

## Chapter Four

# British Anthropological Thought in Colonial Practice: the appropriation of Indigenous Australian bodies, 1860-1880

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Within Australian historiography, the procurement of indigenous Australian ancestral remains by European scientists has generally been explained as resulting from the desire to produce evidence refining the core assumptions of Darwinian theory. I have argued elsewhere (1998, 1999) that the procurement of anatomical specimens through desecration of indigenous burial places in fact began shortly after the establishment of the penal settlement of New South Wales in 1788. It also seems clear that from the early 1880s indigenous burial places were plundered with a view to producing knowledge that would answer various questions about the origins and nature of racial difference that emerged as a consequence of the rapid and widespread assent given Darwinian evolutionary theory (Turnbull 1991).

In this chapter, I want to show that the motivations of British metropolitan and colonial scientists in illegally procuring body parts in the first fifteen or so years after the 1859 publication of the *Origin of Species* were intellectually more heterodox than has hitherto been appreciated. The theft of indigenous Australian bones between 1860 and the mid-1870s did not arise simply from the desire of Darwinians to verify and refine the hypothesis that humanity had developed through speciation. Rather, the plunder of ancestral burial sites occurred because Aboriginal bones took on disparate meanings within the context of rivalry between prominent early Darwinians and the leadership of the Anthropology Society of London. As is well known to historians of racial thought, in early 1863 a split occurred in the Ethnological Society.<sup>1</sup> A faction of about a dozen members led by James Hunt (1833-1869) and C. Carter Blake (c. 1840-1887) broke away to form a new organization, the Anthropological Society of London. For several years this group had sought to reform the Ethnological Society from within, arguing that race was the true foundational principle of anthropological research. By this reasoning, differences in lifeways, social institutions, and forms of cultural expression were all manifestations of racial difference and only truly

explicable when interpreted in the light of comparative anatomical delineation of presumed physiological and psychological differences amongst the races of man. Moreover, they believed racial differences to be biologically immutable and highly suggestive of the plurality of human origins — the doctrine that by the mid-nineteenth century was known as polygeny.

For Hunt and his supporters, race was all. They had grown increasingly frustrated by the polite reception the Ethnological Society gave admirers of the writings of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840) and James Cowles Prichard (1786-1848) who had explained human racial differences as having arisen through environmental modifications of a single ancestral type.<sup>2</sup> However, what provoked them to form a new organization was the growing epistemological credence given within the Ethnological Society to the Darwinian theory of organic evolution through speciation (Van Keuren 1982:29-30). The acrimonious relations between leading Darwinians and the leadership of the Anthropological Society have been appraised by several historians of Victorian anthropological thought.<sup>3</sup> This chapter explores one of the key consequences of these metropolitan debates — their stimulation of scientific trafficking in indigenous remains from Australia and elsewhere.

It was largely in the context of seeking to establish Darwinian evolutionary theory as scientific orthodoxy against the claims of members of the Anthropological Society that scientists such as Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895), George Busk (1807-1886), and George Rolleston (1829-1881) sought out the bones of indigenous Australians. Because they saw skeletons and skulls as reflecting the evolutionary history of specific human populations from one ancestral form, they eagerly encouraged the desecration of burial places by colonial agents. However, members of the Anthropological Society were equally energetic in seeking to procure indigenous Australian remains. Indeed, the most successful collector of indigenous Australian skeletal material of the Victorian era, Joseph Barnard Davis (1801-1881), was no Darwinian but one of the most prominent among the early 'Anthropological' critics of the idea of human speciation. Davis confidently believed that comparative anatomical examination of mainland Australian and especially Tasmanian indigenous bones would yield compelling proof of the historical immutability of racial difference. By proving the unchanging racial characters of these native races, such theorists would not only overturn the Darwinian account of organic development but also strengthen their own case for reforming anthropological practice to focus on investigating how race determined the varying lifeways and social institutions of the different people of the earth.

The chapter also touches on how the appropriation of Aboriginal remains within rival branches of metropolitan science between 1860 and the mid-1870s had profound and pernicious consequences for indigenous Australians. I suggest

that such remains were instrumental in transforming widespread European perceptions of indigenous population decline into proof of the inevitability of Aboriginal extinction. For both Darwinians and members of the Anthropological Society — for different reasons — were led by their examination of what we now know to be superficial anatomical peculiarities to conclude that indigenous Australians were racially incapable of adapting to the changes to their way of life wrought by European colonization. This shared intellectual position resonated fatally with decades of colonial assumptions on the settlement frontiers of Australia.

### The ubiquity of race

I begin by examining how race was fundamental to the conceptual vocabulary of both Darwinians and their Anthropological Society critics, but understood in very different ways. One economical yet informative way of doing this is to consider the controversial reception of one of the most infamous of mid-Victorian racial texts, James Hunt's *The Negro's Place in Nature* (1864). In this widely circulated pamphlet, Hunt outlined a prima facie case for classifying African people as a species distinct from and inferior to Europeans. Having already gained notoriety in intellectual circles in London because of his sympathy for the Confederate States and their defence of slavery, Hunt provocatively read the first part of *The Negro's Place in Nature* as a paper before the 1863 meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. Not unexpectedly, advance publicity ensured that his audience included abolitionists who loudly hissed as he spoke; but what proved unsettling for Hunt was finding himself entangled in debate with William Craft (1824-1900), an ex-slave.<sup>4</sup>

In the question time following Hunt's paper, Craft introduced himself, ironically, as one 'not of pure African descent' but nonetheless 'black enough to say a few words' about Hunt's taking the skull as a reliable indicator of racial origin and intellectual prowess. Craft rejected the notion that measuring the characteristic differences in cranial shape between European and African peoples produced clear evidence of the latter's racial inferiority. He did not dispute that there were morphological differences, notably in the relatively greater thickness of the bones of Negro skulls. Where he differed was in seeing this variation as 'wisely arranged by Providence'. For had God not provided Africans with thick skulls, he declared, the tropical climate they inhabited would have ensured that their brains would 'probably have become very much like those of many scientific gentlemen of the present day'. Craft did not dispute the existence of racial peculiarities but found it sorrowful 'that scientific and learned men should waste their time in discussing a subject that could prove of no benefit to mankind', instead of accepting the wealth of evidence exemplifying the 'independence of character and intellectual power on the part of the Negro' (Hunt 1863:389).

