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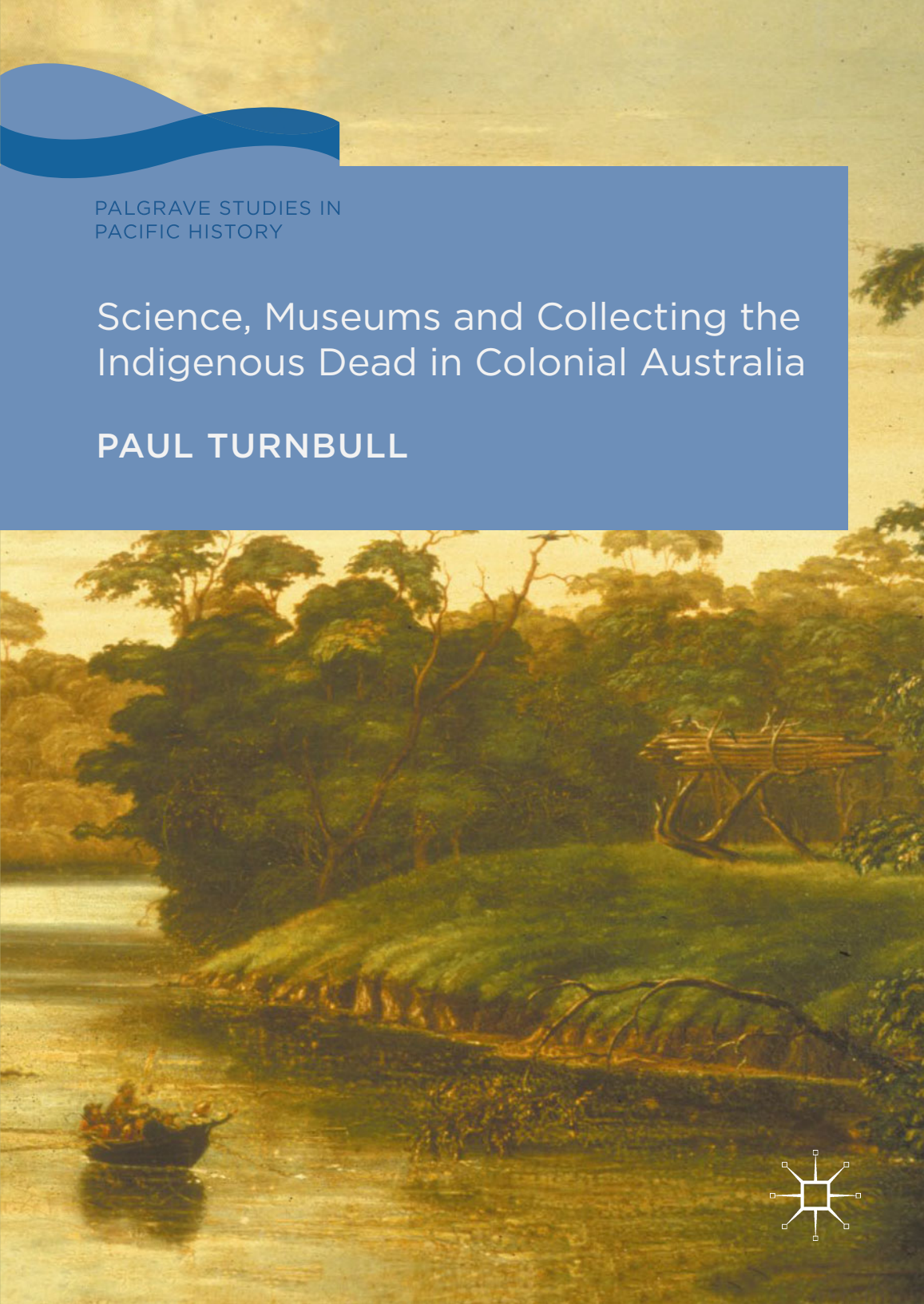
Science, Museums and Collecting the Indigenous Dead in Colonial Australia

PAUL TURNBULL



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Palgrave Studies in Pacific History
ISBN 978-3-319-51873-2 ISBN 978-3-319-51874-9 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-51874-9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017944608

Cover credit: Graham Gore, Burial Reach, Flinders River, Queensland, 1841, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-134323016

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

The original version of the book was revised: Author affiliation has been updated. The erratum to the book is available at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-51874-9_14

Acknowledgements

This book has been longer in the making than is comfortable to admit. My serving in various administrative roles through difficult times in the academy has stolen time. So too has my love of teaching and using digital technologies to share the outcomes of historical research with the wider public. But there has also been my inability to resist opening just one more bundle of forgotten documents in the hope of discovering the community of origin, or perhaps the identity of another Old Person—as my Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islander friends and colleagues respectfully call those among their ancestors whose mortal remains are now being returning to their care for burial in country by museums and other scientific institutions. As it is, this book is a pared-down version of a manuscript that would have continued to grow had colleagues and friends not finally persuaded me to call a halt.

