

## 'RAMSAY'S REGIME': THE AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM AND THE PROCUREMENT OF ABORIGINAL BODIES, c. 1874 - 1900.

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To the south-west of North Queensland's lush Atherton Tablelands the land rises to over 1500 metres. Rainforest gives way to a dry country of weathered granite hills and open eucalypt forest. Further west the land falls away through rocky spurs and escarpments to the inland plains. In this country are the headwaters of the Herbert river, which flows southwards to fall over the eastern side of the Dividing Range to the coast. The land is also the source of the Walsh, which flows westwards, eventually joining the Mitchell in its flow to the Gulf.

This country was occupied by the Mbabaram people until the early 1880s. Then European demand for tin, copper and silver brought mining pastoral development, and death. Cattle, hunting and the damming by miners of the various streams feeding the upper Herbert and Walsh rivers all had a swift and detrimental impact on the ecology of this dry region. Before long starving Mbabaram were forced to take cattle and, as in many other parts of Australia, conflict ensued. Through 1881 reports of Mbabaram attacks on isolated camps spread panic amongst the region's four hundred or so miners, who demanded and gained the protection of the Native Police from the 'black scourge'. In January 1882 the *Cooktown Herald* could report that 'our valiant and vigilant native troopers had recently done their duty in the vicinity [of Herberton]'.<sup>1</sup> Violence continued over the course of the next year or so, ending with a series of Native Police-lead actions that spared very few of the Mbabaram.<sup>2</sup>

In February 1882, Francis Lyons, who took part in a punitive raid against the Mbabaram, sent the following letter from the Cairns Post Office to the Curator of the Australian Museum in Sydney:

Sir,

I take the liberty of addressing you trusting that I have in my possession a curiosity, which may be a great addition to your valuable list. It is that of a Queensland 'Aboriginal Mummy' I procured it a short time since When in pursuit of the nigger who are very mischievous killing cattle in the Vicinity of the Herberton Tin-Fields. When their camp was stormed they abandoned everything except the Mummy in Question, a scull & the dilly bag which contained them And it was not until after a long & desperate chase and when their lives were in imminent danger that they gave it up or rather dropped it I managed to capture one of the tribe in question. An intelligent boy about eleven year of age. And I learned from him through an interpreter that the mummy is that of a 'native King's Daughter' Who got shot a considerable time since.

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<sup>1</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 16 January 1882.

<sup>2</sup> See Loos 1982:95.

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And having 'Blue Blood' They preserved it and carried it about with them. As a mark of loyalty to their Chief

It is quite apparent that what the boy said is true as there is a small hole in the top of the forehead like that caused by a bullet. The body is in a splendid state of preservation. And all the flesh is on the body. The Arms and legs together with the fingers & toes are quite life like as is the whole body. It has been pronounced by everyone who saw it as the best specimen the[y] ever saw. If I could take it to the Southern Colonies & exhibit it I am sure it would realise a very handsome sum. But my position prevents me from so doing. If you require the like for your museum Kindly let me know at once by 'letter' or 'Wire' stating your terms &c &c as I am negotiating with other parties likely to purchase An answer at your earliest convenience will oblige.<sup>3</sup>

One could just treat Francis Lyons' letter as a particularly graphic illustration of how far a man could be tempted - for whatever reason - to turn the violence of frontier conflict to financial advantage. Given the popularity of anatomical exhibitions and 'freak-shows' in late nineteenth-century Australia, one can well believe that a mummified female corpse was displayed in the pubs of Cairns, perhaps before the seller learnt that a museum in a southern Australian city might pay a large amount of money for it.<sup>4</sup> However, as this paper will argue, Lyons' letter is illustrative of more than a naive attempt by a settler to interest Sydney's Australian Museum in a macabre curiosity. The historical context in which the letter is best understood is that of the violent movement of the frontier across nineteenth-century Australia converging with the intellectual frontier of contemporary science.

At the time Europeans arrived to exploit the lands of the Mbabaram, science readily interpreted non-Europeans as if they were repositories of stubborn, previously unconstrued fact. There was little, if any, questioning whether the truths disclosed by science were valid only within the frame of broadly endorsed European cultural assumptions. Rather, by science was understood the rigorous and impersonal application of inductive procedures. It was a method of producing objective and universally applicable knowledge, the diffusion and practical employment of which would enhance the material and spiritual progress of all humanity. 'Ancient traditions', such as those of people like the Mbabaram were seen at best as phenomena to be 'tested by the severe processes of modern investigation', and then allowed to '...fade away into mere dreams'.<sup>5</sup> If the knowledge of the Mbabaram had any further use to humanity it was in this new guise of dissipated superstition: objective comparison of savage thought and custom might disclose similarities of behaviour; these similarities in turn might prove useful in understanding the nature of difference amongst the people of the Earth.