To Hunt's annoyance, Craft's critique triggered additional testimony from members of the audience with first-hand experience of social conditions in the West Indies and Africa, to the effect that slavery and colonial oppression were the true causes of what Hunt claimed was an innate African incapacity for civilization. Hunt's supporters moved to close discussion, praising his determination to argue purely from the basis of facts and regretting that 'philanthropy' had clouded what had been a purely scientific discussion. Smarting from Craft's moral dissection, Hunt could not forgo securing the final word. In doing so, however, he stepped outside the limits of scientific discourse. In a manner reminiscent of the celebrated 1860 debate on evolution between Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and Thomas Henry Huxley, Hunt (1863:391) resorted to ridicule and in doing so severely damaged his scientific credibility by social impoliteness. Like Craft he too was sorry, he exclaimed — sorry that scientific discourse should be opposed 'by poetical clap-trap, or by gratuitous and worthless assumptions'.

Craft's defence of the African illustrates the widespread salience that monogenetic environmentalist accounts of racial difference still enjoyed in Britain during the 1860s. He was able to reaffirm the fundamental truth claims of this tradition by demonstrating its continuing capacity to explain historical events and providing eyewitness testimony as to the intellectual power of men and women of African descent. He did so particularly by exposing the thin evidence on which Hunt's correlation of African bodily peculiarities with recorded or observable behaviour rested. In the absence of robust evidence to the contrary, Craft had argued, the fact that anatomical studies had shown Africans to have thicker skulls did nothing to unsettle the case for providential design as the most plausible account and, indeed, a more scientific explanation than any Hunt had produced, by virtue of its commensurability with the wealth of testimony to the intellectual abilities of Africans who had secured their freedom.

Craft's critique of Hunt further serves to illuminate the fact that Darwinians and Anthropological Society members were consciously engaged in a contest to reinterpret the monogenetic environmentalist tradition. It was, moreover, a contest in which Darwinians enjoyed a distinct intellectual advantage. For by the early 1860s, subscribers to monogenetic environmentalism could draw upon two powerful explanatory resources. One was the encyclopaedic research of James Cowles Prichard. The other was the widely admired philosophical comparative anatomy of Richard Owen (1804-1892). Prichard and Owen equally regarded the diversity of life as the expression of the divine mind. By virtue of its perfection, the divine will obviated the need for the subsequent emergence of new organic forms though, as the fossil record showed, it allowed for the extinction of certain species. Species might come to exhibit diversity but only to the extent that they reflected the divine intention that each be perfectly suited to inhabit a preordained place in the order of creation. Hence, this tradition was

able to envisage human history as evolutionary insofar as it accepted that organisms were subject to biological processes designed to ensure that they became most perfectly suited to the environment which they were providentially destined to inhabit (Rupke 1994:224-30). Darwinians consequently found themselves sharing substantial common ground with monogenetic environmentalists. Where they disagreed was on how far humanity could undergo organic change (Stocking 1973:lv-lvi). By way of contrast, the static physical anthropology espoused by Hunt and his circle had little if any commensurability with monogenetic environmentalism.

Though they stressed that Hunt had merely sought to present the 'simple facts' of race, the leaders of the Anthropological Society were aware that the empirical evidence for classifying Europeans and Africans as separate species was far less substantial than it needed to be. In fact, we should do well to read *The Negro's Place in Nature* as a manifesto for the new Anthropological Society. As the pamphlet makes clear, its founders envisaged the new society as providing an institutional basis and direction for a new science of race, anchored in the study of racial anatomy. In doing so, they looked enviously towards France. Indeed, they chose the name Anthropological Society because of the widespread use of the term 'anthropology' by French anatomists since the early years of the nineteenth century to describe the comparative study of human anatomy, morphology, and physiology. French state sponsorship of the biomedical and natural sciences from the revolutionary era had provided a stronger institutional context for the study of humanity than the network of national and provincial scientific societies and clubs that characterized British intellectual life during the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century. By virtue of its location within Parisian biomedical institutions, the study of human difference had developed a more coherent program of research that was informed by, and in turn gave additional intellectual weight to, the body of theory relating to the nature and origins of organic life-forms propounded by Georges Cuvier (1769-1832), Etienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (1772-1844), and their successors. This research had also become more focused on employing instrumentation to determine statistical regularities in the typical form of organic structures.

Several figures closely associated with the Anthropological Society had either studied medicine in Paris or with Parisian-trained researchers. The most influential was Robert Knox (1791-1862), the charismatic Edinburgh anatomist. Knox (1823-4) had first become interested in the anatomical differences between African peoples and Europeans while serving as an army medical surgeon in southern Africa between 1817 and 1820. During the course of subsequent continental studies, he embraced and idiosyncratically sought to synthesize and refine the transmutationist views of Jean-Baptiste de Monet de Lamarck (1744-1829) and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (Goodsir 1868:26-7). After establishing himself as an anatomy teacher in Edinburgh, Knox began to offer special lectures

on comparative human anatomy in which he reflected a growing conviction that differences in the typical form of bones within indigenous African, American, and Australian populations were so pronounced as to suggest that they were separate species which had developed from different ancestral forms. For the remainder of his life, Knox sought to refine his racial taxonomy through anatomical inquiries. As recalled by Carter Blake (1870:335), an ex-pupil of Knox and member of the first executive of the Anthropological Society, the anatomist 'could not glance at a cranium for the common descriptive anatomy without speaking of its ethnological bearings.... [E]ven when walking along the streets thronged with men and women, he was always on the *qui vive* for race features'. Disgraced by his involvement in the Burke and Hare body-snatching scandal of 1828-9 and then near-bankrupted by the inclusion of anatomy in the Edinburgh University medical curriculum in the mid-1830s, Knox was severely constrained in his own ability to procure and examine comparative anatomical specimens. Nonetheless, he vigorously encouraged those of his past students who had found employment as naval surgeons or colonial medical officers to gather as much information as they could about non-European peoples they might encounter and, most importantly and wherever possible, to procure skeletal material and soft tissue structures for metropolitan anatomical collections.

