

Essay:

Theft in the name of science

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During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, numerous skulls and skeletons of Queensland Aboriginal people found their way into museums and scientific collections throughout the world. These bones were greatly prized as evidence strengthening now long-discredited theories of human racial diversity which had pernicious consequences for Indigenous Australians still not yet fully overcome.

I have found many documents surviving in archives and libraries telling of the theft of Aboriginal bones in Queensland. But one of the most disturbing accounts of how they were procured is to be found in Queensland's State Library in the unpublished memoirs of Korah Halcomb Wills. He was a butcher by trade. After some years in Melbourne, Wills moved in the mid-1860s to the port town of Bowen, where he managed a hotel. In his memoirs, he tells of how the growth of pastoralism in the region was the cause of violent conflict with the Birri-Gubba and other local Aboriginal peoples. Resistance became so fierce that local pastoralists lobbied the colony's government for a detachment of Native Police to be stationed in the region.

The Native Police were armed and mounted Aboriginal men led by European officers routinely used by the Queensland government in frontier districts for the immediate, brutal suppression of Indigenous resistance to colonisation. The role they played in the dispossession, killing and punitive treatment of Indigenous people has been of interest to historians since the early 1970s. Jonathan Richards has shown in *The Secret War* (UQP, 2008), after exhaustively studying archival records long presumed to have been destroyed, how they operated in two worlds. Government officials and politicians knew and accepted that frontier pacification was bound to result in some deaths of innocent Aboriginal people. They directed officers commanding police detachments to operate within the law, but few in inner government circles appreciated just how secretive and murderous the squads were in outlying frontier districts.

Wills' memoirs tell how the superintendent of the detachment assigned to the Bowen region sought local settler volunteers. He wanted men 'whom he thought he could trust for pluck and a quiet tongue after all was over, who he would solicit to join him and his one or two native troopers and go out and disperse the mob that had

been committing depredations on the neighboring settlers'. Wills describes participating in one such raid: 'I took it into my head to get a few specimens of certain limbs and head of a Black fellow, which was not a very delicate occupation I can tell you. I shall never forget the time when I first found the subject that I intended to anatomise, when my friends were looking on, and I commenced operations dissecting. I went to work business-like to take off the head first, and then the Arms, and then the legs, and gathered them together and put them into my Pack saddle and one of my friends who I am sure had dispersed more than any other Man in the Colony made the remark that if he were offered a fortune he could not do what I had done.'¹

Wills writes of cleaning the bones of flesh, and then exhibiting them to raise money for the Bowen hospital – to the disgust, he conceded, 'of many'. 'I remember I had to cover them up with a flag, the Union Jack, and if anyone wished to see what was under that flag they had to ask the favor of one of the committee who were afraid the Ladies might get a shock, if they were left uncovered. We had some great swindles in that Bazaar and it was a grand success from a monetary point of view, and I think it was for the benefit of the Hospital.'²

I first read Wills' memoirs in the early 1990s. His relish in recounting what he had done, without a hint of remorse, was chilling. It disturbed me to know that this man's body would never be recovered by his people for burial.

I closed Wills' memoirs, recalling having walked in dry gum forest and heath land near the granite headland of Cape Upstart, between Bowen and Ayr on the North Queensland coast, earlier that year, where there are many places of profound significance to the Birri-Gubba people, its traditional owners. Since the early 1990s Birri-Gubba elders had sought to resume custody of ancestral burial places, or at least see the creation in country of a keeping place. Elders had been active in seeking the return of remains they had learnt were in museum collections. But the joy on their return was subdued by feelings of sadness that there was yet no place in country where they could be reburied.

I knew this having come to know several elders well. What I did not anticipate, though, was a visit by Peter Pryor, the Birri-Gubba's most senior elder. He brought a small red metal box containing recently returned remains. He was especially troubled that the spirit of the person whose remains they were remained tormented by the bones not being returned to the care of country. During the previous fortnight, several tragic deaths had occurred in the community. In this time of grief, he felt it vital that the remains be brought closer to burial. He had learnt that several Australian universities had established interim keeping places while they dealt with the repatriation of

¹ Korah Wills Memoirs, State Library of Queensland, OM 75-75/3, p.113.