My intellectual debts are too many to adequately acknowledge all who have contributed to the research on which this book draws. However, there are some who must be thanked.

As a Harold White Fellow at the National Library of Australia in 1994, I enjoyed the incredible privilege of being allowed freely to explore the library's stacks. My discoveries during that fellowship have been the source of many fruitful lines of inquiry since. I particularly want to thank Margy Burn, Jan Fullerton, Michelle and Paul Hetherington, Graeme Powell and, of course, the legendary Bill Tully for their assistance and support.

The years 1999–2001 were spent at the Centre for Cross-cultural Research at the Australian National University, where I was tasked with developing new web-based modes of communicating scholarly research. I was nonetheless able to find some time to continue the research on which this book draws, and was encouraged to do so by Bronwen Douglas, a colleague who shares my interests in racial science and has been ever ready to give valuable advice when it was most needed. My thanks to Bronwen for many a stimulating conversation and our continuing friendship. I must also thank Kirsty Douglas, Tom Griffiths, Rebe Taylor and Pat Jalland, who during my time at ANU provided me with perspectives on shared historical interests which I would not have gained otherwise.

A guest professorship in the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna in 2013 provided an opportunity to begin exploring the interests of German-speaking medico-scientific communities in the bodies of Australian and other indigenous peoples, which hopefully will be the focus of a study of the development of physical anthropology during the long nineteenth century. My thanks especially to Dr. Gabriele Weichart and Prof. Hermann Mückler for their generosity in sharing ideas, giving me fresh interdisciplinary perspectives on Australian anthropology. I also want to thank the students of my Vienna seminar on the history of Australian anthropology. They have helped me understand key aspects of settler colonialism with greater clarity than I could have managed alone.

The award in 2015 of a Fellowship by the Morphomata Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Cologne provided time for reflection and writing when it was most needed. The Centre's weekly seminars and conversations with colleagues provided rich food for thought about the connections between nineteenth century imaginings of indigeneity and the figuration of humanity's deep past. I am enormously grateful to Professors Dietrich Boschung and Günter Blamberger for making my time in Cologne so intellectually rewarding.

I have debts to many colleagues. My thanks go especially to Paul Lawrence Rose, who first stimulated my interest in racial science. And Henry Reynolds, who persuaded me that there much yet to learn about anthropological collecting in colonial Australia during the long nineteenth century. Over many years, Russell McGregor and Cressida Fforde have been unfailing in their friendship, intellectual generosity and shared commitment to understanding our colonial past. I also owe much to

Jonathan Richards, whose unrivalled knowledge of Queensland frontier history has provided answers to many questions that I would never have otherwise found. Geoff Gray and Christine Winter have taught me much about the conceptual development of anthropology in Oceania; and I must thank Michael Pickering for his enriching my thinking about museums past and present.

My thanks also to Amber Aranui, Michael Aird, Michaela Appel, Bruce Buchan, Renfrew Christie, Peter Cryle, Kay Ferres, Mark Finnane, Larissa Förster, Steve Hemming, Mark Kornbluh, Gareth Knapman, Gavan McCarthy, Clive Moore, Michael Powell, Ciraj Rassool, Michael Richards, Alex Roginski, Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, Paul Tapsell, Chris Wilson and Andreas Winkelmann. What wonderfully supportive colleagues and friends!

I must also acknowledge the Community Reference Groups of the Museums of Queensland and Victoria for kindly granting me access to documents held in both institutions.

My greatest debts are, of course, to my family: Pamela, Hugh and Tim for their unfailing love, understanding and support; my father Bill and dear siblings, Martin and Linda; and Gabriele, whose love and intellectual companionship do ever inspire and delight.

Several chapters of this book incorporate revised extracts from writings that have appeared elsewhere:

'"Outlawed Subjects": The procurement and Scientific Uses of Australian Aboriginal Heads, ca. 1803–1835', *Eighteenth Century Life*, 22 (1), 1998: 156–171. With permission, Duke University Press.

'Enlightenment Anthropology and the Ancestral Remains of Australian Aboriginal People', in Alex Calder et al., eds., *Voyages and Beaches: Pacific Encounters, 1769–1840* (202–225). University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1999. With permission of the Press.

'Rare Work for the Professors: The Entanglement of Aboriginal Remains in Phrenological Knowledge in Early Colonial Australia', in Jeanette Hoorn and Barbara Creed, eds., *Body Trade: Cannibalism, Captivity and Colonialism in the Pacific* (3–23). Routledge, New York, 2002. Reproduced by permission of Taylor and Francis Group, LLC, a division of Informa, plc.

'Indigenous Australian People, Their Defence of the Dead and Native Title', in Cressida Fforde, Jane Hubert and Paul Turnbull, eds., *The Dead and Their Possessions: Repatriation in Principle, Policy and Practice* (63–86). Routledge, London, 2002. With permission from Taylor & Francis.

'British Anatomists, Phrenologists and the Construction of the Aboriginal Race, c.1790–1830', in *History Compass*, Wiley and Sons, 2006: DOI: 10.1111/j.1478-0542.2006.00367.x.