The half-century or so after 1860 witnessed a remarkable surge of interest in morphological and anatomical investigation of the Australian Aborigine; so much so that by the early 1880s there was a complex scientific discourse in operation, centred on the Aboriginal body. The discourse was generated and sustained by a variety of scientific and cultural factors. It derived cognitive strength from ideas which had long enjoyed broad assent, especially the blanket assumption that the peoples of the Earth were divided into

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<sup>3</sup> F.Lyons to Curator, Australian Museum, 13 January 1882, MS 1589/4:9-12 (Mitchell Library).

<sup>4</sup> On the exhibition of the corpses of indigenous people, see Gilman 1985. On the culture of European exhibitions generally, see Altick 1978 and Greenhaugh 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Huxley 1959:9.

distinct 'types' or 'races'. Still more influential was the climate of debate stimulated by ideas of human evolution which, from the 1860s, seemed to many to imbue older concepts of racial difference with a new order of explanatory coherence and power. Arguments both for and against the concept of human speciation - as it was variously interpreted - were generally advanced from the premise that humans were divided into distinct 'types' or 'races'.<sup>6</sup> By virtue of their geographical isolation and supposedly harsh material circumstances, Australian and Tasmanian Aborigines were viewed as arguably the world's most distinct and morphologically unsophisticated races of man. Structured morphological and anatomical examination of 'racially pure' Aboriginal bodies - preferably undertaken in the controlled conditions of the laboratory - was seen as the best means to solve what was widely agreed to be the central problem of science. Clinical typological comparison and classification of 'half-caste' bodies, too, was seen as having an important role in resolving the vexed question of evolution, by disclosing the nature and magnitude of the changes occurring when such a geographically isolated and morphologically 'primitive race' as the Aborigine supposedly bred away from its type.

Nineteenth-century British medical science was characterised by a general lack of sensitivity towards the bodies of the recently deceased. Yet the quest for knowledge of the morphology and anatomical structure of the Aborigine had a particularly dark aspect. The hauls of 'resurrection men' and, after the passing of the 1832 Anatomy Act, the pauper dead of the asylum and the work-house, were of little interest to racial science. European racial character was deemed best determined by examination of remains from barrow burials and the crypts of Britain and Ireland's most ancient churches. Even so, researchers who sought to examine medieval bodies did not always gain community approval.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the logic of racial science demanded the procurement of 'fresh' Aboriginal bodies; it required bodies, or parts of bodies, in a fit condition to allow investigators to satisfy themselves and the scientific community at large as to the certainty of their findings. There was also anxiety whether science could be provided with sufficient Aboriginal bodies of high racial purity to meet its needs. Since at least the 1830s it had been argued in scientific circles that the Aborigines were 'dying out' before the advance of European 'civilisation'; by the late 1860s it was seriously questioned whether, in a generation or so, the Aboriginal race might not be extinct.<sup>8</sup>

The value of the Aboriginal body to science was further enhanced by the immense prestige to be won by contributing to original knowledge in the field of human evolution; and it was this aura of prestige that also led professional scientists, scientific institutions, amateur naturalists and some ordinary colonists, to treat Aborigines as if they were endangered, though crucially important scientific specimens.

It would appear that in writing to the Curator of Australian Museum, Francis Lyons possessed a fair idea that the corpse he had stolen from the Mbabaram had attributes making it a valuable scientific specimen. The corpse's mummification alone made it a rare find; so

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<sup>6</sup> See Odom 1967; Stocking 1968:ch.3; Stepan 1982:85-93.

<sup>7</sup> In October 1876, one William Samuel Symonds informed George Rolleston, the Oxford anatomist, that church restoration work and the quick wit of a friend made it possible for casts to be obtained of the skulls of Baron 'Hugo tertius le Depensere & his Widow, dates 1348 & 1349,' before re-interment. But Symonds was keen to stress: 'PS/ Please say nothing about the said skulls To any one or my friend may get into a scrape. Party feeling is strong - ' Western MS 6119/76 (Wellcome Institute Medical Library).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Report of the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements), 1837. *Imperial Blue Book VII*,425:10-11.

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much so that museum curators would be sorely tempted to outbid each other to acquire. Furthermore, as the 'Blue-Blood' of the corpse could be verified by both native and European testimony, it could be taken as an example of the 'racial type' of the Northern Aborigine. Indeed, the fact that the woman was young and had in all probability died from a bullet meant that the rigours of savage life and old age had not been allowed to distort her anatomical structure. Even if the corpse was found unsuitable for preservation and exhibition intact, dried flesh and muscle preserved a whole skeleton which would prove extremely suitable for articulation and display.