During the 1840s, Knox turned to popular lecturing on race. His lectures (1850) were a heady mix of anatomical demonstration and racial reinterpretation of history peppered with scathing criticisms of contemporary religious leaders, intellectuals, and politicians for downplaying the crucial significance of race as the principal determinant of human affairs. Knox died just before the foundation of the Anthropological Society but he was a powerful source of inspiration to its leadership which envisaged the new society as a source of institutional support and intellectual direction to the anatomical study of racial difference. However, the society's claim to be the first and sole body truly devoted to disclosing the meanings of race through empirical study was vigorously disputed by leading Darwinians who regarded themselves as more rigorously committed to elucidating the meanings of racial difference through inductive reasoning.

Francis Galton (1822-1911), for example, heard and was unimpressed by Hunt's discourse on African inferiority at the 1863 meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. By this time, Galton (1908:288) had been led by the *Origin of Species* 'to pursue many new inquiries ... clustered round the central topics of Heredity and the possible improvement of the Human Race'. While it was not until the mid-1880s that Galton felt confident he could adequately describe how hereditary characteristics were transmitted, by 1863 he was convinced that Darwin's concept of natural selection was far more powerful an explanation than the static racialism propounded by Knox and his admirers in the Anthropological Society. For if, as Hunt now claimed, members of primitive races inherited identical qualities of intellect, how could they explain

the wealth of empirical evidence for the production by even the most primitive races of at least some 'able men capable of taking an equal position with Europeans'? Indeed, Galton asked Hunt after his paper, if no racially pure African had the psychological capacity to embrace civilization, as Hunt had claimed, how could 'so degraded a people ... furnish men capable of constructing nations out of the loosest materials?' (Hunt 1863:387-8).

Galton's treatment of Hunt was gentle in comparison to that of other influential Darwinians. In the course of delivering the 1864 Hunterian Lectures at the Royal College of Surgeons, Huxley (1872:20) gleefully catalogued Hunt's 'aberrations from scientific fact or fair speculation' when reviewing what leading continental anatomists had actually discovered by post-mortem dissection of black corpses over the previous thirty years. Rolleston, a fellow Darwinian and Oxford's Linacre Professor of Anatomy and Physiology, openly belittled Hunt's scientific pretensions and privately queried whether he was in the pay of Confederate agents (Desmond 1994:326). Hunt and several other prominent members of the Anthropological Society responded by accusing Huxley in particular of having wilfully misrepresented Hunt's intentions. *The Negro's Place in Nature* was never intended as a definitive account of African inferiority but as a call for focused research into the racial distinctiveness of the African and other primitive races. The fact that Huxley and his colleagues seemed uninterested in undertaking such research underscored the rationale for establishing the Anthropological Society (Anon. 1863:107). Society members also charged Huxley with having attacked Hunt because of his pro-slavery views and queried whether his antagonism was unconnected with the fact that key elements of Darwin's theory — such as the existence of intermediate forms between species — lacked empirical verification.<sup>5</sup>

While the leadership of the Anthropological Society steadfastly believed that its program of anatomical research would produce evidence proving beyond doubt the plural origins of humanity and the immutability of racial difference, they were conscious of only having begun to place the study of race on a truly scientific basis. There is no reason to doubt that Hunt was sincere in protesting that his views on African inferiority were in many respects tentative and open to revision. While claiming that anatomical examinations strongly suggested the typical African brain to be smaller in size than the European, Hunt (1864) nonetheless readily conceded that cranial capacity alone was insufficient proof of intellectual capacity. What was needed was extensive research aimed at identifying and correlating what might possibly be complex and racially unique matrices of interrelated traits. The few published accounts of individual post-mortem dissections of adult men and women of African descent, for example, suggested to him that the African brain was more akin structurally to that of a European child. The African brain also supposedly differed markedly in terms of colour and exhibited less numerous and more massive convolutions. What

had so far been found through close anatomical scrutiny of the African body suggested interesting correlations between the physical structure of the brain and what were allegedly typical African behavioural traits. But only comprehensive anatomical inquiry, he concluded, would disclose the full scientific significance of these and many other racial peculiarities likely to be found distinguishing the peoples of the earth.

Where Hunt could justly be accused of being disingenuous was in depicting his Darwinian critics as uninterested in anatomical investigation of racial characteristics. From as early as 1861, Rolleston, for example, had sought to obtain brains of the different varieties of mankind so as to illuminate whether psychological differences might be explained by racially typical aspects of cerebral structure.<sup>6</sup> He also studied homologies in shoulder musculature and teeth enamel in some detail with a view to disclosing evidence of evolutionary processes (F[lower] 1881). Huxley (1900:205-9) documented cranial variations between the fossil crania and modern 'primitives' to show how they formed a series highly suggestive of evolutionary refinement. In short, for all the differences between Darwinians and their polygenist opponents, both regarded the human body as an ensemble of markers of racial affiliation. Irrespective of their selection of bones or soft tissues or their methods of measurement, both camps implicitly assumed that the true course of human natural history would only be disclosed through regimented, statistically significant measurement and racial differentiation of bodily structures.

### **The lure of Aboriginal bodies — the Darwinians**

The centrality of bodily measurement within anatomical and anthropological circles meant that much of the interaction between metropolitan racial scientists and their Australian colonial correspondents during the 1860s centred on the procurement of indigenous bodies and the interpretation of their supposed racial characteristics. Darwinians sought indigenous Australian bodily remains in the belief that they would yield important evidence of ancestral relations between races that over time had come to exhibit morphologically distinct physical and psychological characteristics. Those who subscribed to static racialist explanations of human origins were equally, if not more, anxious to amass evidence of racial peculiarities, believing that accurate determination of the contours of race would show the immutability of certain key racial characteristics, thus proving that humanity could not have evolved from a common ancestral type.