'British Anthropological Thought in Colonial Practice: The Appropriation of Indigenous Australian Bodies, 1860–1880', in Bronwen Douglas and Chris Ballard, Eds., *Foreign Bodies: Oceania and the Science of Race 1750–1940* (205–228). ANU Press, Canberra, 2008.

'A Judicious Collector: Edward Stirling and the Evolutionary Genealogy of Aboriginality', in Sarah Ferber and Sally Wild, eds., *The Body Divided: Human Beings and Human Material in the History of the Medical Sciences* (180–203). Routledge, London, 2012. With permission from Taylor and Francis.

Research in museum and government archives in Australia and Britain on which this book draws was made possible by periods of study leave granted by James Cook University and Griffith University. Some recent findings that have made their way into this book were made possible by funding from the Australian Research Council through its Linkage Scheme (LP130100131: Return, Reconcile, Renew: Understanding the History, Effects and Opportunities of Repatriation).

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: 'To What Strange Uses'

White man took their bones.
Played around with them and brought them back.
Now we will bury them.
Home.
What is the message?
We put them home
—Jacob Nayinggu, Bininj Elder, 2011
(Thomas 2015, 163).

The large shelf was drawn out to reveal a glass display case trimmed with Australian hardwood. In the case lay a body carefully prepared for burial. I was with Dr. Michaela Appel, the curator of Oceanic ethnology at Munich's Five Continents Museum. We had gone to see the body, kept in one of the museum's storerooms, which the Australian Government had requested the state of Bavaria to release to the care of the National Museum of Australia, in the hope that further research might identify the man's community of origin and enable his reburial in his ancestral country.

We viewed the body to compare it with the description of one similarly prepared for burial that I had found in newspapers of the early 1880s. This latter body had been offered for sale by one Ludwig Bruck, a German-born Sydney-based dealer in homeopathic medicines, who also bought and sold natural history specimens and Indigenous Australian artefacts. I knew that this body had been taken in 1876 by a European survey party

P. Turnbull, *Science, Museums and Collecting the Indigenous Dead in Colonial Australia*, Palgrave Studies in Pacific History,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-51874-9_1

from a clearing within dense rainforest some twenty or so kilometres to the northeast of the present-day Far North Queensland city of Cairns; it was one of two in the process of being prepared for burial when the party found it. Several years later the body was exhibited in Sydney and Melbourne, after which Ludwig Bruck was commissioned by one of the party who had carried it away to sell it to an Australian or European museum. Too high a price was put on the body, the seller had got into financial difficulties, and Bruck claimed the remains in lieu of his commission. This was not a wholly unusual occurrence, incidentally: Tambo, a Manbara man from Palm Island, whose reburial I was invited to attend in 1994 by Walter Palm Island, his direct descendant, had died 110 years before while touring the dime-show circuit in the United States with a group of men and women from Far North Queensland billed as 'Cannibal Boomerang Throwers'. His body had been kept by an undertaker in Cleveland, Ohio, when the entrepreneur who arranged the tour could not afford the embalming bill (Palm Island 2002; Poignant 1997).

Michaela Appel strongly suspected that the man whose body had come to Munich was from Far North Queensland, and had probably died sometime in the 1870s or early 1880s. She knew that the body had been acquired by Maximilian Buchner (1846–1912), the director of Munich's ethnology museum from 1887 to 1907. She had also found out that Ludwig Bruck had given the man's remains to Buchner when he visited Sydney in 1884, and that Buchner had thanked Bruck for generously giving the museum so rare and anthropologically interesting a relic by nominating him as a corresponding member of the Royal Bavarian Academy of Sciences. However, Michaela had not yet discovered how Bruck had come by the body. Comparing the body with our respective research findings, we were able to confirm that it was indeed that taken from rainforest in the Cairns region in 1876. As the Bavarian State was willing to allow the body to be repatriated, the Australian Government's International Repatriation Program could now seek advice from Elders of the region's traditional owners about arranging for the man's eventual return for the burial in ancestral country that he had been denied.

Few weeks have gone by over the past three decades without similar instances where museum curators, biological anthropologists and historians—working in collaboration with ancestral communities—have sought to establish the origins of Indigenous Australian skulls and skeletal remains lying in scientific collections throughout the world. Within

the next ten years the bones of around 6,000 Indigenous Australians will have been returned from Australian and overseas museums and other scientific institutions to the care of communities with whom they have kin or clear cultural ties. Of these, the bones of probably around 1,500 people will have been surrendered by British, continental European and North American museums and medical schools. Most of these relics came into scientific hands between 1860 and the early 1920s. This was due to the importance that they were then thought to have as sources of insight into humankind's evolutionary genealogy. Some, however, have lain in museum collections for as long as two hundred years, having been acquired in the pursuit of other, earlier avenues of scientific curiosity.