² Wills Memoirs, p. 131.

remains held in medical and archaeological collections. James Cook University, where I then worked, had no such collections; but he was hopeful that we could safely keep these bones until they could be reburied. The university did this willingly.

The quiet conversation I had with Peter Pryor that day left me deeply aware of how the aims and practices of nineteenth century racial science continue to be a dark, and in many ways unresolved, legacy of Queensland's colonial past. Our talk about unfulfilled obligations to the dead was much in mind after encountering the memoirs of Korah Halcomb Wills.

An aspect of Wills' account remained a disconcerting puzzle. He referred to the man he killed as a 'specimen' and wrote of 'dissecting' and 'anatomising' his corpse. Why had he used such clinical language? I deduced that Wills wrote this way knowing of other instances where the bodies of Aboriginal people had been mutilated during frontier clashes for skulls and skeletons. Possibly he had heard of other settlers joining punitive expeditions to 'get a few specimens'.

There was some plausibility to this. I knew that Archibald Meston, the flamboyant frontier entrepreneur, politician and self-styled anthropological expert, was on several occasions in the 1880s publicly accused of accompanying the Native Police on expeditions to secure Indigenous artifacts. When approached in March 1887 by Edward Pierson Ramsay, curator of Sydney's Australian Museum, about supplying the museum with Aboriginal skulls, Meston replied with grim humor: 'Re skulls &c. skeletons of the festive myall!! To what strange uses are our noble primeval inhabitants to be devoted! At your prices I could have procured about £2000 worth in the last six years. I shall start on the warpath again! Hope to succeed in slaughtering some stray skeleton for you. Shall also see to weapons dilly bags &c. &c.'³

In the mid-1860s Amalie Dietrich, a naturalist collecting for a German museum, approached William Archer, a Rockhampton pastoralist and keen amateur naturalist, to have an Aboriginal man killed to obtain his ritually scarified skin. It was said that Archer ordered Dietrich off the property, and that subsequently she asked an officer of the Native Police to kill one of his Aboriginal troopers for his skeleton.

Even so, I could find no credible evidence that any would-be skeletal collector in Queensland frontier districts had been directly implicated in the killing of Aboriginal people for their remains. Dietrich returned to Germany in the early 1870s with the skin of an Aboriginal man, and several skeletons stolen from burials places near Bowen, but the skin was probably stolen from a clan whose mortuary rituals involved the post-mortem removal and drying of the skin of initiated men. Dietrich would have been very keen to secure this sacred item, as there was only one in scientific

³ Meston to Ramsay, 15 March 1887, E.P. Ramsay Papers, Mitchell Library (State Library of New South Wales), MS 1589/2.

hands: that presented to England's Royal College of Surgeons in 1829 by the botanist-explorer Allen Cunningham. Given that William Archer enjoyed good relations with local Aboriginal people, it could well have been simply the suggestion that he help her desecrate a burial place that so offended him.

There is ample evidence that scientists and museum curators had few qualms about being knowing beneficiaries of the violence and killings occurring with the spread of Queensland's pastoral and mining frontiers. Richard Semon, a German biologist who visited Cooktown in the early 1890s, was typical. Semon learnt that the bones of a number of people killed by the Native Police 'had for a long time been left to bleach in the open bush' and was appalled, but later admitted: 'My humanity did not go so far as to prompt me to exert myself in order to obtain an honorable burial for these bones. On the contrary, I had the ardent desire to secure the remains of these poor victims for scientific purposes, the study of a series of Australian crania being of considerable anthropological interest.'⁴

After failing to find the bones, Semon wrote of having been told it was a pity he had arrived after the death of a local man who would have procured as many skulls as he wished. He asked how the man, whose identity he preferred to keep anonymous, would have done this. To this he claimed to have received the cool answer, 'Oh he would have shot them'.

Semon was not alone in seeking to capitalise on the actions of the Native Police. The Queensland Museum began receiving sufficient government support from the late 1870s to build collections and enlisted the help of Native Police officers, many of whom were well-educated men interested in natural history and anthropology. William Armit, for example, was a sub-inspector in the force involved in numerous punitive expeditions and a keen botanist and ornithologist, who regularly wrote newspaper articles about the colony's flora. During the eight years he served with the police, he actively supported the museum.