However, in seeking to map racial characteristics, researchers faced a serious difficulty. As Berthold Seeman (1825-1871) warned fellow members of the Anthropology Society in June 1863, skulls alone were insufficient to determine racial identity. In many instances, it was also necessary to examine soft tissue. Indeed, he told the society, 'I myself should like to see in London an anthropological garden, something on the same principle as the Zoological

Gardens, where living specimens of the principal varieties of the human race might be seen and compared'.<sup>7</sup> Yet, as the Darwinian palaeontologist George Busk lamented in 1861:

while in the case of animals and plants, copious collections can be made and stored up in museums for accurate and leisurely examination and comparison ... at best but few perfect specimens of pure or unmixed races (to use an indefinite term) can be obtained, and the Anthropologist at home is compelled to rely for the materials of his studies upon such fragmentary portions of the body as can be easily obtained and transported.... A Gorilla or a Chimpanzee can be caught and sent alive to the Zoological Gardens, or killed and forwarded in a cask of rum to the British Museum, but loud would be the outcry were similar attempts made to promote the study of Anthropology (1861:348-9).

Busk knew first-hand from over twenty years as visiting surgeon to the Dreadnought hospital ship at Greenwich how few opportunities for studying racially interesting soft tissue occurred.<sup>8</sup> Accepting that the study of human racial difference should necessarily be restricted to bones, Busk (1861) believed it essential that they be made to reveal as much as possible and to this end he personally invested much time developing new cranial measuring techniques and instruments. However, by the early 1860s, he and many fellow anatomists feared that they were working against time. Opportunities for procuring even skeletal material were threatened by what seemed the impending extinction of the world's more primitive and scientifically interesting races.

The concept of racial extinction was hardly novel. At least since the 1830s, many British intellectuals and colonial administrators had thought it possible that some races would disappear as a consequence of the expropriation of their homelands by European settlers. By this time, it was common knowledge that in South Africa and the Australian colonies resistance to settler ambition had frequently led to the indiscriminate killing of indigenous peoples. However, few if any ethnographers believed that settler violence alone explained the collapse of native populations. Rather, a wealth of eyewitness testimony to the impact of diseases and the prevalence of infertility and supposed social anomie was interpreted as highly suggestive that the demise of peoples such as the 'aborigines of New Holland' was providentially ordained.

What was new in the early 1860s was the conviction amongst racial scientists that the pace of extinction had accelerated to the point that several races were on the verge of disappearing. Indeed, the fact that only several 'full-blooded' native Tasmanians remained alive convinced such theorists that the race had effectively become extinct. This conviction, moreover, gained cognitive strength from the additional empirical weight that the apparent decline of indigenous populations gave to the core theoretical assumptions of both Darwinians and

static racialists. Darwinians saw the drama of racial extinction supposedly being played out in the Australian colonies as further proof that, like all other forms of organic life, humanity had evolved through natural selection. With the spread of settler society, the native Australian race was naturally being subsumed by the more advanced European. Critics of Darwinian explanations who believed in the plurality of human origin interpreted the supposed extinction of races such as the Tasmanians as one further historical episode in which two races of unequal physiology and intellect had sought to occupy the same territory. For polygenists, the scientific significance of studying the typical bodily characteristics of these vanquished races lay in producing evidence that racial conflict did not result in hybrid beings who over time would become the ancestors of a new race.

The new intellectual salience assumed by the premise of racial extinction during the 1860s heightened the desire of both Darwinians and polygenists to secure anatomical evidence likely to prove the truth of their respective accounts of human natural history. It made authorities in both camps even more concerned to secure the bones of races believed to be close to extinction. To this end, they sought to enlist the help of colonial scientists, museum personnel, medical practitioners, and amateur naturalists, representing the collection of remains as a means for them to make an invaluable contribution to the progress of British anthropological science.

Amongst Darwinians, Rolleston was particularly active in cultivating Australian collectors. Until his death in 1881, Rolleston was successful in promoting a slow but steady flow of indigenous skeletal material to Oxford by two avenues. One was through his brother Christopher Rolleston (1817-1888) who had been nearly thirty years in New South Wales when he was appointed auditor-general of the colony in 1864. Among the specimens yielded through this family connection were four skulls stolen from a burial place on a cattle station owned by Christopher in western central Queensland.<sup>9</sup> The other means by which George Rolleston secured remains was through former students practicing medicine in the Australian colonies. In 1869, for example, he received the skull of a Wiradjuri woman from H.M. Rowland, by this time a physician in the Bathurst district. The skull had been removed from a burial place unearthed during the clearing of scrub.<sup>10</sup> In the same year, Rolleston received a case containing five skulls obtained from another former pupil residing in Adelaide who had employed a local natural history collector to secure him skulls from a traditional burial site near the Murray River entrance. Two of the skulls, belonging to a man and his wife only buried in 1862, were the last remaining at the site. However, as the collector informed Rolleston's former student:

If you should wish to have any more skulls I may have opportunities of obtaining some, but at present I do not know for certain of any place

where I could get some. Those from freshly dead natives would of course be most valuable, & those I do not know how to get. I think I would undertake to clean them myself if I had them, as I have often prepared the skulls of lower animals.<sup>11</sup>

The question of how Aboriginal people reacted to these desecrations is beyond the scope of this paper. However, there is a wealth of archival evidence and oral testimony illustrative of Aboriginal determination to protect the dead (Turnbull 2002).

Around 1870, Rolleston received the complete skeleton of a man from the Port Augusta region of South Australia from another former pupil, J. Marshall Stokes, who informed Rolleston that the man, who had died in 1869, was in his opinion 'considerably below the average stature of his tribe and I always fancy weakly so as not to be taken as a type of his race physically'. While he was a willing participant in the production of racial knowledge, Stokes's encounters with living indigenous Australians had left him convinced that the common perception of the Australian race as limited in intellectual capacity was 'very mistaken'.<sup>12</sup> Also in Rolleston's hands by 1872 was a skull procured from a burial place on a sheep station (ironically named Oxford Downs) 130 kilometres west of Mackay in central Queensland. The skull had been obtained for him by George Marten who had been an undergraduate at Pembroke College in the early 1860s. Marten, now growing sugar in the Mackay district, had acquired the skull on learning of Rolleston's desire for aboriginal remains from a neighbour, W.R. Davidson, another ex-student of the anatomist. In sending the skull, Marten wrote that he would be 'glad to know if there is any special objects of interest that I might be in the way of procuring in Queensland' and 'glad to do anything we could in the cause of science'.<sup>13</sup>