That this is indeed how we might reasonably interpret the letter is firstly suggested by the fact that the Australian Museum's Board of Trustees entered into business-like negotiations with Lyons. On learning that the asking price of the corpse was no less than fifty pounds, they resolved '...to purchase it for a sum of £10 (ten pounds), if delivered in Sydney in good order and condition.' Further examination of the surviving letterbooks of the Museum, and the correspondence of the then Curator, Edward Pierson Ramsay, does not reveal whether the Museum acquired the corpse<sup>9</sup>; but it does suggest that this type of negotiation was not uncommon. Indeed, the only unusual aspect of the negotiations was that Lyons does not appear to have been a regular trader.

During the 1880s and 1890s the Australian Museum encouraged the collection and trade of Aboriginal remains, viewing them as scientifically interesting specimens of natural history. The Museum readily payed freelance collectors for skulls, skeletons and whole bodies after considering the state of their budget and judging the scientific value of the remains on offer; in doing so, they behaved no differently from when assessing the worth of an wallaby corpse or bird-skin. Typical of the regular freelance traders was James Yardley, who supplemented his income in the 1880s by supplying colonial museums and private collectors with natural history specimens ranging from bird skins to Aborigines (it would appear that in the 1880s no-one could make a living solely out of independent collecting).<sup>10</sup> In April 1889, Yardley was in Murwillumbah, where he learnt of an old Aboriginal burial place 'a few miles from here in the mountains'. He wrote to Ramsay that

...the man that is going taking me to look at them is going to get a skeleton from one of the graves to send to someone in Sydney if you was wanting any skeletons or skulls I could get them while we had the tools there.<sup>11</sup>

The following September, however, Yardley wrote to apologise that he had

...not obtained any good skulls or skeletons I have turned up a good few but they have all been too much Decayed it is a very wet place anything a few inches under the soil soon gets water-logged and all of them that are Buried now are put in a hole and covered with soil formerly they made a hole and put

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9 I have not yet been able to determine the subsequent history of these remains. However, the Australian Museum displayed mummified bodies of a woman and a child 'from Cairns' in a wall case during the 1890s, probably collected by Robert Etheridge from the Bellenden Ker region. See *Guide to the contents of the Australian Museum*. Sydney, 1890:144.

10 In 1878 Ramsay advised a would-be Queensland collector of '...the great difficulty you would have in making a living at collecting. in fact *making a living out of it alone* in this country is out of the question.' E.P.Ramsay to Price-Fletcher, 19 February 1878, MS 1589/3:14 (Mitchell Library).

11 J.Yardley to Ramsay, 12 April 1889, MS 1589/6:109 (Mitchell Library).

the corpse in it in a sitting posture and covered it with a sheet of Bark never filling any earth at all.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, Yardley had previous experience of taking bodies from traditional burial grounds.

Another regular collector was William Day, a young Englishman of some education, possibly a medical student, who appears to have partly funded his travels in Australia by collecting a wide variety of natural specimens. Day also collected Aboriginal remains and items of material culture in North Queensland with a view to becoming a professional ethnologist. In 1891, Day lived on the Russell River mining field, to the north of present-day Innisfail. From there he supplied the Australian Museum with swords, shields and the bodily remains of the Bagirgagara rainforest people. In June 1891, he sent Ramsay '...two skulls of Bungee (Russell River) blacks, the last of their tribe as they all got shot', and wished to know 'What is a perfect skeleton worth of a Russell river black?'<sup>13</sup> Day also tried to meet a request for more specimen skulls, even though, as he informed Ramsay in November 1891, getting them was proving extremely hazardous: 'I do not know when I can get you more black curios as the blacks killed a miner and all are on the war path or what ever you call it in Australia'.<sup>14</sup>

When the Museum Trustees could afford to do so, they hired collectors on a contract basis, and instructed them to be especially on the look-out for Aboriginal bodies, without specifying any guidelines of ethical conduct to be observed in obtaining them. In October 1882, Charles Jenkins was instructed by the Trustees to explore a set of caves near Cowra, 'at the same time obtaining as many Skeletons and Skulls of Aborigines as may be found buried near your camp'.<sup>15</sup> Facing the end of a six-month contract and anxious to have it renewed, Jenkins wrote to the Trustees from Yass in December 1882 'offering skeletons of Aborigines with no further expense to the Museum than carriage'.<sup>16</sup> Dissatisfied with Jenkin's overall performance, the Museum refused his offer.

The known correspondence of Edward Ramsay records only one occasion on which a collector hesitated to procure a body. In October 1886, C.J. McMaster wrote to Ramsay from Moree, in north western New South Wales, to say that he had his 'eye upon a number of aboriginal skeletons which I will send you as soon as I can find time to get them.' He had also discovered that 'a very remarkable man' and 'a great warrior in his time' had been buried in the Warialda district cemetery. Rather than try to exhume what was, presumably, a Christian corpse, McMaster thought it best to ask Ramsay 'What steps could I take to get him?'<sup>17</sup>

Far from simply responding to the approaches of freelance collectors, Edward Ramsay and the Trustees of the Australian Museum appear to have played an instrumental role in investing the bodies of Aborigines with value as 'specimens'. In 1887 the Museum published a pamphlet by Ramsay, entitled *Hints for the preservation of specimens of*

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12 Ibid.:174.

