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ANGEL OF BLACK DEATH

This woman encouraged the killing of Aborigines for scientific research in the 1800s. Shocking new evidence says she was not alone. And it's causing a furore in foreign museums



The battle to get foreign museums to return Aboriginal remains collected last century has reached new heights with the grim discovery that thousands of graves were raided and an unknown number of blacks

killed, all in the name of science.

DAVID MONAGHAN*

reports on the war with museum staff in Britain that will have far-reaching consequences – and not only for anthropologists and Aborigines...



In the red dirt country of Central Australia, to point the bone is an Aboriginal curse. Like those who would be sung to death on the coast, an offender against tribal law dealt with by the bone is jinxed for ever and will die.

For 200 years, scientists around the world have been collecting the bones of Australian Aborigines to study. This year, British and Australian scientists have found that their Aboriginal relics have left them cursed. The bones gathered by their predecessors have tainted scientists with racism, grave-robbing and, according to new evidence, murder.

The way science, particularly in Britain, is dealing with those bones is the biggest test of black and white relations since the emergence of the land rights movement. The new evidence is that the bones were not necessarily the honestly rescued souvenirs of erosion and road building.

British and Australian scientists ran one of the biggest grave-robbing networks ever organised. Studies by an Australian academic researching in Oxford indicate the graves of between 5000 and 10,000 Australian Aborigines were desecrated, their bodies dismembered or parts stolen to support a scientific trade.

Worse, it appears that Aborigines were murdered to obtain specimens for science. Recently-discovered documents, including a diary found in an attic in Britain, confirm Aborigines were killed for display. Bodily parts from these murders may be in a museum in Hamburg, others from less specific massacres in London institutions. It is these discoveries that are raising the temperature of the dispute between Aborigines and world science.

Previously there had been religious objections to unburied bones being held far from home. Now, the dispute is taking on the dimensions of the fight by Jewish people over the disposal



Far left: Robert Etheridge Jnr (second from right) became the Australian Museum's director in 1895. His diaries tell how he robbed the graves of Aborigines. A girl's skeleton he exhumed at Dee Why is in the museum. Left: Russell River blacks. Etheridge's predecessor, Edward Ramsay, wrote asking for their skulls to be sent to him

building in Bowen Hills. That vast collection of uncatalogued bones was known as the "dungeon of death" by Brisbane Aborigines, who feared spirits arose from there.

The "dungeon" at the Queensland Museum contained at least one skull with a bullet hole through it. Another body is believed to be that of an Aboriginal princess hawked to museum curators for £50 by a tin miner and Aboriginal shooter in 1882. The collector, Francis Lyons, describes how he got the young girl's preserved body "while in pursuit of niggers. It has a hole in the forehead, like that made by a bullet."

The collection of bodies by the public was not enough for the Australian museum collectors. They ran their own system of organised grave desecration to maintain supplies. The ongoing price for blacks' skulls was between five and ten shillings in 1890.

From the early days of the colonies, massacres offered a source of supply for skulls. NSW missionary Lancelot Threlkeld described an incident in the 1840s: "A large number were driven into a swamp and mounted police rode round and round and shot them all indiscriminately until they were all destroyed, men, women and children ... but 45 heads were collected and boiled down for the sake of 10 skulls! My informant, a magistrate, saw the skulls packed for exportation ... in a case at Bathurst ready for shipment to ... England."

Previously, an Aborigine had begged Threlkeld not to tell anyone of a burial he had witnessed out of fear the skull collectors would steal the remains.

A Sydney newspaper of the time described the shipment of Aboriginal skulls as the colony's "new export industry". Traffic in Aboriginal parts followed the trade in tattooed Maori heads, for which Sydney was a distribution point. That trade became an open scandal when a hessian bag of human heads was put up for sale on a ship outside Sydney and the heads were rolled along the deck to the buyers.

The early interest in Aboriginal body parts was as curios or trophies and for the quasi-scientific study of phrenology. The fashion for phrenology – the reading of personality traits from the contours of the skull – provided some of the first overseas museum exhibits and a trade in bones. The British Museum began to sell its surplus heads at auctions during the mid 1800s – a good negro head selling for as much as a guinea.

By the mid-19th century, the scientific interest in the bones of Australian Aborigines was gaining popularity, as early Evolution theorists sought proof for rival ideas. The interest grew to a storm soon after Charles Darwin published his *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. A race began to prove his hypotheses. In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin positioned the Australians as crucial proof of his theories: "At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilised

racess of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world."

