

# Colonialism and Extractivism

## A Tale of Two Commodities

Anna Fairtlough



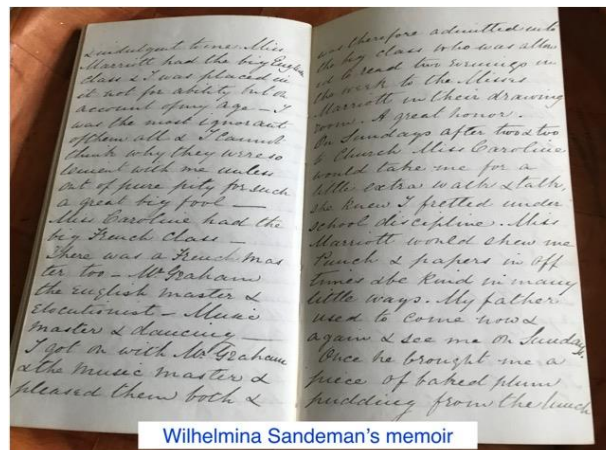
*In this article I reflect on researching and writing a piece of fiction based on a family document set in India in 1861. It is increasingly clear to me that climate injustice, whereby those in the Global South who have contributed least to the climate and nature emergency are suffering most from its effects, is one of the enduring legacies of colonialism. I employ the idea of extractivism, i.e. the taking of natural and human resources without renewing what has been extracted or repairing any harm caused by the process, to explore stories of two commodities - coal and tea - that feature in my characters' lives.*

### Key words

Imperialism, Colonialism, Extractivism, Climate and nature emergency, British Raj, Documentary Fiction

I've spent the Covid years writing a piece of documentary fiction. As an undergraduate I studied the history of Colonial India and the Indian Independence struggle. I have long been interested in exploring imaginatively my own family's relationship to and participation in this history. Sanghera (2021) describes the selective amnesia of the British about their past empire. We cast a hazy glow over our history, remembering that we built the railways in India, glorifying our role in abolishing the trafficking of enslaved people, and believing, in a vague way, that our empire must have helped spread prosperity, freedom and the rule of law around the world. However we rarely systematically study the history of our empire in schools and universities. Unlike Germany, which after the second world war has, Sanghera argues, undergone a process, however incomplete, of "working off the past", we in Britain have not done something similar about our own history of imperialism and colonialism. What I have learned from the work I have done over the past two years has helped me, as an individual ego, to recover some lost memories of my own family history. I hope that whatever I put into the world as a result of this work through writing or other action can contribute to diminishing our (e)collective amnesia. Of course colonialism and imperialism is not just a British invention but as a White, British woman from an upper middle class background, at least on my father's side, this is what is of particular interest to me in this project.

I have a memoir of her childhood written by Wilhelmina Sandeman - my great aunt's godmother's mother. In 1861, after her parents could no longer support her due to their financial 'ruin' she was sent to Calcutta to join her brother, Hugh, an ambitious member of the Indian Civil Service, no doubt with a view to finding her a suitable husband. The memoir ends when she is on the steamship to India with the words 'as all girlhood ended with me at 17. I do not care to recall any more.' This is the jumping off point for my novel, in which I imagine what she might have



recalled had she allowed herself to do so. I aim to evoke the social and material world Wilhelmina would have found herself in the early days of the British Raj, after the assumption of Crown rule in India by Queen Victoria. Some of the characters in my novel are invented and others real. I have found out as much as I can from the historical record of the lives of the real characters and have supplemented this with more general research about the social history of that period.

The European system of colonialism that emerged from the fifteenth century onwards has been described as being 'both a practice and a worldview' (Böröcz and Sarkar 2012). The practice of colonialism typically involved:

- invasion and conquest of large areas of the globe often resulting in the death of indigenous people through war, disease or famine.
- displacement of indigenous people and their forced labour and transportation.
- temporary or permanent migration of European people to the colonised areas and the expropriation of indigenous land.
- imposition of unequal trading regimes, the undermining of local economies and the introduction of extractive enterprises such as mining or plantations.

The worldview that enabled and justified these activities included:

- acquiring 'scientific' knowledge of the geography and resources of the colonised lands and the culture and traditions of indigenous people.
- establishing educational institutions and public discourses that promoted the idea of the superiority of European cultures and framed colonised people as inferior or backward.
- recruiting of 'scientific' racism to promote white supremacy.