13 W.Day to E.P. Ramsay, MS 1589/7:108 (Mitchell Library).

14 Ibid.:194-5,206.

15 C.R.Buckland, to C.Jenkins, 16 October 1882 (copy). Letter Book 7:1882 (Australian Museum Archives).

16 Ibid.

17 C.J.McMaster to Ramsay, MS 1589/5:161-2 (Mitchell Library).

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*natural history*.<sup>18</sup> On the opening page of the work, Ramsay explains that, 'SKELETONS of Aborigines are much wanted, and for the benefit of collectors,' he has 'annexed...a list of the *separate* bones of a complete human skeleton.' Directly following the list comes this advice:

In cases where whole *skeletons* cannot be procured, the *skulls*, along with the lower jaw, will prove of great interest and value. Any apparent malformation or peculiarities in the formation of the cranium of the various tribes should be carefully noted; and all possible information obtained respecting such occurrences, and whether produced by artificial means or otherwise. 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.

Ramsay's *Hints* also give practical advice about preserving freshly killed mammalian specimens. 'The brains of many of our Australian animals', the *Hints* declare, 'are interesting and valuable to naturalists, and should therefore be collected whenever opportunities occur.' To this end, the collector is carefully instructed how to cut the head off an animal, peel away the skin, saw around the skull and prise off the top with a knife. After cutting through the *dura mater* 'over the centre and sides of both hemispheres' the whole head is to be placed 'in strong spirits of wine or other preserving fluid to harden'. After ten hours the *dura mater* is to be removed and the preserving agent allowed to flood the interior cavities and surfaces. When this is done, the top of the skull can be tied back in place, the whole head re-immersed in fluid and the container sealed ready for shipment.

Thus far, Ramsay's instructions seem an illuminating guide as to how collectors of Australian fauna might preserve the brain of a kangaroo or platypus. However, the instructions take on a different implication when they conclude with this brief, italicised note:

*'The brains of Aborigines so prepared would be of great value.'*

Also, on the closing page of Ramsay's *Hints*, appears a list of 'Special desiderata of the Australian Museum'. Heading the list are:

Skins, skulls and skeletons of *Aborigines*, males and females.

*Authentic skulls of Aborigines* from the *graves* of the native of each tribe, also the *whole skeleton* if possible.

Although there is no evidence that specimen brains were in fact made available to science in this way through the Australian Museum, there is evidence of a continuing scientific interest in the subject. When he arrived at Cambridge from Sydney in 1896, Grafton Elliot Smith, the young brain anatomist and later anthropological theorist, wrote to his old teacher, James Thomas Wilson, the Challis Professor of Anatomy at Sydney University:

Among anthropologists over here there is an extreme desire to know something definite of the soft parts of the Australian Aboriginal. A full account of the morphology of even a single individual aboriginal would be welcomed here. Could you get someone to do the work?<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This was the third edition of this slim work; the first edition carries no date; the second is dated 1876. A fourth and final edition of the *Hints* was published in 1890. To date I have only located and cited here the third 1887 edition.

<sup>19</sup> G.Elliot Smith to J.T.Wilson, 18 November 1896, MS 969/35/2 (Sydney University Archives).

In 1903, Elliot Smith, by this time Professor of Anatomy at the Government Medical School in Cairo, questioned Wilson as to whether any studies had been published on Aboriginal brains gathered by Wilson's Sydney colleague and mentor, Anderson Stuart.<sup>20</sup>

It is impossible to gauge how widely Ramsay's *Hints* were used in the field, but the stress laid on the racial pedigree of corpses to be found in the handful of known letters from collectors for the Museum does suggest that the work was read and its prescriptions followed. Further, the Museum's letter books suggest that Ramsay took pains to explain to would-be collectors that the Museum was especially interested in indigenous corpses that had never been buried. In November 1890, he advised one collector:

As regards Skeletons:- we require two (one male, one female) of natives of New Hebrides or other island, as fresh as possible, so that the bones can be whitened. Any history concerning the individuals, their names, tribe, &c will render them more acceptable. If you obtain fresh specimens leave the sinews on the hands and feet to prevent the small bones going astray, and leave the scalp and hair on the head. Good, perfect specimens as above, are worth £10 the pair. If, however, you only get those that are dug up, or otherwise are not in good order, or incomplete, the price will be less - perhaps about £5 the pair - but I cannot quote definitely till I see the specimens.<sup>21</sup>

