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## **The Awkward Origin of Extinction**

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In recent months mass protests under the banner of Extinction Rebellion have shaken many cities. At the same time, major international scientific reports, including a UN report issued last May, conclude that a mass extinction of species is on course. Clearly, it is time to critically reflect on extinction from a variety of perspectives. My talk focuses on the fate of a flightless bird, the Great Auk (*Alca impennis*), which apparently became extinct on Eldey, South-West Iceland at the middle of the nineteenth century under growing international pressures for museum specimens. To what extent, I will ask, was the birth of extinction as an epistemic and biopolitical object driven by the extinction of the Great Auk? Secondly, what is the relevance of the case of the Great Auk, and other “signature” narratives of extinction, in the current age, at the dawn of the so-called Anthropocene, characterized by escalating human impact on the planet “itself”? Finally, what does extinction involve, when does it begin and end, and how should we follow its course? My take is partly informed by the works of British zoologist Alfred Newton (1829–1907) who visited to Iceland in the summer of 1858. Arguably he deserves credit for inventing extinction, by adding “unnatural” extinction generated by humans to the “natural” extinction of deep time pictured by Charles Darwin. It is pertinent now, however, to ask: If humans and the planet have become inseparable and humans are in the driving seat, what is the current relevance and usefulness of Newton’s distinction between natural and unnatural extinction and how can we meaningfully act?