Of course, since its inception colonialism has been resisted and challenged. Virtually all former colonial territories are now, at least ostensibly, independent. Nonetheless the legacy of colonialism persists in the many economic and political injustices between the Global South and North and in enduring racial and class inequalities within many countries across the world.

As I have done the research for this novel the connections between this history and the accelerating climate and nature emergency have become increasingly apparent. Awareness of environmental inequalities is lacking in some traditional accounts of colonialism and imperialism. Those parts and peoples of the world, predominantly White and wealthy, that have benefited most from colonialism have historically contributed most to the greenhouse gasses in our atmosphere. Hickel (2020), analysing whether and how far different countries have exceeded a 'safe' per capita share of emissions (estimated at 350 ppm atmospheric carbon dioxide), reports that countries in the Global North have contributed 92% of the existing excess emissions. There continue to be vast inequalities in greenhouse gas emissions across the world. In 2015 the richest 10% of people, again disproportionately White and Western, produced 49% of global carbon emissions, whereas the poorest 50% were responsible for just 7% (Horton 2022). The average Briton produces more carbon in two days than the average Congolese person does in a whole year (McVeigh 2022). Those who have contributed least to the burning of fossil fuels and benefitted least from the accrued economic advantages will therefore have the fewest resources to deal with the consequences of climate breakdown that they have played little part in causing. It is predominantly the poor and those in the Global South that are experiencing and will experience the worst impacts of global warming such as increasingly destructive flooding, storms, drought and heatwaves. These are already leading to direct deaths, the destruction of homes, businesses and farmland, forced displacement of groups of people, disruptions to food supply and war.

Scholars and activists have developed the concept of extractivism to demonstrate the relationship between the colonial practices described above and the global ecological crises we face (McKenzie 2020). Extractivist cultures and practices extract wealth from the planetary system and the living things, including humans, that depend on that system without renewing what they have extracted or repairing any damage they have caused. Regenerative cultures and circular economies attempt to do the reverse. Extractive enterprises initiated during the European colonial period and which now extend across the world are contributing to a potentially catastrophic depletion of biodiversity. It is estimated that two out of five wild plant species face extinction (BBC 2022). Bridget McKenzie of the Climate Museum who facilitated a memorable and inspiring workshop for the AMED writers' group has created a model that illustrates the processes - material and intangible, direct and indirect - that sustain this 'Great Acceleration of Extraction'.

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From [About Stories of Extraction](#): Bridget McKenzie (2020)

In this piece I write about two commodities - coal and tea - that feature in the novel and whose production is implicated in these extractivist processes. When I first thought about my contribution to this edition I wondered if I might use some characters in my novel to speak about their perspectives about these things. However I found that I (they?) resisted being recruited to serve this purpose, resisted being held to account as it were, for the perhaps unintended consequences of their actions and thoughts. But I also wanted to give a flavour of the novel so I have selected a few extracts in which these commodities are mentioned.

## Coal

### Extract 1

Behind her Wilhelmina could hear Hugh and Nicol continuing their conversation. More talk of money and business and things that always interested men.

*'The Empire's not treated you so badly though, I understand,'* said Hugh,

*'Aye that's true enough. There's been opportunities I'd nae have had in Greenock. I saved a bit before the shipyards closed...the railway stock's a safe bet. With what I've put in Bengal Coal,'* said Nicol.

*'I'm sure you've been very prudent.'*

*'The mines are making a tidy profit now...and demand for coal will only increase...'*

In this extract Nicol, one of Wilhelmina's suitors, is talking to her brother Hugh. Nicol (McNicol), one of the real characters I referred to above, was from Greenock. I'm sure Nicol would have been proud of James Watt, also from Greenock, who re-engineered the steam engine, greatly improving its efficiency and transforming it into the machine that would come to revolutionise all aspects of the economy and of daily life in Britain and, later, the world. One of Nicol's ancestors ran a coffee shop in the same street that Watt was born. I like to imagine that Watt had formative conversations there about engineering, science and philosophy before he went to Glasgow to begin his career as an instrument maker.

The steam engine was of course powered by coal. That black, concentrated, energy-rich substance, formed under great pressure and heat from plants that grew hundreds of millions of years ago. Of course we know now that coal is the most dangerous of the three fossil fuels, emitting much more carbon when it is burned than either oil or gas and that it can also release other harmful pollutants such as sulphur, nitrogen dioxides and mercury into the atmosphere and water supply. Then, though, coal would have been seen as a miraculous substance, the substance that was powering the British Empire. Coal powered the steam ships that enabled British officials, merchants, planters, soldiers, missionaries and women like Wilhelmina, pejoratively dubbed the 'fishing fleet', to reach India in weeks rather than months. Steam ships too took the goods manufactured in Britain to India and the raw materials extracted from India back to Britain. Coal also powered the railway engines that transported these people and goods throughout India.