Once returned to community care, the remains will be reburied in ancestral country at a time and place in accordance with customary law, but only after careful reflection on what museum and other historical records disclose about the circumstances in which they were acquired. Where there is uncertainty about where the dead should be reburied, they may be placed in secure keeping places on ancestral land, or trusted to the care of Australia's national museum. As for those remains about which nothing is known beyond what forensic analysis confirms as a high probability of Indigenous ancestry, they may be, at some future time, should there be the political will, placed in a specially built national keeping place.

Two questions much asked in recent times are how and why should it be that natural history museums and medical schools in Australia, Britain and continental Europe amassed collections of skulls, but also other skeletal structures and, in several instances, soft organs and even genitalia of Australia's first peoples. This book attempts to answer these and related questions. It explores in contextual detail the collecting and scientific analysis of the bodily remains of Indigenous Australians from the early years of British settlement of the continent to the late 1920s, by which time interest in comparative morphological studies of the Indigenous dead had waned in favour of anthropometric and blood-based genealogical research on their living descendants. The idea for this book was born out of curiosity as to why Indigenous Australian bodily remains became the focus of European scientific interest and how they were acquired; but the book also reflects my concern to offer a more historically contextualised account of the motivation for collecting and studying these relics than that which, since the 1980s, has figured prominently in media coverage of the efforts of Indigenous people to gain

their ancestors' remains, and the responses of scientists and museum curators who have opposed their repatriation.

To explain by way of historical illustration: one of the stimuli for my embarking on this research was finding a letter by Archibald Meston (1851–1924) in the papers of Edward Pierson Ramsay (1842–1916), the first Australian-born curator of Sydney's Australian Museum, the oldest and at that time the largest museum in Britain's antipodean settler colonies. Meston was a man of many parts: journalist, entrepreneur, politician, amateur ethnographer, and one of the architects of Queensland's notorious 'Aboriginal protection' regime established in 1898. In 1887, he managed a sugar plantation on the coastal plains of the Barron River in Far North Queensland, not far from where the ritually prepared body that Maximilian Buchner secured in Sydney for Munich's ethnology museum was stolen. In March that year, Meston received a letter from Ramsay asking for his help in obtaining skeletal remains of the traditional owners of Far North Queensland's coastal rainforests. Meston ebulliently responded, 'Re: skulls and skeletons of the festive myall! To what strange uses are our noble primeval inhabitants to be put' (Meston 1887).

This was typical of Meston, whose outlandish rhetoric was the hallmark of his journalism and political oratory. Ramsay had come to know him through newspaper articles wherein Meston had written of his encounters with Far North Queensland's 'festive myalls'—the term *myalls* was settler slang for Indigenous people still living traditionally and thus, in European eyes, given to wild and unpredictably violent behaviour. Rarely would Meston let slip an opportunity to boast of having unrivalled firsthand knowledge of the language and lifeways of the Indigenous peoples of northern Queensland. Confident of his expertise, he had little interest in contemporary anthropological scholarship (Thorpe 1984). Even so, he was sufficiently well-read in contemporary anthropology to see nothing strange in Ramsay's eagerness to secure the skulls and skeletons of northern Australia's first peoples. He had a reasonably well informed understanding of the scientific uses to which these bones were likely to be put.

Since gaining the resources to campaign for the return of ancestral remains in the mid-1970s, Indigenous Australians have condemned the collecting and scientific investigation of their Old People, as they as they respectfully call these relics, believing in the continuing presence of the spirits of those whose bones they once were. Oftentimes they have

maintained that their Old Peoples' bones were taken because European scientists wanted to fabricate proof of their biological inferiority, thus providing pseudo-scientific grounds on which to justifying the violent conquest of their ancestral lands and the removal of those who survived dispossession to reserves and mission stations, where they struggled to resist white efforts to suppress their language, lifeways and culture (FAIRA 1989).

Securing the return of the dead has been a difficult and stressful spiritual burden, falling especially on senior men and women who are obligated to ensure that the dead are reburied as their customary law and cultural traditions demand. They believe that unless the dead are laid to rest in the right place in the traditional country of their ancestors, with the correct ceremonies and rituals, they will wander in torment. In many communities, the removal of remains is thought to have contributed to the spiritual and environmental degradation and suffering of the country in which they were originally buried. As the late Tom Treverrow, Elder of the Ngarrindjeri people, observed when reburying the bones of his ancestors returned from the Anatomy Department of the University of Edinburgh,

> all those Old People and the people we got here, [they are] all our family. We know where they were taken from, illegally taken from their burial grounds: their resting places and we know that they are our ancestors, we are connected to them … We know that their spirit has been at unrest. We believe that the things that happen around us—our lands and waters—is all connected. It's part of it, and what's happening here is part of the healing process, when we bring our Old People home. (Hemming and Wilson 2010, p. 183)

Indigenous Australians speak of repatriation rather than of the return of the bones or remains of their ancestors: they believe that the spirits as well as the bones of their Old People are making the journey home to the care of the land.

It is not hard to understand why many Indigenous people should think that the collecting of remains was motivated by the same aggressive colonialist ambitions that saw them violently dispossessed of their land and its sustenance of their traditional way of life. Reburying the remains of their ancestors is an obligation for communities for whom the psychic and material legacies of colonial oppression have yet to be overcome.

