stephen’s Church, Bristol, England:*

Collichang a heathen man buried the 8th of November
Egnock a heathen woman buried the 12th of November

* “Collichang/Calichoughe” and “Egnock” were the English renditions of the Inuit words for “man” and “woman.” The Inuit man died from pneumonia related to his punctured lung (his rib may have been broken during his capture). The child died soon after his mother and was buried at St. Olave’s in London. [Canadian Museum of Civilization]