Within 20 years, Darwin's prediction was to come true in Tasmania. Darwin himself wrote, through one of his associate's museums, asking for pure-blood Tasmanian skulls if it would not upset the feelings of the remaining natives. There were then only four Tasmanian Aborigines left.

Darwin's theories had placed Aborigines as a possible evolutionary link between man and ape. Museum curators from around the world clamoured to obtain skulls. A complete set of racial crania was essential for any study. Australian Aboriginal skulls, particularly the increasingly rare Tasmanians, were much sought after.

The trade required a link man. That was Edward Pierson Ramsay, the first Australian-born museum director in the colonies and a willing provider of Aboriginal relics. He was curator of the Australian Museum in Sydney from 1874 to 1894. Ramsay's scientific trade reflected much about the system that scattered Aboriginal bodies around the world. The currency was not money but patronage, prestige and reputation. He swapped Aboriginal parts for rare specimens from overseas and, where necessary, his own betterment. (A museum director in Florence offered him a knighthood if he could provide

Ramsay's field system had freelance collectors as far afield as North Queensland who mixed skull gathering with hunting for the eggs of native birds. In May 1891, Ramsay wrote to a young science student, W. S. Day, who had camped in frontier country north of Cairns watching lyrebirds: "I shall be glad of any black skulls, not too much broken, they are worth at least five shillings each if perfect with the lower jaw, more – seven shillings and sixpence to ten shillings – for good ones. I would certainly get some of the skulls of the Russell River blacks." Four weeks later, Day wrote back: "I send you two skulls of Bungee [Russell River] blacks, 'the last of their tribe' as they all got shot."

Ramsay went so far as to publish hints on how to rob graves. The 30-page booklet for his staff and public was reprinted four times until 1890. His instructions included: "Skulls of Aborigines found suspended around native dwellings are of little value but authentic skulls may be obtained from the graves of the natives of each tribe."

Under the heading "Mammalia", the book gave instructions about fresh specimens: "Plug any holes or other bleeding wounds with tow, wadding or rag." Ramsay continued: "The brains of our Australian animals are interesting and valuable... The brains of Aborigines so preserved would be of great value."



Scientists outside the Australian Museum in the 1920s after a collecting trip. Note the skulls

him a particularly "showy" display of Aboriginal relics.)

Ramsay wrote that efforts by the Queensland colonial parliament to stop the slaughter of Aborigines was affecting his supply. In 1882, he bargained with the director of the Colonial Museum of New Zealand for an exchange deal on tattooed Maori heads, commenting: "The shooting season is over in Queensland and the 'Black Game' is protected now by more humane laws than formerly. So it is impossible to obtain reliable skulls and skeletons."

The brains of Aborigines were being used to theorise on why the race was "difficult" to civilise. Pickled specimens were sent to England, Scotland and Europe. The results of those studies underlie what may be a more tragic legacy than the crimes and atrocities of a century ago. Aboriginal bones were used to provide evidence of racial inferiority. Twentieth-century racism was sanctioned and institutionalised by those and similar scientific studies.

In his recent book *Mismeasure of Man*, American scientist Stephen J. Gould des-

cribes how racist theories of skull measurements, such as those of Frenchman Paul Broca, were enthusiastically embraced by Adolf Hitler's emerging National Socialist movement in the '20s.

Racial theorising on Aboriginal bones was not just a pastime for hidden laboratories. Generations of British schoolchildren learnt of Australian racial positioning from Aboriginal skulls displayed behind glass.

Among collections that Aborigines were returned from the Natural History Museum is a set of Tasmanian and Australian crania, displayed for many years in the public gallery. The museum's 1921 public guidebook described them as "the Black Fellow ... perhaps better regarded as low-grade Caucasians". The Royal College of Surgeons museum listed its Aboriginal skulls as "the most primitive of all existing forms of mankind".

Most museums in Britain no longer display Aboriginal skulls. The Horniman Museum in South London has two skulls on show, including one of a young woman from the Broome area.

David Mowaljarlai, who belongs to a neighbouring tribe, gazed at this head during his visit to London last month. He has begun negotiations to try to bring about its return. The museum has confirmed it holds three other skulls, bought for between £2 and £3 during the '50s.

In Australia, the theorising about racial inferiority had a more direct impact. Hypotheses resulting from studies of the skulls were used to justify laws governing Aborigines. Queensland pastoralist T. S. Gunn linked science and politics in a letter to the Queensland Museum in 1919 that was as much a plea for Aboriginal rights as a procurement of skulls.