Many of the men and women who have been involved in repatriation since the late 1970s were deeply affected by successive generations of children being forcibly removed from their parents. No small number was among those who suffered physical and mental abuse in state or church run institutions. Continuities are easily drawn between the fate of these children and the remains of the Old People they now reclaim, who were 'torn from their country and resting places in much the same way as Indigenous children were stolen from their families' (Hemming and Wilson 2010).

What has also disposed many of those involved in repatriation to charge science with having served colonialist ambitions has been media commentary suggesting that Indigenous Australians have exploited the presence of remains in scientific collections for political ends. Stuart Piggott (1910–1996), the eminent British archaeologist, for example, wrote to London's *Times* newspaper in 1990 decrying the Yorta Yorta people's demand for the reburial of ancient remains from Kow Swamp in northern Victoria as emotion mixed with political objectives (Piggott 1990). The following year, Sydney's *Bulletin* magazine reported the eminent Australian prehistorian, John Mulvaney (1925–2016), warning that favouring 'strident claims by radical Aboriginal leaders' for the return of remains risked the wrongs of the colonial past being replaced by a 'black intellectual totalitarianism' (Monaghan 1991). Similarly, in refusing to consider repatriation claims, Robert Foley, the director of the Leverhulme Centre for Human Evolutionary Studies at Cambridge University, warned readers of the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 2004 that Australian remains were 'global human heritage, not the preserve of any one culture', and asked, '[Would] future generations of Western and Aboriginal cultures be more grateful that the past was preserved rather than lost or intentionally destroyed because of current political fashion?' (Fray 2003).

Until the early 1990s, communities seeking the return of their dead also encountered unsympathetic museum personnel. As Michael Pickering and Phil Gordon, two museum professionals long involved in repatriation processes, have pointed out,

> there was majority opposition by heritage professionals, many of whom worked in, or were associated with, Australian museums. They believed that repatriation was the wrong thing to do. Any repatriation was considered to be a surrender to Indigenous political activism. (2011)

It continues to be alleged that Indigenous Australians had no interest in securing the return of remains before in the late 1970s Native Americans began to demand that museums and universities surrender remains and grave goods for reburial, thereby generating public interest in and wider support for their efforts to regain ownership of tribal lands (Jenkins 2016, p. 312). In short, Indigenous campaigning for the return of their dead has commonly been portrayed by opponents of repatriation as orchestrated by a handful of activists in radical Indigenous organisations for whom it has been a means of gaining support for their demands for recognition of their rights to land within the wider Australian community. Repatriation has been represented as more informed by the politics of decolonisation than by any abiding connection between contemporary indigeneity and ancestral spiritual beliefs.

It is true that well organised and resourced campaigning for the return of the dead only began in the mid-1970s. However, agitation by Australia's first peoples for the return of their ancestral dead has not been a politically opportunistic stratagem. On the contrary, the plundering of burial places has long been remembered in many communities and, as several chapters of this book show, there is a wealth of evidence dating back to the early years of white settlement confirming that Indigenous communities sought forcefully to protect burial places and the taking of remains for scientific or other ends. What was new in the mid-1970s was that regional, state-based and national representative organisations now existed with the resources to represent and support communities to campaign systematically for the return of remains.

One can appreciate, then, Indigenous Australians' responding angrily to suggestions that they have exploited their dead by replying that, on the contrary, those who collected remains during the colonial era did so for what were political ends: to provide a pseudoscientific rationale for Indigenous dispossession and colonial subjugation. Little wonder, moreover, that claimants of remains have at times been quick to accuse scientists and museum curators, who have sought to persuade them to allow remains to be retained for scientific research, of denying the complicity of science in frontier terror. Many Indigenous Australians involved in repatriation share the view expressed by one Tasmanian on bringing home remains from London's Natural History Museum in 2009: 'We know', she told reporters, 'that some of our people were murdered just so the prized skulls of what settlers hypocritically called savages could

be donated to scientists … There was a massive trade in Tasmanian Aboriginal remains in the mid-1880s' (Mundy 2009).

For their part, scientists and museum personnel caught up in repatriation claims have inadvertently helped foster the idea that the remains of Indigenous people were collected from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries to fabricate pseudo-scientific grounds for their dispossession and colonial subjugation. They have conceded that these relics were commonly acquired in ways that would now be condemned as immoral and cruel. Scrutiny of institutional records confirms that graves were plundered, and that sometimes skulls, skeletons and other bodily structures were secured by postmortem dissection of Indigenous men, women and children who died while under white medical care. Evidence has also come to light that during the settlement of northern Australia through the second half of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century, museums occasionally received the bones of Indigenous men and women killed in frontier regions by police or armed settlers.