Armit explored and documented the customs of the Aboriginal peoples he encountered and his observations of Aboriginal culture were published by leading British anthropologists. He was convinced that the extinction of Aboriginal societies was inevitable, and that the spread of settlement meant much had already been lost to anthropologists. The colony's government, he argued, should 'sanction and foster' the systematic collecting of anthropological material.⁵

It did formally sanction anthropological collecting in the late 1890s, after the creation of Queensland's protectionist regime saw Aboriginal people forcibly removed from their country and placed on government reserves. But at the time Armit called on government to act for the good of anthropology several of his fellow

⁴ Richard Semon, *In the Australian Bush* (Macmillan: London, 1899), p. 266

⁵ *The Queenslander*, 4 September 1880, p. 307.

officers had already taken advantage of the collecting opportunities of frontier service. One was sub-inspector Alexander Douglas. He had joined the Native Police in 1872 only rapidly to gain notoriety for his ruthlessness in tracking down and killing Aboriginal men thought to have been involved on attacks on settlers. In 1873, a local magistrate in Central Queensland formally questioned him after troopers under his command shot two Aboriginal men employed by local squatters. One body was found tied to a sapling floating in a water hole. In quietly burying the magistrate's report of the incident, one of Douglas's immediate superiors wrote that 'Acting Sub Inspector Douglas seems as yet not to have learnt circumspection'.⁶

In 1875, Douglas led punitive expeditions to stop the spearing of cattle in newly established pastoral runs on the Laura River, three hundred kilometres north-west of Cairns. He returned from one patrol with remains from two burials for the museum.⁷ Two years later, heightened anthropological interest in the mortuary practices of northern rainforest peoples led the museum to approach Douglas, and within a short time he sent the mummified remains of a child from the Barron River.⁸

James Lamond was another officer ready to serve the museum. The son of a pastoralist, he joined the Native Police as a sub-inspector in 1879. By the mid-1880s, he was in charge of a detachment based between the Nicholson and Gregory Rivers in the Gulf Country, where some of the most brutal Native Police actions took place. In March 1885, Lamond wrote to the museum that he had secured, and would send at the first opportunity, 'a Gregory River skull ... found in a cave in the ranges in the head of the Gregory River'. He continued: 'I also know of another burial ground or rather repository of aboriginal bones on the Nicholson River &c. shall furnish you with some from there 1st opportunity'.⁹

Four months after Lamond promised to secure remains from this 'repository', Frank Hann, the leaseholder of Lawn Hill Station to the south of the Nicholson River, confided to the pioneer anthropologist, A.W. Howitt, that the Native Police had 'shot, so Lamond told me, round this run alone over 100 blacks in three years'.¹⁰

There is no conclusive proof that the bones Lamond offered the museum were of people killed by the Native Police. However, it seems clear enough that the desire of museum personnel to secure remains outweighed any moral reservations they may have had.

As Charles Howard Clarkson, a surgeon in Mackay, and himself an active grave-robbler, assured the curator of the museum in 1883, his colleague, 'Dr Symes of

⁶ Colonial Secretary, Correspondence, Queen State Archives, COL/187/73/2122.

⁷ Queensland Government Gazette, 1875 (16), p. 952.

⁸ Douglas to Curator, 3 February 1879, Queensland Museum Archives [hereafter QMA], QM4/37.

⁹ Lamond to Curator, 24 March, 1885, QMA, QM4/37.

¹⁰ Hann to A.W. Howitt, 5 July 1885. Provenance unknown. I am indebted to Jonathan Richards for this reference.

Springsure could I am told procure you any amount of skulls &c. bones from a place where a massacre took place in retribution for the Murder of the Wills family many years ago.'¹¹ The massacre occurred in the wake of the killing by Aborigines of a settler party in October 1861. A large number of Aboriginal people were encountered in a valley and shot by Native Police and local settlers. The museum immediately contacted Symes to secure these remains.