While Ramsay's personal scientific interests were largely in the fields of ornithology and ichthyology, he aimed during his tenure as curator to make the collections of the Australian Museum outstanding in all fields of natural history. In making Aboriginal bodies 'special desiderata', he aimed especially to create within the Museum a key centre for the study of the physical nature of man. Ramsay cultivated close links with the Anatomy Department at Sydney University, giving James Thomas Wilson free access to all the Museum's human crania. Having cultivated a network of trusted natural history collectors throughout eastern and north west Australia, Ramsay took care to obtain a wide variety of specimens for the research and exhibition purposes of the Museum, and also items that could be traded or strategically presented to institutions and influential scientists throughout Europe and the rest of the British Empire. Ramsay understood Aboriginal bodies to be a desirable commodity in dwindling supply. As he explained regretfully to George Rolleston, of Oxford University's Anatomical Museum, who had approached Ramsay for Aboriginal crania in March 1881:

...we have so few duplicate crania in the Museum, but in a few weeks I hope to be able to advise you respecting them. Nearly all of the N.S.W. Aborigines are gone, and the skulls are so much sought after by collectors that it is, even now, very difficult to obtain good specimens.<sup>22</sup>

With 'all the native races' believed to be 'fast dying off the face of the Earth', the bodies of Aborigines served Ramsay as a unique and persuasive currency, to obtain rare specimens of fauna from other parts of the globe, and also to procure 'specimens' of other 'dying' races.

Trading of Aboriginal crania with the Auckland Museum appears to have commenced in 1878.<sup>23</sup> In 1882 Ramsay wrote to James Hector, the Director of the Colonial Museum

20 Elliot-Smith to Wilson, 18 November 1896, MS 969/35/3 (Sydney University Archives).

21 Ramsay to H. Parkinson, 12 November 1890 (copy). Letter Book 13:1890 (Australian Museum Archives).

22 Ramsay to Rolleston, March 1881, Rolleston Papers (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

23 See T.F.Cheeseman to Ramsay, 9 July 1878, MS 1589/3:63 (Mitchell Library).

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of New Zealand, that he was glad to be able to meet a request for specimen crustacea, adding,

With respect to the skulls I shall be glad to have authentic '*Mori*' and can send a few Australian exchange. 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 & skeletons.<sup>24</sup>

When Ramsay was unable to get specimens for the Australian Museum through exchange with other scientific institutions, he occasionally turned to a world-wide network of commercial dealers in natural science. Based near the large universities and museums of Britain and North America, the private dealers were generally small firms catering for schools, Mechanics Institutes and the many thousands of middle-class amateur natural historians. Many advertised their wares through popular scientific magazines and the great exhibitions which were so much a part of urban life in late nineteenth-century Britain, North America and the Australasian colonies. Astute dealers were always on the look-out for specimens likely to tempt a curator; and it was not unknown for them to inflate the price of 'desiderata' by playing ambitious curators off against each other.

One such dealer with whom the Australian Museum held an account in the early 1880s was Henry Ward, of Ward and Howell's Natural Science Establishment, based opposite the University of Rochester, New York.<sup>25</sup> It was through Ward that Ramsay was able to obtain skeletons, 'beautifully white and nicely mounted', of a variety of North American mammals. Ramsay in turn appears to have been ready to sell 'duplicate zoological and geological material' to Ward.<sup>26</sup> There is no evidence that Ramsay sold Aboriginal remains to Ward, but the dealer was actively engaged, as his letter-head reveals, in trading not only the skins and skeletons of animals, but also 'Anatomical Models, Human Skeletons, Skulls and Skeletons of the Races, etc.'

Ramsay also used Aboriginal bodies to bring himself and the endeavours of the Australian Museum to the attention of influential scientists throughout Europe. Between 1883 and 1892, he supplied a variety of zoological specimens and ethnological artefacts to Enrico Hillyer Giglioli, Curator of the Zoological and Vertebrate Museum at Florence's Institute for Higher Study. In September 1883, Giglioli informed Ramsay that a collection of

... spears arrived all safe, but not in time to be shown yet. I will exhibit them and propose your nomination as Corr. Hon. Memb. of the Anthropological Society at our Next meeting.

I hope that you will be able to send to this Museum the Dugongs, Sphergis, Mammals, *Fish* and Birds agreed to. I shall not forget in that case my promise and see that the Government here send you a token of their esteem.<sup>27</sup>

In October 1883, Giglioli wrote again to Ramsay, asking him not to delay in sending a large and showy collection on which I may enlarge in my report to our Minister of Public Instruction, who may very probably inspect what you send

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24 Photocopy of Ramsay to J.Hector, 28 August 1882 (original National Museum of New Zealand Archives). My thanks to Henry Reynolds for this reference.