Evidence of the entanglement of collecting and colonial violence was a significant factor in Australian-based anthropologists, archaeologists and museum professionals conceding by the mid-1980s that Indigenous communities with ancestral ties or clear cultural connections to remains in scientific collections had the right freely to decide whether they should be reburied. By the early 1990s, Australian museums, universities and research communities with interests in human remains had endorsed a national policy recognising that the remains of Indigenous Australians in their possession who had died since contact with Europeans were to be dealt with according to the wishes of the surviving family or relevant community. Remains predating European contact were to be returned when requested to communities having a clear historical or cultural affinity to them. Despite objections by some archaeologists and human palaeontologists, it was agreed that Indigenous people who were recognised as the traditional owners of country wherein remains of great antiquity had been discovered had the right to decide their fate (see Mulvaney 1991).

The situation in respect of British, continental European and other overseas museums and universities has been slower to resolve, but generally speaking, scientists and museum professionals outside of Australia have also recognised the depth of cultural and spiritual obligations on Indigenous people to rebury their dead, and acknowledge that remains

were generally acquired in ways that would now be condemned as morally abhorrent.

Even so, museum professionals and scientists who have tried to negotiate the continued availability of Australian remains for research have inadvertently given the appearance of substance to Indigenous charges against nineteenth and early twentieth anatomists and anthropologists. Understandably and rightly they have accentuated the intellectual and ethical distance between their ideas and activities and those of current-day researchers. They have stressed that remains were collected to answer questions largely arising from scientific communities of the nineteenth century era erroneously investing in explanations of human variation that gave cognitive strength to the idea that humankind comprised biologically distinctive racial types, each with greater or lesser powers of intellect. While emphasising the false and dangerous nature of this investment, contemporary scientists have argued that we are now able to see this because subsequent generations of scientists have been free to research human remains, and have further argued that this research now proceeds by self-correctively framing hypotheses purely on the basis of empirical and measurable evidence. And they have emphasised that there are now clear ethical guidelines for research on human remains, the formulation of which also owe much to knowing the terrible consequences of the construal by nineteenth and early twentieth century scientists of our species as comprising a hierarchy of distinct racial types, each with its own supposed psychological strengths and weaknesses. It is inconceivable, they have argued, hoping to convince to Australian and other Indigenous peoples, that scientific research on remains could ever again validate the kinds of culturally ingrained racialist assumptions and prejudices that many peoples throughout the world suffered on falling victim to European colonial rule.

One can only agree that comparative research on human remains of different ethnic origins has played an invaluable part in our realising that 'race' has no reality in biology. It has provided evidence confirming the impossibility of categorising geographically located populations into 'races' on the basis of any meaningful genetic similarities. While there are populations with high frequencies of covariance in characteristics such as skin colour and hair type, there is still immense genetic variation between individuals in these populations. Indeed, there is as much variation among people of similar European ancestry as there is between peoples of European and African ancestry (Lowentin 1972).

We owe much to research on human remains. However, in highlighting the discontinuities between contemporary research and the practices and intellectual products of nineteenth and early twentieth-century racial science, scientists and museum personnel have encouraged the likes of Edward Pierson Ramsay and his scientific contemporaries to be popularly seen as wanting the remains of Indigenous Australians in order to scientifically prove their innate inferiority to Europeans. We have seen the caricaturing of collectors and investigators of Indigenous cranial and bodily morphology during the long nineteenth century by liberal use of gothic clichés in widely read feature articles in leading Australian national newspapers and magazines, as well as in British and Australian television documentaries, so that they appear to have been no more than pseudoscientists, obsessively bent on justifying Indigenous dispossession on bogus racial grounds (Glover and Langsam 1990; Monaghan 1991; Oxley 1991).

This book challenges this popular assessment of the history of scientific interest in Indigenous Australian anatomy and morphology by means of historically contextualised investigation of how and why it was that the remains of around 6,000 Indigenous Australians came to be in western museums and other scientific institutions.

By the time that Ramsay sought Meston's help in acquiring skulls and skeletons from Far North Queensland, bones of Indigenous Australians had been collected for nearly a hundred years. A small number of skulls came into the hands of leading European anatomists soon after British colonisation of southeastern Australia began in the late 1780s. The scale of collecting thereafter was numerically small, compared to the extent to which anthropological collecting of the bones of people of European, Asian or African ethnic origin occurred over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but from the time of first contact with Europeans until Indigenous Australians were able to prevent unrestricted archaeological excavation of their traditional burial places in the 1980s, their bodily remains—and skulls in particular—were regarded as extremely valuable objects within European scientific and intellectual circles.

The intellectual value of Australian remains, moreover, changed over time. Since Nancy Stepan's pioneering 1982 study of the development of British racial science, numerous scholars have discussed how the scientific consensus during the first half of the nineteenth century was that human variation was primarily due to environmentally induced degenerative

embranchment from one original ancestral type (Stepan 1982; Stocking 1987). As will be shown in Chapter 3 of this study, Indigenous Australian skulls were thought to illustrate with striking clarity the plasticity and susceptibility to environmental modification of the human cranium and facial bones. By the same token, they seemed to some investigators to suggest that human agency in the form of reproductive selectivity was likely an equal, or more powerful, determinant of variation.