Lacking a network comparable to that enjoyed by Rolleston, other Darwinians proved less successful in securing donations of Australian skeletal material. Busk, for example, managed to obtain no more than two or three crania. Huxley had better but still relatively limited success. Among the colonists he approached was the mining engineer and colonial ethnographer Robert Brough Smyth (?-1899), author of the compendious *Aborigines of Victoria* (1878). Interestingly, Smyth — unlike Darwin himself — had no difficulty in reconciling the latter's theory of organic development through speciation with the essential truths of Christianity as they were understood within liberal Anglican circles. In a lecture to the Bendigo Working Men's Club in 1886 (1856-89:4 [c]), he declared that providence had bestowed on man two books of supreme wisdom: the Bible and *The Origin of Species*. As secretary and later chair of Victoria's Board for the Protection of Aborigines during the 1860s, Smyth accordingly saw no tension between administering a regime in which conversion to Christianity was regarded as an essential precondition for civilizing the colony's indigenous inhabitants

and subjecting them to scientific examination of their presumed racial peculiarities on behalf of leading metropolitan Darwinians. Nor indeed did Smyth (1856-89:4 [d]) have any qualms about approaching Victoria's colonial secretary to procure the skeleton of an Aboriginal elder given Christian burial in the Melbourne general cemetery. Through Smyth, Huxley came in contact with Christopher D'Oyly H. Aplin (1819-1875), a surveyor with the Victorian Geological Survey Office. Aplin in turn willingly approached landowners on Huxley's behalf, eventually securing him three skulls. One, Aplin wrote, was 'found by some friends of mine in an excavation made by them for the purpose of examining the nature of the large mounds or "myrnong heaps" rather numerous in the Western Districts of the colony'. The other two were obtained after being exposed by erosion in sand dunes at Port Fairy.<sup>14</sup>

Amongst those whose aid Huxley sought to enlist was Johann Ludwig Gerard Krefft (1830-1881), curator of Sydney's Australian Museum from 1864 to 1872. By the time of his appointment, Gerard Krefft had established a modest reputation as a taxonomist with leading metropolitan British anatomists. Since the late 1850s, he had supplied numerous rare vertebrate fossils to Richard Owen at the British Museum and published descriptions of new Australian reptiles and fish species in several London scientific journals. Krefft had closely followed the debates between Darwinians and followers of Owen and could not have been unaware that the question of human origins was now a tripartite contest in which both Owenites and Darwinians alike were targets of the static physical anthropologists of the Anthropology Society. Indeed, Krefft realized that by virtue of his ability to procure and examine native Australian bodies, he was uniquely situated to gain fame in metropolitan scientific circles by producing knowledge to help resolve the question of the significance of human racial differences. One of his first moves on being appointed curator was to instruct the Museum's assistant George Masters (1837-1912) to remove remains from indigenous burial places encountered on collecting expeditions. In May 1865, Masters wrote to Krefft on returning from the countryside west of Ipswich, in southern Queensland, informing him that he had shipped to the Museum a variety of skins and skeletons, including the bones of an Aboriginal woman.<sup>15</sup> Krefft also alerted the many amateur naturalists who regularly donated zoological specimens that the Museum particularly desired Aboriginal skeletons. One of the first naturalists to oblige in this respect was a pastoralist in central Queensland who wrote to Krefft in September 1865 that he had not only 'got the bones of an alligator for you as soon as they are fit to send away' but 'also two blackfellows buried in a paddock of mine on purpose to get the skeletons to send you'. The pastoralist gave no indication of how he had procured the bodies.<sup>16</sup> In the same year, the Museum also received another two skeletons of central Queensland Aboriginal people donated by George Rolleston's old student W.R. Davidson.<sup>17</sup>

On being approached by Huxley in 1866, Krefft provided him with basic cranial measurements of the Museum's collection and promised to help him secure skulls through James Wilcox (1823–1881), a farmer in the Grafton district of New South Wales who for some years had supplemented his income by selling bird and marsupial specimens to the Australian Museum and the Museum of Victoria. Wilcox was also known to be willing to plunder Aboriginal graves.<sup>18</sup> However, this was as far as Krefft was prepared to help Huxley, being concerned to ensure that he did not enhance his relationship with metropolitan authorities at the expense of failing to enrich the holdings of his own Museum. Krefft was now unwilling to pass over any opportunity to acquire Aboriginal or other racially interesting human remains. By the early 1870s, the Museum had acquired four complete skeletons and some eighty skulls, mostly of Aboriginal and Oceanic origin (Maddock 1874:78). When Huxley again approached Krefft in 1872 wanting additional remains and in particular female Aboriginal pelvic bones, Krefft deflected the request by sending Huxley photographs of Aboriginal skulls in the Museum's collection while stressing that it was becoming increasingly rare to discover burial places. 'I wish I could', he told Huxley, 'but it is very difficult — we have 2 female skeletons in the Museum but I cannot send them'. He had again told a collector 'a few days ago to look out for same', but added, 'I suppose the greater portion of the native graves are obliterated'.<sup>19</sup>

By the early 1870s, Krefft had two further interrelated reasons for not wanting to see remains shipped to Britain. Although he had come to believe that humanity had evolved through speciation, he was sceptical of Darwin's claim that new species emerged by a purely random process. In common with influential metropolitan figures such as George Campbell, Duke of Argyll (1823–1900), and the geologist William Dawkins (1837–1929), Krefft was inclined to think that, while variation occurred through natural selection, some underlying law determined that the flow of variations moved in a purposeful direction.<sup>20</sup> However, unlike these British authorities who had sought to reconcile speciation with Christian belief in the subordination of nature to providential design, Krefft appears to have been influenced less by Darwin's writings than by the radical pantheistic account of evolutionary processes championed by Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), the Prussian zoologist.<sup>21</sup> The second reason why Krefft was unwilling to part with Aboriginal bones was that he had himself become greatly interested in the question of Aboriginal origins, largely as a result of having discovered in 1869 what he took to be a fossilized human tooth during the excavation of a cave in the Wellington Valley of central-western New South Wales.