25 See Ward 1948.

26 H.A.Ward to Ramsay, 8 May 1881, MS 1589/3:341-2 (Mitchell Library).

27 Giglioli to Ramsay, 18 September 1883, MS 1589/4:236.

as he often comes to Florence, that will ensure you the distinction of Knighthood from our King.<sup>28</sup>

Giglioli informed Ramsay in March 1884 that he had spoken with the Minister of Public instruction and hoped 'ere long to see him knighted.' However, in the meantime, Giglioli continued, he would be especially obliged if Ramsay could supply the following items ...some of the large New Guinea or Solomon Island mounted *Adzes, clubs, &c* also shell stone (obsidian) spears and daggers from the Admiralty islands; also any of the Australian stone implements. I should also like to have the Tasmanian [skull] casts and Australian Aborigines 2 Fiji skulls which you had written to have sent on to me as far back as April 1881 per S.S. *Cotopaxi* (but never left Sydney and certainly never reached me).<sup>29</sup>

In the late nineteenth-century, scientific discourse invested the body of the Aborigine with meanings that we would now generally agree hid some crucial distinctions. What human attributes late nineteenth-century Europeans were prepared to give Aborigines, racial science placed beyond the realm of significance; they became rare specimens of natural history. Aborigines' 'qualities' as 'specimens' further took on precise monetary values; a Bower-Bird skin in good condition was worth five shillings; a 'racially pure' Aboriginal skull complete with jaw was worth seven shillings and sixpence. A collector could write regretting that he had no bodies to offer, while adding that he was nonetheless forwarding some rare Trap-Door Spiders' nests to the Museum. The bodies of Aborigines also assumed value in terms of their potential to enhance an individual scientific reputation; they could even earn a scientist a knighthood.

However, it could be argued that Ramsay and the Trustees of the Australian Museum understood themselves to be acting out of scientific and thus, ultimately, moral necessity. Ramsay, for example, was like many late Victorian scientists in that he blended belief in racial difference and speciation with agnosticism. While quick to endorse received opinion as to what constituted moral impropriety or illegality, Ramsay seems to have viewed science as offering a surer future footing to law and morality than contemporary Christianity. In view of the wide acceptance of the belief that, as a race, the Aborigines were fast approaching extinction, Ramsay might well have viewed the procurement of Aboriginal bodies exhumed from traditional burial grounds, or obtained in the wake of 'dispersals' by Native Police troops or settlers, as ultimately for the moral good. Though the Aboriginal race could not be saved, scientific preservation of their bodily remains might answer important scientific questions and thus contribute far more to the future happiness of all humanity than had established religion.

That was certainly how Ramsay's colleague, the anatomist James Wilson justified procuring a skeleton in 1892. Sometime in 1889, a Chinese man died in the Prince Alfred Hospital. In his capacity as pathologist to the hospital, and a member of the management committee of Sydney University's Anatomical Museum, Wilson had the body taken to the hospital's post-mortem room, where the man's skeleton was removed.

After removal of the bones the body was carefully arranged, and so treated that the friends were afterwards permitted to view the body in the coffin before it was screwed down (the face had been carefully left intact).<sup>30</sup>

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28 Ibid.:253.

29 Ibid.:330-1.

30 J.T.Wilson to Registrar, Sydney University, 8 April 1892, MS G.63/1 (Sydney University Archives).

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At the Museum the skeleton was whitened, articulated and exhibited as illustrative of the skeletal structure of the Asiatic race.

Wilson's action became public knowledge, and the University Senate was sufficiently disturbed to request him to explain the affair. Under the New South Wales Anatomy Act of 1881, it was unlawful for Wilson to take the skeleton. It was also unlawful to anatomise the body if the deceased had left written instructions, or told two or more witnesses during their last illness, that they did not want their corpse to be dissected. Kin of the deceased also could direct that the body be interred without interference. In his reply to the University Senate, Wilson made no claim of having complied with the provisions of the Act. Rather, he stressed that he was allowed to take the skeleton by hospital rules, which entitled the pathologist to obtain specimens of value for the University Museum, arguing that

It is the invariable practice in all scientific and properly equipped medical schools in the world to secure material in this way for Anatomical Museums and the latter would practically cease to exist were liberty restricted in this respect.<sup>31</sup>

Wilson ended his defence by stressing that in his work he had 'always taken extreme precautions against publicity and consequent scandal', and that the account of the circumstances in which this particular skeleton had been procured came from a disgruntled ex-porter at the hospital. The Senate appears to have been satisfied with Wilson's account of the affair and no further action was taken.

Those who administered the law in late nineteenth-century Australia also appear likely to have condoned the erosion of key legal concepts by science, believing the consequent provision of knowledge as likely to serve a higher moral good. While it was not until 1908 that the legality of possessing an unburied body was considered by the High Court of Australia, the views expressed at that time were probably no different from those which would have held sway during the preceding half-century. In the 1908 case, concerning the legality of a showman possessing a preserved deformed (non-Aboriginal) foetus, Griffith, the Chief Justice, held that

It is idle to contend in these days that the possession of a mummy, or a prepared skeleton, or of a skull, or other parts of a human body, is necessarily unlawful; if it is, the many valuable collections of anatomical and pathological specimens or preparations formed and maintained by scientific bodies, were formed and are maintained in violation of the law.<sup>32</sup>