I discovered from his will that Nicol died a fairly well-off man, certainly much richer than he would have been if he had remained a boat builder in his native town. Much of his capital was in the form of stock in the Bengal Coal Company Ltd, which was formed in 1837 to purchase and manage the Raniganj coalfield in Bengal. This coalfield, which by 1886 covered some 500 square miles, was transported by and supplied coal for the expanding railway network. Throughout the nineteenth century the Raniganj Coalfield was the largest supplier of coal in India (Hunter 1886, reprinted 2005). Coal is still mined there today. In 2019 Kolkata (then Calcutta) had the highest number of premature deaths from coal plant pollution in a study of 61 global megacities (The Statesman, Kolkata, 2021).

## Tea

Although the mining and burning of coal is an example of extractivism par excellence, as Bridget McKenzie's model makes clear, extractivism involves more than just extracting minerals. It also involves the biotic, i.e. the sphere of life that relates to plants. Nearly 70% of people in Britain drink tea every day. I am one of them. I've always loved tea - the fragrance, the bitterness, the bright clear feeling it gives me. For me tea has associations of conviviality, of warmth, of childhood meals with my grandmother's sandwiches and home made cakes. I imagine tea also to play an important role in the family life of the characters of my novel. This leads me to research the development of the tea industry in India. I discover that these cosy familial feelings are associated with a brutal, and sometimes illegal, history that is entwined in complex ways with Britain's imperial relationship not only with India but also with China (Rose 2010).



In the eighteenth century tea was becoming popular throughout Britain. At that time only the Chinese knew how to cultivate tea, thus ensuring that it had to be obtained from China. The Chinese Government insisted that tea be paid for in silver bullion. To finance this the East India Company (EIC) facilitated the cultivation of opium in Bengal, which was sold for silver to merchants in Calcutta to be smuggled into China. Gradually these illegal opium imports became nearly sufficient to cover the cost to the EIC of purchasing the tea. When, in an attempt to stem a wave of opium addiction, the Chinese Government seized and destroyed these illegal opium stores the British reacted by declaring war (National Army Museum, no date). The so-called First Opium War (1839-42) ended with the Chinese defeated and being forced to legalise opium importation and cede the island of Hong Kong.

Despite achieving their commercial aims with regard to opium through the war with China the EIC, having lost its monopoly on trading tea, was determined to experiment with producing tea in India. In 1848 they employed Robert Fortune, a Scottish botanist, to go to China to learn the secrets of tea cultivation. As an inducement to undertake the mission, which was illegal and could have cost him his life were he to be uncovered, the EIC paid Fortune five times his salary as the curator of the Chelsea Physic Garden. Fortune disguised himself as a Chinese Mandarin and for three years travelled throughout the 'forbidden zones' of China. He removed tea seeds and plants from celebrated tea growing areas and extracted knowledge and folklore about tea cultivation from his hosts. He was able to recruit a number of Chinese experts to accompany him back to India to advise the nascent tea industry. Through this act of what we would now call bio-piracy: i.e. 'the unethical or unlawful appropriation or commercial exploitation of biological materials (such as medicinal plant extracts) that are native to a particular country or territory without providing fair financial compensation to the people or government of that country or territory' (Merriam Webster dictionary) the tea industry in India was established.

## Extract 2

*'Sandeman. Now that's a familiar name,' the bungalow keeper was saying. 'Your husband, I think, cut his teeth in the Honourable Company around here...'*

*'Possibly,' Rosie said. 'That would have been long before we were married...We've lived in Calcutta for some time now...'*

*'But where are my manners? You've had nothing to drink.'* He pushed himself out his chair and hobbled towards the door calling for the *khit'mut-gar*. *'Bring cold tea for the ladies. Make sure it's not too strong.'*

Wilhelmina exchanged a glance with Rosie. Rosie must have sensed her discomfort. Hugh had told her to avoid getting into conversations with strangers. But how to extricate themselves without appearing rude?

The door opened and the khit'mut-gar came in. The glasses clinked on the brass tray as he set it down in front of them.

