

Etched in Bone

directed by Martin Thomas and Béatrice Bijon
DVD, 73 min., Red Lily Productions and Ronin Films, 2018,
\$34.95

Review by Mike Jones
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Campaigns for the return of ancestral remains from Australian and international museums started more than 50 years ago. Following the removal of Truganini from the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in 1976, the push to repatriate and rematriate thousands of bones gained momentum. Yet many museums, particularly outside Australia, have remained reluctant to participate.

The Smithsonian is one such institution. In 1948, they joined with the National Geographic Society and the Australian Government to mount an American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land. While others focused on mythology, artworks and artefacts, the Smithsonian's Head Curator of Anthropology, Frank Setzler, pursued his interest in anatomy, including the collection of bones.

Despite having a dedicated repatriation unit to deal with local requests under the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), when faced with international requests, including from Australian officials, the Smithsonian Institution initially refused to act. Then they offered to return some of the bones, retaining others for their perceived scientific value. It was not until early 2010 that the Smithsonian gave in to mounting pressure and agreed to return all the bones taken in 1948.

Martin Thomas and Béatrice Bijon's understated documentary *Etched in Bone* – itself 8 years in the making – provides a fascinating and moving insight into the return of these remains to western Arnhem Land. The film is not about the struggle to reach an agreement over the remains, or an investigation into who was responsible. The facts are clear: among the beautifully preserved film footage from the expedition shown in the documentary is vision of Setzler removing bones, including an ochre-covered

skull, from a cleft in the rock. Thomas and Bijon's primary focus is on the trip to Washington, DC, by a small delegation led by Joe Gumbula to collect the ancestors, and their return to the Gunbalanya area, close to the north-east corner of Kakadu National Park.

Central to the story is traditional owner Jacob Nayinggul. He has a wonderful presence on screen, clearly feeling the weight of responsibility as a traditional owner, his quiet authority woven through with a dry sense of humour. In addition to the Washington trip, expedition footage and interviews with Jacob Nayinggul, Joe Gumbula and other community members, we are given full access to the preparations for the reburial ceremony. Women from the community pull huge sheets of paperbark from trees to serve as wrapping for the bones, stripping branches to make the string that will tie them closed. Jacob and his son, Alfred Nayinggul, work through the practical issues of dealing with the remains of many men, women and children. The community comes together to prepare ochre and spread it over the bones with their hands. And we see the director Martin Thomas himself, asking questions and helping to push the wheelchair from which an increasingly frail Jacob Nayinggul directs the action.

Periods of narration from Thomas, who is a professor of history at The Australian National University, help to frame and contextualise the story. But the narration is sparing, and the film avoids becoming overly emotive or didactic. Moments such as the comparison drawn between anthropological remains and the efforts of Alexander Graham Bell to bring James Smithson's bones to the United States (where they received a national welcome) resonate deeply without becoming laboured.

Likewise, discussions about Aboriginal beliefs and knowledge systems are insightful because they remain quotidian and unadorned. The documentary opens with the disks containing the film being smoked to protect us, as viewers, from restless spirits. Jacob Nayinggul expresses concern about the people whose remains were taken, worrying they might have become lost and unable to find their way back home. When asked whether the ancestors would be wondering why the documentary crew was there, he replies without hesitation: 'Oh yeah, oh yeah'.

Jacob Nayinggul speaks of the events and their filming as a 'true document'. He is concerned that it is done well, 'because this is a true story'. While some may try to deflect responsibility from contemporary institutions and disciplines with reference to the different attitudes of the past, Setzler himself knew he was violating cultural beliefs, waiting until his local guides were asleep before taking the bones. Vigilance is required to ensure current practice continues to improve, and appropriate reparations are made. *Etched in Bone* makes a valuable contribution to those aims.

In allowing the documentary makers in, Jacob Nayinggul and the Gunbalanya community clearly understood the value of continuing to raise awareness, and to inform future generations. Despite this, it seems the Smithsonian remained reluctant participants, not allowing staff to be interviewed or appear in the documentary. Yet their mark remains, the film's title referencing the museum numbers and places of origin etched into every bone, literally *objectifying* the remains of the dead. Once the bones have been ochred, wrapped in paperbark and returned to the earth, we see the containers they were sent in – those grey institutional boxes so familiar to anyone who has spent time in museum stores – burning on the red earth.

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