Justice Barton upheld the traditional position that no-one had a right to possess a dead body, or what had once been part of a dead body, and that the only right course of action was to give the remains a decent burial. To his mind, the central question was whether a foetus was ever a body and could thus become a corpse. The third and final opinion was given by Higgins, who held that to recognise the right of possession of a corpse would create a situation in which there would be nothing 'to hinder anyone from snatching the corpse of some eminent man, such as Napoleon, and keeping it in a bottle, or using it for degrading purposes'. However, while acknowledging that bodies were being bought and sold, and quite illegally obtained from dissection rooms, Higgins conceded

...that sundry contraventions of the strict law as to dead bodies are winked at in the interests of medical science, and also for the practical reasons that no one is interested in putting the law in motion.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> *Commonwealth Law Reports* 1909: 413.

Further, he was of the opinion that mere possession of a corpse was probably not unlawful; there was just no right of property that could be maintained against someone who took the corpse with a view to burying it.

Legal action was unlikely to be taken against those who took, sold or preserved Aboriginal remains, unless in doing so they acted in ways that, to European eyes, threatened public health or offended public decency. To take the body of someone who had died violently prevented the holding of a coronial inquiry and was thus a serious offence. But the offence was likely to be ignored, when the body in question was Aboriginal and the death occurred in a frontier district, where those charged with upholding the law generally condoned the killing of Aborigines. Obviously, Aborigines were in no position to use the established framework of law to take back and bury their own; and even if they did understand that this was their right in British law, neither they nor any sympathetic European were likely to gain justice when law so readily deferred to science.

But if men like Ramsay and Wilson did act in the belief that the scientific knowledge to be gained from procuring and examining Aboriginal bodies would increase the happiness of the descendants of the Aborigines, then the best that can be said is that they underscore the value of recent comments by the literary critic, Terry Goldie. In appraising the image of the indigene in Canadian, Australian and New Zealand literatures, Goldie likens the discursive field governing literary representation of the indigene to a chessboard: the discourse of British imperialism governs an economy of knowledge in which indigene 'pawns' are moved by white signmakers in a given number of ways. Further, Goldie writes,

A variety of factors are involved in incorporating the indigene for the page but still more are added when the genre requires that the indigene be corporally present, in the theatre. There must be presence in the theatre, although the presence is that of the actors and not of the author. If the pawn is played by a white actor in disguise, signifying processes are at play similar to those in the novel but if an indigenous actor is used the cross-cultural leap in which the white author creates the lines and context for the indigene's speech might seem a beneficial erasing of boundaries. It might also be considered a means of hiding some very necessary distinctions.<sup>33</sup>

Besides being a major element of the field in which literary images of the Aborigine functioned in late nineteenth-century Australia, racial science directly created its own 'lines and contexts'; in the Museum and the Anatomy theatre 'some very necessary distinctions were hidden.' In hindsight, we can see that men like Ramsay and Wilson acted in the name of scientific progress in ways that in fact helped marginalise what slender grounds there were in late nineteenth-century Australia for European recognition of Aborigines' human rights. They were blind to the cruelty inflicted on Aborigines by the desecration of graves and the stealing away of the bodies of those murdered in 'dispersals'. They were unmoved to comment on the work of more traditionally minded colonists, who were working to expose the 'sickening and brutal war of races ... carried on in our outside settlements, especially those in the North'.<sup>34</sup> In the quest for scientific knowledge, Ramsay could even go as far as to cynically view the outrages of the North Queensland frontier as a 'Black Game' shoot.

There is, moreover, a danger in our simply assuming that Ramsay and the Trustees of the Australian Museum were cognitive prisoners of the racial assumptions of their day. Trading in Aboriginal remains gradually expired through the first decades of the twentieth-century as the paradigm of racial science that had fostered the trade since the 1860s waned.

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33 Goldie 1989:17.

34 *Queenslander* 1880:3.

## RAMSAY'S REGIME

Looking back in old age on his 1910-11 trip to western Australia, the Cambridge biologist E.L. Grant-Watson, recalled that 'the conscience of the white community was waking to the fact that, the natives, had, in the past been badly treated,' Grant-Watson thus thought it wise to get the remains of two Aboriginal bodies he had secretly exhumed back to England by packing them 'carefully in a strong wooden case, labelled 'Geological Specimens'

...and with the connivance of a young man, lately engaged as secretary to a Very Important Person, we smuggled them through in the luggage of the V.I.P. What was not known was not grieved over.<sup>35</sup>