### **Metropolitan ideas and the colonial 'field'**

By 1872, Krefft was convinced that the Aboriginal remains collected by the Australian Museum bore striking anatomical similarities to the ancient 'stone

age' remains recently discovered in the limestone cliffs of the Vézère river valley in the Dordogne region in France. As Kreffft had learned from reading the 1869 address by Paul Broca (1824-1880) to the Académie des Sciences, the most important of these discoveries had been the fossilized remains of four adults and an infant in a rock shelter uncovered during the construction of a railway line at Cro-Magnon (Broca 1873:305-9).

Broca (1873:426-8) was fascinated by what he and other French researchers presumed, on the basis of animal bones and various items of material culture found with the Cro-Magnon skeletons, to have been the development of an ancient race through three distinct societal stages before sudden extinction. They took the Cro-Magnons to have been a morphologically distinct race whose bodily characteristics bore no relation to less ancient remains found in barrow mounds or to modern Europeans. The thigh bones, for example, were much thicker than in any modern human race though seemingly closer in shape to modern men than were those of the higher apes. The skulls were much longer than those of modern European races with cranial sutures sufficiently similar to those of modern 'savage nations' to encourage the conclusion that they were probably on the same level in terms of social sophistication. Even so, Broca believed that their skulls showed 'signs of a powerful cerebral organisation' which he took as suggesting that they might have been constrained in achieving their full evolutionary potential by unknown environmental or social factors. Indeed, Broca was drawn to speculate that their extinction was due to their having been a peaceable people who were intellectually and technologically incapable of resisting the intrusion into the Vézère of a more aggressive and better-armed race.

Kreffft was inspired by Broca to see remarkable affinities between the apparent course of human evolution in prehistoric Europe and the drama of racial supersession seemingly being played out in the Australian colonies, although the question remains open as to whether Kreffft, in embracing Broca's reasoning as to the fate of the Cro-Magnons, also accepted Broca's polygenist explanation of human origins. Broca's fascination with the Cro-Magnon remains was in large measure due to his seeing them as providing clear morphological evidence that humanity had not evolved as Darwinians suggested through the evolutionary transformation of one ancestral type.

Whatever he thought of Broca's polygenist transformism, Kreffft, over several newspaper articles published in Sydney during early 1873, argued that Australia's indigenous race exemplified the same three stages of societal development posited by Broca for the race whose remains had been discovered at Cro-Magnon. 'Comparing the weapons of our savages with these descriptions of the learned Frenchman', he wrote (1873b), 'we must acknowledge that he has hit the proper distinction to a point'. In Western Australia, he added, there lived 'savages with

scarcely any covering except a cape of wallaby skin, without possum rugs and with the roughest lump of granite embedded in grass-tree gum for a hatchet'. These people clearly corresponded to the earliest era of Cro-Magnon society whereas the people living along the Murray and inhabiting coastal New South Wales were in Krefft's estimation obviously 'more advanced'. Like the socially more advanced Cro-Magnons, they fashioned stone hatchets with ground edges and carved or drew hunting scenes. Finally, in Krefft's eyes, the inhabitants of New Guinea were modern counterparts to the Cro-Magnon race in the third phase of social development preceding their extinction. By contrast, the Maori of New Zealand were a distinct, more advanced, 'intelligent' race who might in different circumstances have colonized Australia where they 'would have made short work with our gentle savages' and 'given future invaders more trouble than they gave them in their limited islands, though even there they proved hard to conquer'.

Krefft's conjectural racial history appears to have attracted no public comment in either Sydney or London media. Possibly, as he later claimed in a letter to Darwin, his evolutionary beliefs were a factor in his dismissal from the post of curator of the Australian Museum in 1874 (Butcher 1994:52-4). However, regardless of its reception, Krefft's comparative prehistory vividly illustrates how, by the mid-1870s, competing racial discourses licensed the imaginative reconstruction of human history as a universal narrative of racial struggle and supersession.<sup>22</sup> Yet Krefft did not simply bring the Darwinian conception of speciation together with Broca's speculative human history. Certainly, his collecting of Aboriginal bodily remains is a striking instance of convergence between seemingly disparate discourses on the issue of examining those remains. Moreover, the implications of that discursive convergence were doubly pernicious for Indigenous Australian people, given shared polygenist and Darwinian expectations of racial supersession and extinction. However, Krefft's position at the hub of colonial collecting practice also shows that Australia increasingly served as a critical zone of intellectual feedback to the metropole, with practical ramifications for diverse strands of the European science of race.

### **The lure of Aboriginal bodies — the polygenists**

Darwinians were not alone in hunting indigenous bones. Leading members of the Anthropology Society proved equally keen to encourage the flow of indigenous Australian remains into scientific hands. Indeed, one of them, Joseph Barnard Davis, proved by far the most successful collector of racial crania and skeletons of the nineteenth century, amassing just over 1700 specimens by the late 1870s.<sup>23</sup> What is particularly remarkable about Davis's achievement is that, unlike Huxley or Rolleston but like most of his 'anthropological' colleagues, he was an amateur student of comparative human anatomy. Shortly after completing his medical studies in the late 1820s, Davis settled in the Staffordshire village

of Shelton where he worked as a private physician and medical officer until his death in the 1880s. He was a confirmed believer in the immutability of racial characteristics who was especially critical of Huxley's argument (1862) that affinities between the shape of the Neanderthal skull discovered in 1856 and that typical of modern Australian crania suggested strongly that humanity had evolved through monogenetic speciation. The Neanderthal find, Davis argued (1864), was clearly pathological and of relatively modern origin. He wrote of Huxley to John Beddoe (1826-1911), a medical colleague and fellow member of the Anthropological Society: 'He is maddened that I have demolished the first and only foundation stone of human Darwinianism and can't help showing it'.<sup>24</sup> Even so, Davis was cautious in what he claimed could safely be inferred about human origins from cranial research and never positively affirmed publicly that humanity had arisen from plural origins.

