

What is not visible

Colin Browne

The photographer was Richard Maynard, a forty-one-year-old British immigrant hired to create a record of the inaugural visit to coastal Indigenous communities by Israel Wood Powell, British Columbia's first Superintendent of Indian Affairs. In May and June 1873, they travelled to villages between Victoria and Bella Coola aboard *HMS Boxer*, a Royal Naval gun vessel armed with a 16-calibre 7-inch gun that could penetrate seven inches of armour. On June 8, 1873, the *Boxer* rounded Cape Caution into Smith Sound and anchored within view of what Powell called "Gwa-sil-lah camp."¹

Prior to the ship's departure for Tsaxis the following day, Maynard assembled the residents on the beach and made this wet-plate photograph and ten others, mostly individual portraits. Powell wrote down the names of two chiefs, Mantzie and Iolthkin. The man standing on a rock or a piece of wood may be one of them.² Anthropologist George MacDonald identifies the site as the Gwa'sala winter village of Tak'us, also in Smith Inlet, although, considering the structures, I'd hazard a guess that this is their nearby summer camp.

In the photograph, thirteen people are lined up in front of what looks like a large canoe, the youngest wriggling in the arms of the person second from the right, not far from the prow of a smaller, narrower canoe. Another delicate craft can be seen on the bank. Three small dogs are visible—two on the beach and one on the bank above. They're remarkably still given the long exposure. From the doorway of one of the split-cedar houses, a small human face looks on. It's possible that within this group there are Christians—perhaps the woman in the dress with her hair severely pulled back. The man beside her wears a ring around his neck, a sign of his status. The woman to her left has no shirt on at all. What is not visible is that each of the adults in this photograph has survived the epidemics that ravaged the coastal villages from 1862 onward.

Everyone, with the exception of the young woman in the dress, is clutching or wearing a Hudson's Bay blanket. They may have received these blankets as gifts from Powell, and they may have been asked to display them for the camera. Was posing for this photograph an obligation on the part of the subjects in return for the blankets? Is the photograph a record of the exchange—and a document of capitulation? Did they realize that as the light rushed in something would be taken away from them that would never be returned?

It's possible that a pair of hands on this beach shaped a cedar trunk into an image of defiance and nurturing love for the perpetuation of the Gwa'sala nation. Visiting Tak'us in 1905, Charles Newcombe acquired a monumental house post from Chief Walas Penquit, a radical re-conception of the child-devouring giantess Dzunu'k'wa as a maternal figure of love and renewal.³ It was later owned by the artist Max Ernst and is today installed in the Louvre, the implication being that it is one of the treasures of the world. To confront it is to become enmeshed in the haunted colonial legacy of this coast—as one is when studying this photograph, in which Maynard's camera rendered its subjects visible and invisible at the same moment.

Many thanks to Marie Mauzé and Dan Savard for their generous assistance.

1 Israel Wood Powell, "Handwritten report to The Honorable Secretary of State for the Provinces & Indian Affairs." Ottawa: Library and Archives Canada, Indian Affairs RG 10, Volume 3602, File 1794, July 7, 1873. Entry for 8 June, 1873.

2 "Gwa'sala people at T'akus, 1873." Images from the research archive of Dr. George and Joanne MacDonald. Vancouver: T'akus (Smith Inlet) Gallery, Bill Reid Centre, Simon Fraser University.

3 "A Dzonuqwa house post from the Gwa'sala winter village T'akus, at Takush Harbour in Smith Inlet, 1905." Images from the research archive of Dr. George and Joanne MacDonald.



Richard Maynard
Takush Harbour, 9 June 1873
albumen print, 18.3 x 23.5 cm