However, the perspective from which we now view and regret the young Grant-Watson's body-snatching does not of itself guarantee that the production of knowledge in our own time and cultural space will be judged, in retrospect, free from cruelty. Indeed, one aspect of the current controversy over the return of Aboriginal remains held in scientific institutions has come uncomfortably close to illustrating as much. This is the initial stance taken by several European scientific institutions in the face of Aboriginal pressure for the repatriation of modern remains. Whereas there is a reasonably strong case on both scientific and ethical grounds for the preservation of ancient remains - dating in some instances to before 30,000 BP - Australian, and some European scientific institutions, have agreed with Aborigines that there are no, or at best slim, grounds for keeping the remains of individuals who died within the last 3000 years or so.<sup>36</sup> Even so, some European institutions possessing remains whose actual identity or community can be established have resisted speaking with Aboriginal delegations. They have chosen to argue publicly that modern remains in their collection were legitimately obtained, and still had scientific value. But they refused to say exactly how the remains were obtained, or explain how they remain scientifically valuable. It has been left for Aboriginal spokespersons to spend time and scarce funds on swaying public opinion to the point that scientific need has come to be judged against extra-scientific, ethical criteria.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Grant-Watson 1968:70.

<sup>36</sup> See Goldsworthy 1990. The fate of ancient remains is a complex and tragically politicised issue. European science represents Australia's Aborigines as the genetic and cultural descendants of late pleistocene colonists who arrived on the Australian land mass around 40,000 years ago, or possibly a people whose ancestors include earlier migrants. Some scientists leave open the question whether Australasia was in fact a specialised site of human evolution. Aboriginal spokespersons reject these assumptions: they say they have been of the land that Europeans call Australia since its creation by ancestral spirits. They reject the claim that the remains of their ancient ancestors are the heritage of all humanity and should be made freely available for scientific study. They do so mindful of past dehumanisation and objectification by European scientific discourse. In a forthcoming paper I try to disclose something of the broad cultural contours to the current controversy over ancient Aboriginal remains. I suggest that the controversy cannot be resolved easily, as argument to date has necessarily been framed by the participants as critique and counter-critique of two very differently constituted bodies of knowledge. At heart these two bodies of knowledge construe history and the ultimate meanings of life in incommensurate ways. Nonetheless, this does not preclude the possibility of scientific investigation of Aboriginal remains continuing in ethically responsible and useful ways. On this score see Colin Pardoe's valuable, 'The eye of the storm: the study of Aboriginal remains in Australia' (in press: *Journal of Indigenous Studies*).

<sup>37</sup> To give two examples: the Anatomy Department of the University of Edinburgh initially refused to speak with Aborigines, amongst whom was Monty Prior, a well-respected

Not only does the initial reaction of such institutions call to mind the objectification and dehumanisation of the Aborigine in past scientific discourse, in the late twentieth-century intellectual context it seems bad science. In recent times, the research generated within various disciplines of the natural and human sciences which has contributed most to explaining the sophistication and complexity of non-European societies has been that which listened to indigenous peoples. Listening has led many researchers to take care to ensure that neither the methods governing their particular discipline, nor the cultural concerns of the broader community they work within, are allowed to shape unduly their perceptions of what their science can claim to have established. In this way it has actually helped science be more impartial and objective. Moreover, in part due to indigenous critiques of western knowledge, the question is now often heard across the disciplinary spectrum of the sciences whether, since the seventeenth-century, European science has been seriously weakened by operating on the assumption that it is possible to slough away contingencies of time and cultural space, to reveal some essential nature or essence of humanity for impartial, 'scientific' study.<sup>38</sup>

Given what we now know about how museum curators like Edward Ramsay fostered the procurement of Aboriginal dead for the advance of racial science, it would seem worthwhile taking time to reflect carefully on why Aborigines think it so important to have these remains returned. The ways in which Europeans of Ramsay's time understood and acquired bodies underscores the fact that science is never neutral; it has made decisions and sanctioned developments which impact on all facets of our lives; and yet too often dissent easily meets the blunt response that science knows best. By seeking critically to evaluate the worth of European science and technology against other human considerations - as Aborigines have challenged us to do by their campaigns for the return of remains - we are offered dialogue that might be difficult, but could greatly enrich the quality of both cultures.

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North Queensland Elder and Deacon in the Roman Catholic Church, who had travelled to Scotland in 1989 on behalf of several Northern communities. The Anatomy Department argued that the remains were of crucial value to physical anthropology, but would not say in what respect. In the wake of student and staff pressure in 1989 the University Senate agreed to discuss the ethics of keeping Aboriginal remains and decided to return them. A small collection of Tasmanian remains were returned early in 1991; over 250 Australian relics are to be returned by Autumn 1991. Several authorities in the field of physical anthropology have condemned this decision. In Paris, the Musée de l'Homme has refused to discuss the repatriation of a much smaller collection of modern Aboriginal remains. Again Aboriginal delegations have been told bluntly that these remains are being kept for some unspecified scientific good. The matter looks likely to be brought before European Human Rights Authorities in the near future. See Mansell 1991.

38 The history of dissatisfaction with essentialist theories of humanity is complex; the philosophical grounds of dissent are best put by Rorty 1979 and Taylor 1982:15-57. See also Feyerabend 1987:ch.3.

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