Davis's racial thinking was greatly shaped by an intimate acquaintance with indigenous Australian bodily remains. By his own account, he began collecting and systematically mapping the racial peculiarities of crania in the late 1840s and it seems clear that his intellectual stimulus was the research into racial difference pursued since the early 1830s by the American anatomist Samuel Morton (1799-1851). In *Crania Americana* (1839), Morton had presented comparative measurements of the shape and internal capacity of some eighty indigenous north and south American skulls, believing that the sum of these cranial measurements 'of more than forty Indian nations' proved beyond dispute that they were a distinct race exhibiting no signs of having originated in Asia. In fact, Morton claimed, the typical form of the indigenous American skull justified the conclusion that racial distinctions were purely the product of physiological processes and that humanity was adapted 'from the beginning' to particular geographical regions (Morton and Combe 1839:3). By the mid-1840s, further research, based in part on 137 skulls procured from ancient Egyptian burial sites, had convinced Morton (1844:66) that humanity was comprised of separately-originating races and that the 'physical or organic characters which distinguish the several races of men, [were] as old as the oldest records of our species'.

At the time of his death in May 1851, Morton had only published detailed comparative measurements of American and Egyptian crania but it was well known in anthropological circles that he envisaged these works as preliminary instalments of a comprehensive base map of human racial diversity. The supposition that Davis saw himself as completing the polygenist Morton's research is strengthened by the fact that from the early 1850s he began energetically seeking the help of colonial administrators and medical practitioners to procure crania of European, Asian, Oceanic, and particularly mainland Australian and Tasmanian origin. As John Beddoe recalled (1910:205), 'Davis's enthusiasm for his subject was wonderful, but sometimes it verged on the ghoulish.... [He]

looked on heads simply as potential skulls'.<sup>25</sup> Davis had no qualms about encouraging the theft of Tasmanian skulls during post-mortems or from graves at the settlements on Flinders Island and Oyster Cove where the survivors of the infamous campaigns of the 1820s were exiled. He informed one correspondent in 1856 (Rae-Ellis 1981:133): 'Were I myself in the colony, I could with very little trouble abstract skulls from dead bodies without defacing them at all, and could instruct any medical gentleman to do this'.

By the late 1860s, Davis had acquired the remarkable number of sixteen Tasmanian crania and the complete skeleton of a thirty year-old Tasmanian man. He bought several skulls at sales but acquired others through contacts with colonial administrators and medical colleagues. They included Joseph Milligan (1807-1884), the superintendent and medical officer of the Flinders Island and Oyster Cove settlements between 1843 and 1855 who had kept Tasmanian remains he came across in the course of his duties. Having retired to England by the early 1860s on a meagre colonial pension, Milligan was well aware of the value placed on bones in metropolitan anatomical circles but was loath to be seen to be trafficking in human remains (Davis 1867a:1). Davis regarded one of the skulls he had bought from Milligan as 'perhaps the finest and most perfect specimen in any Museum. Of great rarity and value'. It was from a Tasmanian man aged about twenty-four who had been killed in 1831 during an attack on a shepherd's hut in the Surrey Hills. Several other specimens Milligan sold Davis bore testimony to the viciousness of frontier conflict in Tasmania, notably the skull of a woman shown to Milligan by a boy of her clan. The boy 'told Milligan that his party some years before had been fired into by a white man when a woman was injured ... she had been shot through the eye'.<sup>26</sup>

Davis's quest for Tasmanian specimens also led him to cultivate the friendship of George Augustus Robinson (1791-1866), Tasmania's first protector of Aborigines, who by the early 1860s had retired to the English spa town of Bath. Over the years, Robinson had acquired a skeleton and at least six crania, two of which were most likely procured during post-mortems at the Aboriginal settlement on Flinders Island.<sup>27</sup> Not content with the gift of one skull from Robinson, Davis sought to acquire the entire collection after the protector's death in 1866, together with his copious journals — though his plans in this regard were foiled by Robinson's family.<sup>28</sup>

From 1869, Davis found Tasmanian remains harder to obtain as a result of the infamous affair of the post-mortem mutilation of William Lanne, allegedly the last man of the Tasmanian race. As is well known, Lanne's corpse became the focus of scientific rivalry between the Hobart surgeon William Crowther (1817-1885), who sought to procure the skeleton for the Royal College of Surgeons in London, and leading members of the Royal Society of Tasmania. The mutilation of Lanne's corpse by the competing camps caused widespread public outrage

over the willingness of medical authorities to transgress morality and the law in order to secure anatomical specimens, regardless of race (Petrow 1988:20). The scandal meant that few amongst the colony's elite were henceforth prepared to risk public association with the procurement of body parts through dissection or, particularly, the exhumation of graves.

While the Lanne affair greatly restricted both inclination and opportunities to procure Tasmanian remains, Davis was fortunate that one of his Tasmanian correspondents was prepared to risk moral censure for grave-robbing. This was Morton Allport (1830-1878), a Hobart lawyer and prominent member of the Royal Society of Tasmania. Davis appears to have begun corresponding with Allport after the latter sought in 1871 to become a corresponding member of the Anthropological Society and ensured his election by presenting the society with a complete skeleton exhumed in great secrecy from the Aboriginal cemetery on Flinders Island. At about the same time, Davis doubtless also learnt that Allport (1850-78:9-10) had presented the Royal College of Surgeons with two complete Aboriginal skeletons and had professed his readiness to send a third if the College would give Lanne's skull and vertebrae to the Royal Society of Tasmania. Davis's cultivation of Allport eventually led to his receiving a skull and bones in May 1872 that Allport had taken 'no small trouble to see ... were disinterred from a spot where none but other Aborigines were buried'. The following January, Allport (1850-78:107) sent news that he had secured 'a treasure for you in the shape of an adult male Skeleton of Tasmanian native all but absolutely perfect except as to the styloid processes which always seem very fragile'. However, this was to be one of the last skeletons that Allport removed from Flinders Island. As he explained in a letter of May 1874 to Charles Gould, son of the famous ornithologist, he had been approached for skeletal material by Professor Wyville Thompson, then visiting the Australian colonies as naturalist on the *Challenger* expedition. 'He also wants a *specimen* from Flinders', Allport confided to Gould, but remains had been discovered when a packing crate of 'geological specimens' was opened and he now feared that the Tasmanian government would move to protect indigenous Tasmanian burial places.<sup>29</sup>

Davis was to play an influential part in the contest between the 'anthropologicals' and their Darwinian opponents during the 1860s as a consequence of his ruthless pursuit of racially significant non-European skulls and skeletons. His unrivalled collection of Australian and indigenous remains from many other parts of the world proved a valuable resource for generating craniometric evidence that Davis (1864) and other leading 'anthropologicals' deployed against the evolutionary claims of Huxley and other leading Darwinians. The Darwinians responded by dismissing or ignoring the worth of Davis's findings. Even so, they were respectful if not jealous of his success in procuring racially significant remains. And while dismissive of the conclusions that Davis drew from measuring crania, they were equally convinced of the fundamental

importance of comparative examination of the bones of ancient and modern 'primitive' peoples in reconstructing the true course of human evolutionary development. In the cause of racial science, Darwinians and 'anthropologicals' were equally willing to disregard the religious and moral sensitivities of their contemporaries and those of the people whose dead they defiled.