He wrote: "In reply to yours of 2nd March, I looked up a large hollow box tree where six blacks were buried but some other body snatcher had been there... There are no blacks about here now the so-called Aborigines Protection Act has done its dreadful work. The poor natives have either been forced into slavery or sent to the death settlements on islands and other places..."

The Queensland Aborigines Protection Act dating from the beginning of this century was based partly on a belief that the Aboriginal race was inferior to the white - a hypothesis put forward by scientists using skull measurements. This led to laws that forcibly segregated Aborigines from the white population.

The politicians making such laws referred to the findings of science. Craniologists such as Broca, in France, and W. J. Berry, in Australia, supported a theory that Aborigines and other black races were less developed than whites. The evidence was that skull sutures supposedly joined more slowly in black races than among non-blacks.

This "evidence" of inferior intelligence greatly effected the way Aborigines in the

fringe camps and reserves of Australia were treated. In 1908, a Department of Aborigines inspector in the West Kimberley wrote: "I was glad to receive telegraphic instructions ... to arrange for transport of all half-castes to the Beagle Bay Mission... The half-caste is intellectually above the Aborigine and it is the duty of the State that they be given a chance to lead a better life than their mothers. I would not hesitate for one moment to separate a half-caste from an Aboriginal mother, no matter how frantic her momentary grief."

The policy of removing half-caste Abo-



The NHM's Robin Cocks: under attack

original children from their parents continued until the '60s. The legacy of the bones continues. The last generation of Australian and British schoolchildren was taught about world races from a British Museum book *Races of Man*, published in 1965. It cites a small brain capacity as one of the delineating measures of the Aboriginal race.

Such data originated in the works of scientists such as Broca who poured sand, lead shot and mustard seed into skulls to measure their capacity. Gould recalculated their early findings to show how the numbers had been fudged to give white races a greater brain capacity.

As the call from London's Natural History Museum shows, Aboriginal bones are still being sought. The last body was logged into the Royal College of Surgeons museum as recently as 1951. In 1965, the Royal Anthropological Institute published its guide for beginners, *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, which advises "it is often difficult to collect skulls and bones, but every effort should be made to do so".

Today's competition for Aboriginal bones has been triggered by new scientific techniques such as DNA testing whereby genetic characteristics can be traced back many generations. Scientists such as those at

the John Radcliffe Institute in Oxford are examining the development of man and even the history of diseases through old bones. That laboratory, however, has a policy of not testing Aboriginal bones until the ethics of such study has been settled.

Some scientists fear the next generation of Aborigines will lose out on crucial knowledge about themselves if the remains are returned and destroyed. Dr Don Brothwell is the curator of zoo-archaeology at University College, London. He keeps six Aboriginal skulls near his desk for study. He wants to catalogue the material before it is sent back to Australia and is trying to negotiate a compromise involving the remains being held in Aboriginal keeping with access granted for approved scientific projects.

"Believe it or not, we know very little about the Australian Aborigine," Brothwell says. "We don't know to what extent they are related in evolutionary terms to other populations in New Guinea and out into the Pacific."

"We don't know to what extent the Tasmanian people were closely related to the tribal populations [on the mainland] and so on. Although the material has been collected over a long period of time, we are only just beginning to ask many of the pertinent questions."

After the handing back of remains from seven British museums and universities, however, a backlash is brewing. The American Committee for the Preservation of Archaeological Collections says: "Anyone who takes these [ancestral] claims seriously has a level of credibility that makes them an ideal prospective purchaser of the Brooklyn Bridge."

In Britain, one of Australia's best-known prehistorians, Dr John Mulvaney, rallied against the returns in a recent edition of the quarterly magazine *Antiquity*: "White treatment of Aboriginal society has been shameful... But past repressive colonialism does not mean that the present academic generations must pay the price by never opposing strident claims by radical Aboriginal leaders. Not to do so will be to replace white violence and repression with black intellectual totalitarianism."

Last month, after David Mowaljarlai stood in front of a case containing the heads of two of his people, he said he could feel their spirits. "The land still cry, cry for ever, looking for its child, that mother. The spirits are not at peace, not in their proper place."

Weatherall added: "They've got to go back in the ground. That's the only way it can happen. And the sooner the so-called great men of science come to realise that fact, then they might have some understanding, because it is obvious they have no understanding of our customs, our religion. They look at our ancestral remains like tools of the trade, like a spanner or a screwdriver, and nothing else." ■