*'The very best thing to quench your thirst after such a journey...'* The bungalow keeper lifted his glass towards Rosie. *'So Mrs Sandeman, we were talking about your husband. He's done very well for himself...'*

### Extract 3

Wilhelmina heard the clatter of footsteps. Probably it was Rosie and the children returning from their excursion. She peeked through the wooden lattice at the end of the veranda. It was the postman. He couldn't see them but they could see him, trudging up the stony path. She imagined the route the letters must have taken, on the railway, along the endless bumpy tracks up into the hills and through the burnt scrub where trees lay in their hundreds, cut at their roots, fallen where the wind and their weight willed.

In extract 2 Wilhelmina and her sister-in-law Rosie are staying in a 'dâk-bungalow' (equivalent to an Airbnb) en route to the chapters in the book that are set in the hills just below Darjeeling. I need to find out about when the tea plantations were established there in order to imagine what the terrain would have looked like then. I find an article that describes the development of the tea industry in Darjeeling (Akhtar, S. & Wei, S. 2021). In 1861 tea production was just beginning and many of the early plantations were being cleared and planted (extract 3). I read that the Colonial government has designated the land in these hills as 'wasteland'. The word immediately triggers an image in me of an industrial wasteland such as that around the Raniganj coalfields. But of course this is not what the word signifies. It was not such a wasteland but a forest full of trees and animals and birds. Not a wasteland but a diverse living ecosystem that would have been drawing down carbon from the atmosphere, storing water, keeping the soil from eroding. Not empty of people either. The local Lepcha people, though they didn't 'own' it, used the land for their swidden agriculture (previously called 'slash and burn') (Besky 2017). It would also have been place to gather wood, food, plants for medicines, a place of spiritual significance where their ancestors and gods resided. My teacher at university, Ranajit Guha, (see, for example, 2013) taught me to locate colonial historical sources in their context, to delve between apparently neutral and uncontested words, to 'interpret' how colonial power was established and enacted.

Wasteland. This is the legal concept that the colonial government has used to give itself the right to dispossess the indigenous people, to sell the land, to distribute it to British plantation entrepreneurs, to open up the land so British capital can extract value from it. It is similar idea to that of 'res nullius' applied in Australia and North America to legitimise the appropriation of land from indigenous people. It occurs to me that this process marks a point of transition not from ego to eco as in the title of this edition, but the reverse, from eco to ego, from wild to tame, from ecological diversity to monoculture. It also occurs to me that for the

colonisers the word 'Wasteland' would then have been understood not only in a material way but also in a moral one as the 'waste-of-land'. The addition of two letters implies a duty to use land 'productively' thus justifying the taking of this land for extractive purposes. Whitehead (2010) argues that the distinction developed in colonial India between wasteland and value-producing land drew from Locke's theories about the moral and economic benefits of private property. We can see in this concept a further transition from 'eco to ego': from common to private.

There is an addendum to this story that relates not only to the 'eco' of the sphere of minerals, biotics and animals in McKenzie's model but also to the 'eco' that includes relationships between humans. As the number of tea plantations grew so the demand for labour increased. The British considered the Lepcha people "unsuitable" for labour in the plantations (Besky 2017). In contrast, in a categorisation that Chatterji (2001) describes as "the colonial typology of labour", Nepalis were deemed to be "hard workers", the men described as "amiable, brave and industrious" and the women "comely" (Besky 2017). The Sardari system, whereby Sardars (high ranking local people) were paid on a per capita basis to recruit labour from (mostly) Nepal but also Sikhim was established. British policy encouraged the recruitment of whole families, as women and also children were considered to be "better pickers". Initially Akhtar, S. & Wei, S. (2021) present this as a benevolent endeavour: life in the estates resembled life in the villages, thus "avoiding the worst features of town life". Housing, medical care and education services were provided. It is only at the end of the paragraph I am reading about this that I learn that these Nepali people who now call themselves Gorkhas (Nepali speakers resident in India) were in fact more like bonded labour. They were not free to leave and a paramilitary force known as the North Bengal Mounted Rifles was placed at the plantations to prevent them from doing so. The portion of the Great Acceleration of Extraction that refers to the enslavement and exploitation of people is demonstrated here. Das Gupta (1992) argues that the use of "unfree labour" is an essential component of all colonial plantation systems.

### **From eco to ego and back again?**

So far in this article I have suggested that the colonial period in India - and by extension colonial societies across the world - was characterised by the practice and ideology of extractivism. This represents a key transition from 'eco' to 'ego' both in relation to direct extraction from the material environment and indirect extraction through the exploitation of human beings' labour, culture and knowledge. I have told some stories about two commodities that illustrate different components of McKenzie's model of the Great Acceleration of Extraction. I could, of course, have chosen other commodities to illustrate this. Currently the extraction of oil and gas, the clearing of tropical rainforests for ranching, producing animal feed or for palm oil, are all processes fuelling the climate and nature emergency. I believe that if human beings are to have a habitable future on the planet, we will have to learn how to reverse extractivism both as a material activity and mindset. What can we do to reverse this process, to go from ego to eco?