## Conclusion

By the early 1880s, Darwinian evolutionary theory had become scientific orthodoxy in British anthropological circles. On his death in 1881, Davis received faint praise from evolutionist critics for his tenacity as a collector and for donating his wealth of specimens to the Royal College of Surgeons. In contrast, his Darwinian rival George Rolleston, who died less than a month later and had also examined large numbers of crania using much the same metrical techniques as Davis, was feted as Britain's leading craniologist. The failure of the static, polygenist ideas of the 'anthropologicals' owed much to the lack of explanatory power their interpretation of the meanings of race were deemed to have in comparison to those of the Darwinians. Moreover, while at its height in the mid-1860s the Anthropological Society boasted over 700 members, it was only a small inner circle within the society that actively propagated static racialism. These men were largely amateur researchers like Davis who worked outside the professional scientific establishment of mid-Victorian Britain. In contrast, many leading Darwinians enjoyed positions and rising influence within universities and the medical establishment. They had many more opportunities to convince professional colleagues and students of the validity of their ideas. Furthermore, the Darwinian conceptualization of the demise of indigenous people as a natural process rather than the outcome of human agency in the form of inter-racial conflict was culturally and morally a far more attractive vision of human natural history.

I have shown in this chapter that the contest between the Darwinians and their 'anthropological' opponents put indigenous Australian bones at the heart of a disturbing practical juncture between long-standing colonial assumptions about the inevitable extinction of 'inferior' races and the divergent logic of opposed branches of the science of race. The apparent correspondence of theory and experience had sinister consequences. It not only stimulated the plunder of Aboriginal burial places and scientific trafficking in bodily remains but strengthened white perceptions that the Aboriginal body itself proved the reality of profound and insurmountable biological differences between indigenous Australians and colonial settlers. This entanglement of metropolitan intellectual controversies with colonial experience, phobias, and actions firmly established race as the dominant cognitive foundation for envisaging and managing the destiny of Aboriginal Australians.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Ethnological Society of London was founded in late 1843 through the agency of Richard King, a physician and secretary of the Aborigines Protection Society. King and several other members of the Aborigines Protection Society believed that the world's 'savage' nations were destined to extinction in the wake of colonialism and that it was of crucial scientific and philosophical importance that their physical and moral characteristics be studied before they became no more than a history memory. See especially Stocking 1987:240-5.

<sup>2</sup> Blumenbach 1781, 1795; Prichard 1813, 1836-47. See Chapter One (Douglas), this volume.

<sup>3</sup> See especially Ellingson 2001; Stocking 1987; Van Keuren 1982; Young 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Hunt 1863; Craft and Craft 1860.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Anon. 1863:114-17; Reddie 1864:cxv-cxix.

## Foreign Bodies

- <sup>6</sup> This is clearly evident from items of correspondence in the Rolleston Papers detailing his efforts to secure non-European brains from British port cities (Rolleston c. 1850-81: Box 2).
- <sup>7</sup> Anthropological Society of London 1863:xxiii.
- <sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Clark 1862:106.
- <sup>9</sup> Rolleston c. 1850-81: Box 4.
- <sup>10</sup> Rolleston c. 1850-81: Box 2.
- <sup>11</sup> Rolleston c. 1850-81: Box 4.
- <sup>12</sup> Rolleston c. 1850-81: Box 2.
- <sup>13</sup> Rolleston c. 1850-81: Box 4.
- <sup>14</sup> Huxley 1825-95b: XVI, 2: 143.
- <sup>15</sup> Australian Museum 1853-83a: C: 40.65.5.
- <sup>16</sup> Australian Museum 1853-83b: C: 30.65.24.
- <sup>17</sup> New South Wales Parliament 1866:4, 909.
- <sup>18</sup> Museum of Victoria 1854-99: Box W.
- <sup>19</sup> Huxley 1825-95a: ff. 291-v.
- <sup>20</sup> Desmond 1982:175-86; Krefft 1873a.
- <sup>21</sup> In his *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen* (1866), Haeckel sought to transform Darwin's theory into a monistic *naturphilosophie* grounded in the idea that through the agency of fundamental causal laws, all living organisms and inorganic matter were more or less complex expressions of the same substance.
- <sup>22</sup> See Chapter Two (Douglas), this volume, for earlier conjectural histories of racial displacement.
- <sup>23</sup> Davis's collection was acquired by the Royal College of Surgeons of England shortly before his death in May 1881. The size of his collection can be gauged from Davis 1867a.
- <sup>24</sup> Davis to Beddoe, 18 Feb. 1866, in Beddoe 1854-73.
- <sup>25</sup> Beddoe recounted further: 'Once when [Davis] visited us I took him to the infirmary, and showed him a Morlachian sailor from near Ragusa, whom I was trying to cure of gangrene of the lung, resulting from having been half-drowned — a fine, handsome fellow, but desperately ill. "Now", said my friend, "you know that man can't recover; do take care to secure his head for me when he dies, for I have no cranium from that neighbourhood". After all, the poor Morlach made a wonderful recovery, and carried his head on his own shoulders back to the Herzegovia' (1910:205).
- <sup>26</sup> Davis 1867b:1, 1128, 1120.
- <sup>27</sup> Robinson 1788-1866: Vol. 68[a], f. 517; Davis 1867a:270-1.
- <sup>28</sup> Robinson 1788-1866: Vol. 68[a], ff. 583, 591, 595, 603, 607.
- <sup>29</sup> Allport 1850-78:56-7, orig. emphasis.