Australian skulls and skeletons also played an influential part in the emergence of more biologically determinist interpretations of human variation during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Recently it has been argued by Kay Anderson that the correlation of Australian cranial morphology with ethnographic reportage by British anatomists and phrenologists was instrumental in giving evidential strength to the notion that humankind comprised distinctive, separately originating racial types, each with own unchanging innate physical and psychological characteristics. The shape and internal volume of crania were interpreted as confirming that Indigenous Australians were near bereft of mental attributes and qualities clearly distinguishing them from higher primates. So much so, Anderson argues, that racialist readings of Indigenous Australian cranial morphology provoked a 'crisis of humanism' which strengthened pessimism in early Victorian intellectual and political circles as to whether Indigenous people were capable of any significant degree of mental improvement under European tutelage (Anderson 2007).

Whether Australian bodily remains were so significant in the formulation of mid-nineteenth century polygenetic racialism, as opposed to studies of the skulls of peoples of sub-Saharan ancestry, is questionable; but as will be discussed in Chapter 3, the cranial morphology of Indigenous Australians was seen by a number of the most influential anatomists and early ethnologists of the first half of the nineteenth century as indicating that they were a race that had interestingly experienced such a degree of 'degeneration' from humankind's original form as to have become irreversibly trapped in a state of savagery.

Where Australian remains assumed an importance beyond other ethnically distinctive human remains collected by or on behalf of anatomists and anthropologists was in the conceptual development of European thinking about the deep human past human during the last third of the nineteenth century. In the early 1860s, Darwin's argument for evolution by speciation rapidly gained assent and support, especially among younger British scientists and intellectuals. Darwinian evolutionism also gained

German and French converts despite the scepticism of some leading continental medico-scientific authorities. As will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 7 of this study, Darwinian anatomists excitedly imagined that the Australian skull confirmed humanity's pithecoid ancestry. Comparing its shape to the Neanderthal cranial fragments unearthed in 1856, Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895) and other leading Darwinians unhesitatingly proclaimed Australia's first peoples to be 'living fossils', whose fate had been to experience environmental conditions freezing them physically and mentally at 'ground zero' of human evolutionary development (Bennett 2004, v. 9, p. 136–158).

What is more, Darwin's critics in British anthropological circles also saw Indigenous skulls as extremely valuable because they allegedly exhibited morphological features that *refuted* the notion that humankind had evolved from some long extinct pithecoid ancestor. So it was until the late 1920s, when morphologically based investigation of human evolutionary history came to be overshadowed by social anthropology. Living Indigenous peoples, their lifeways and culture, then became the prime focus of European intellectual curiosity, although there continued to be anatomists, physical anthropologists and human palaeontologists who employed craniology and other anthropometric techniques to investigate what seemed to them to be evolutionarily significant traits, or other biological typicalities, in Australian and other indigenous populations that might shed new light on prehistoric patterns of human migration and settlement. And while by the 1980s Australia's first peoples were empowered to the point of stopping unrestricted excavation and investigation of ancestral remains, these years witnessed the development of new computer-based anthropometric techniques and modes of genetic analysis that gave Indigenous Australian skulls and skeletons renewed value as scientific material that might yield new knowledge of humanity's evolutionary development and prehistory.

Recalling, momentarily, Archibald Meston's ebullient response to Edward Ramsay's request that he secure skulls and skeletons for Sydney's Australian Museum ('To what strange uses are our noble primeval inhabitants to be put!'), there was nothing strange about the uses to which Ramsay intended putting the remains that Meston agreed to try and find. The Indigenous Australian body excited the curiosity and imagination of many of the most intellectually gifted and influential European- and Australian-based anatomists, ethnologists and museum curators of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As this book shows,

Darwinian anatomists and anthropologists saw Australian remains as opening a scientific window onto the deep past of humanity. Ramsay and other Australian-based museum curators and scientists of the last third of the nineteenth century understandably responded by trying to obtain remains with the help of settlers in rural and remote parts of Australia. Despite their reliance on insecure and parsimonious funding by local legislatures, they set out to create anthropometric collections that would enable research by colonially-located scientists and, in time, they hoped, visiting metropolitan authorities. For by the 1880s, the near monopoly on the production of scientific knowledge enjoyed since the scientific revolution of the late seventeenth century by researchers located in metropolitan centres had given way to a more 'federative' outlook. Australian-based museum curators and scientists were no longer mere suppliers of 'raw material' in the form of specimens and factual reportage for theorising within metropolitan scientific circles (Macleod 1982): They now aspired to produce knowledge locally, while generally still deferring to the ideas and expertise of metropolitan authorities.

While this book focuses on the acquisition and interpretation of the bodily remains of Australia's first peoples, it does so while exploring the significance of these activities within the wider intellectual landscape of European scientific interest in the nature and origins of human diversity, from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century. The book thereby aims to contribute more generally to our knowledge of the conceptual development of racial science over the course of the long nineteenth century. It also attends to the history of the collecting of Australian remains, with a view to extending our understanding of how the sciences of comparative human anatomy and physical anthropology evolved through changing modes of interaction and exchange between colonially-based and metropolitan scientists.