I said above that I did not want to charge the characters in my novel as guilty parties for the colonial world they were involved in creating. Nonetheless I can hear their ghosts whispering at me. A few grow quiet, are prepared to listen, look serious, nod. Others, though, bluster, become defensive, assure me that I am mistaken, that I have not understood how things really were for them. Others still are angry, deny responsibility, accuse me of ingratitude for the material benefits and freedoms I have enjoyed, disloyalty to my country and class and, if they were to know the word, of unbearable 'wokeness'. Their voices make me doubt myself. What is the purpose of learning about such things, of trying to emerge from our selective amnesia of the consequences of colonialism and imperialism? What can I as an individual (ego) do to change such a complex, long standing system, so embedded in every aspect of our lives and our economies and supported by so many powerful vested interests?

It is easy to despair. I tell myself that all I can do is to consider what effect this knowledge should have on what I can control: my own behaviour. My responses to the two commodities I have written about are different. It is now abundantly clear that globally we have to stop using coal. I have done some things to reduce my own emissions. We have blocked up our chimney and stopped burning coal, have put up solar panels, use a renewable energy supplier. I don't think, however, I will stop drinking tea. My favourite tea pot was made by my aunt. I love the way it looks as if the horse is leaping up and away from the pot. It was made to celebrate the Chinese Year of the Horse. In that belief system the horse signifies enthusiasm, action and energy. I can use this image as a reminder to use these qualities in my



life. I am determined to use 2022 to take the next steps towards improving the insulation in our house and replacing our gas boiler with a heat pump. I can work within all the networks and organisations to which I belong to raise awareness and enact (distributed) leadership. I am a director on the board of our local community energy co-operative that installs community-based renewable energy, supports people in fuel poverty, and promotes energy efficiency and, through that, hope to make a small contribution to social and environmental justice in the place where I live.

On a wider (eco) scale we have to transform our profit-based economic system that disregards its impact on people and the planet. Kate Raworth's (2017) well-known model of 'doughnut economics', where the outer edge of the doughnut represents our planetary boundaries, the hole in the middle the place where no human being should fall and the doughnut itself an "environmentally safe and socially just space in which humanity can thrive" provides a framework with which to assess the benefits or otherwise of our activities.

It seems to me that, amongst all of the myriad things that we need to do to enable nature and humans to thrive, two key priorities are the rapid curtailing of carbon (equivalent) emissions in the Global North and the payment of climate reparations from the Global North to the Global South to recognise their vastly unequal contribution to and experiences of global breakdown. The land rights of remaining indigenous people must be protected. Research in Brazil (Baragwanath & Bayi 2020) has demonstrated that where indigenous people have full territorial rights not only are their human rights better protected so too are their forests. I can protest and campaign with others to try to achieve these things. The fifth and final episode of the BBC's (2022) Green Planet Series presents the living bridges created by the Khasi people in Meghalaya, North East India. These bridges, woven from the roots of the fig trees planted on the river banks, allow the Khasi to cross otherwise impassable rivers and to maintain relationship within their communities. As the roots grow they share nutrients and resources thus making the whole much stronger and more stable than a single root could be. Shining Star Kongthaw, one of the builders of these bridges, likens the connections between these roots to the ways in which people become stronger when they help each other. This is perhaps an apt metaphor for how we might build a bridge away from an extractivist mindset towards a more socially just, regenerative and sustainable one.

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## About Anna

Anna Fairtlough is a qualified social worker. As a practitioner and manager she was interested in developing a workplace that supported professional development. In 2002 she moved into the academy, becoming a senior lecturer in social work at Goldsmiths, University of London. As an academic she published in the fields of social work with children and families and professional learning. Her book *Professional Leadership for Social Work Practitioners and Educators* was published in 2017. Her retirement from paid work coincided with the first Covid-19 lockdown. Since then she has been working on a novel based on a family memoir set in the early days of the British Raj.

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## A note about AMED

*Sadly, so far, nobody has expressed a willingness to take over from the outgoing AMED Council. So in the circumstances, the EGM on 26 May is likely to confirm that AMED will finally cease to operate as an educational charity by the end of 2022 at the latest.*



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