Clarkson, incidentally, did not restrict himself to plundering Aboriginal graves. He supplied museums with crania through his position as resident surgeon at the hospital in Mackay established by sugar planters for their South Sea Islander labourers. Clarkson had Islanders who died in the hospital buried in its grounds. In 1883 he wrote to the museum, telling its curator he had 'sprung a plant of Kanaka skeletons' that he intended sending them.¹² Two years later, he sent the museum skulls he had illegally taken during post-mortems; however, fearing that this might be discovered, he asked the museum to 'make them look a little ancient or some inquisitive friend may want to know too much'.¹³

The predatory anthropological ambitions of the museum helped Queensland to become internationally regarded as an important site for research into the origins and nature of human diversity. Museum personnel and their supporters in government took special satisfaction in the visits of leading European scientific authorities. When, for example, the eminent Heidelberg anatomist Hermann Klaatsch visited in 1904, the resources of the museum and government agencies were at his disposal. When he left Queensland after a year or so of fieldwork, it was with several complete Aboriginal skeletons, and the promise of a substantial series of crania to further his researches into the course of human evolution.

What we know of Klaatsch and other scientists who visited Queensland around the turn of the twentieth century attests to the pernicious consequences that the science they produced through theft and examination of the dead had for their descendants who survived frontier violence. During his Queensland travels, Klaatsch visited the Yarrabah settlement south of Cairns. His visit coincided with the arrival of Gilbert White, Anglican Bishop of Carpentaria, at the mission, which since its establishment in 1892 had become home to Aboriginal clans driven from their ancestral country in neighbouring regions.

In published reminiscences of his thirty-year missionary career in Australia, Bishop White recalled the visiting anatomist had 'asked that the natives might be sent to him in order that he might measure their skulls' and 'sat accordingly on the veranda with a big pipe and measured the skulls of all who came, and the more he measured the

¹¹ Clarkson to Curator, QMA, QM4/37.

¹² Clarkson to Curator, [n.d.], QM4/37. Clarkson was first appointed surgeon at the Hospital in 1883. See Queensland Government Gazette, 1883 (34), p. 1027.

¹³ Clarkson to Curator, 14 September 1885, QM4/37.

more he shook his head'. According to White, the head shaking troubled Ernest Gribble, his fellow priest and Yarrabah's superintendent: "Will you not come into the school and examine the children?" said the superintendent. "They have made remarkable progress, and up to the age of eleven do the same lessons as the children in the white schools." "No," said the Professor, "I do not want to see them. I know that they are incapable of learning anything. I have measured their skulls." "But will you not look at our steam-engine, which is run entirely by two aboriginal boys?" "No," was the reply. "They cannot possibly understand machinery. I have measured their skulls." "But," persisted the superintendent, "will you not at least listen to our band, which is often in requisition when good music is required in Cairns?" "No," was the reply. "It is no good. I have measured their skulls."¹⁴

White's account needs to be read in the context of the antipathy to scientific circumscription of Aboriginal destiny that most missionaries of the time felt. They had helped persuade the government to implement legislation and policies in the late 1890s to protect those forced from their ancestral country. By the turn of the twentieth century, missionaries were conscious that scientific authorities such as Klaatsch were gaining equal if not greater influence.

Many missionaries of the turn of the twentieth century accepted the scientific consensus of the day that Aboriginal Australians had experienced evolutionary stasis and were thus inferior. Where they differed from scientists was on how far this could be overcome. Missionaries saw Christianity as providing spiritual and intellectual foundations for future generations to live independently by agrarian labour within settler society. This explains why White represents Klaatsch as a threat to missionary endeavour – the scientist believed that it was flawed by an Hermann Klaatsch, *The Evolution and Progress of Mankind* (T. Fisher Unwin: London, 1923), p. 107. 'exaggerated humanitarianism which sees brothers and sisters in all the lower races'.¹⁵ For Klaatsch, Aboriginal people required scientifically based management of their destiny.

Key elements of Aboriginal policy in Queensland reflected the influence of racial science well into the second half of the century. Those policies continue even now, in obvious and subtle ways, to affect the lives and aspirations of Aboriginal people in Queensland. This is why the return of remains is so important. Their return as ancestors, not specimens, attests to the continuing vitality of Aboriginal culture in Queensland and reminds us that the pursuit of scientific knowledge was deeply implicated in colonialist ambitions and violence. ■

¹⁴ White, *Thirty Years in Tropical Australia* (SPCK: London, 1918), pp. 158–59.

¹⁵ Hermann Klaatsch, *The Evolution and Progress of Mankind* (T. Fisher Unwin: London, 1923), p. 107.