The book further aims to contribute to recent discussions among of historians of colonial Australia and comparable settler colonies about the cultural suasiveness of racial thought during the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Historians of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Australia have shown that, arguably more than in other contemporaneous settler societies, material and moral progress to nationhood was envisaged as dependent on safeguarding the biological integrity and potential of an evolutionarily advanced white social body (Anderson 2002; Bashford 1998; Bennett 2004; McGregor 1997). They have also shown how the

concept of race, and the belief in the fundamentality of cultivating and protecting white biological vigour, gained much of its existential concreteness through the history of Indigenous Australians since European invasion supposedly exemplifying the dreadful consequences of racial decay (McGregor 1997).

The connections that have been drawn to date between the cultural suasiveness of racialist perceptions of indigeneity and scientific investigation of bodily remains, rest on limited contextual appraisals of what scientists made of Indigenous skulls and other bodily structures. More often than not, historians of colonial Australia have spoken briefly and with little specificity about connections between the collecting of these relics and 'social Darwinism' within settler society. By exploring in detail the aims and outcomes of research on Indigenous Australian remains as they developed through the 'long nineteenth century', this book aims to show how this scientific work influenced the construal of the biological and psychic dimensions of indigeneity within Australian settler culture.

While the research on which this book draws has found nothing to substantiate claims that Indigenous Australians were murdered to secure their remains, what has come to light is disturbing evidence of connections between Australian anthropological collecting and frontier violence. I was to discover, for example, that Archibald Meston, of whom I have spoken above, when agreeing to collect skeletal remains for the Australian Museum in the late 1880s, not only spoke playfully about the 'strange uses' to which they would be put but also joked ghoulishly about the prices that the museum was willing to pay for them. He told Ramsay, the museum's curator, 'I could have procured about £2000 worth in the last six years'. And he did so adding, 'I shall start on the warpath again! Hope to succeed in slaughtering some stray skeleton for you' (Meston 1887). Meston rarely let pass an opportunity to boast of his exploits on Queensland's tropical north. Shortly after writing to Ramsay, he let it be known via the *Cairns Post* that he intended to assist the Australian Museum by travelling in 'to the neighbourhood of the Russell River in the hope of obtaining some skeletons and mummies of Aboriginals'. This prompted the *Post*'s editor to cynically observe that the Russell River was a good place for Meston to go looking for bones, because of bloody clashes between Aboriginal men and miners of tin and silver on streams in the region (News 1887).

Did Meston really mean that he hoped to 'succeed in slaughtering a stray skeleton'? It seems to me that the best explanation is that

he was crassly alluding to the scale of frontier conflict in far North Queensland during the 1880s. For by this time he had gained a reputation as an outspoken critic of the Native Police in his journalism and political campaigning. This paramilitary force of Indigenous men led by white officers was, as Jonathan Richards has shown, responsible for numerous atrocities committed in the name of pacifying the Queensland frontier (Richards 2008). Meston had publicly called for the force's disbandment, condemning its killing 'for sport or slaughter gins and picaninnies'—though he nonetheless held to the consensual view of the time, that securing Australia's tropical north for white settlement inevitably meant the violent suppression of Indigenous resistance (Meston 1884).

Indigenous people seeking the repatriation of their dead have attention to argued that the terrors of frontier violence in colonial Australia included the murder of men, women and children to supply scientists with their bodily remains. In 1989, for example, representatives of Brisbane's Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action (FAIRA) claimed at a meeting of the World Archaeological Congress in South Dakota that a number of individuals were so murdered, and argued, moreover, that disturbing parallels existed between the continued scientific preservation of Indigenous Australian remains in museums and those of Jewish and other victims of the Nazi holocaust in Austrian and German medical schools (FAIRA 1989). Other repatriation campaigners and sympathisers have since charged that Indigenous people were murdered in the name of science, some following FAIRA in evoking parallels with the Holocaust. In 1999, for example, Indigenous artist Fiona Foley wrote of going on a field trip during an academic symposium in Berlin:

> From West Berlin further into the east, on a train threading its way through a scene resembling one from Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, the destination was the Leipzig Museum and the collection of the renowned German naturalist, Amalie Dietrich. It became apparent that there was another dire narrative that was seeking its brand new day. For the two Indigenous people in the guided tour, there were flashbacks to a feature article on the front page of the *Bulletin*, November 12, 1991, in which Dietrich was named the 'Angel of Black Death'. (Foley 1999, p. 46)

The feature article in question, a sensationally inaccurate piece by an Australian journalist based in London, drew a crude parallel between Amelie Dietrich (1821–1891) and the sadistic concentration camp guard Irma Grese (1923–1945), the so-called 'Blonde Angel of Auschwitz', on the basis of unsubstantiated allegations that Dietrich, when collecting in central and northern Queensland for Hamburg's Museum Godeffroy in the 1860s, supposedly had tried on two occasions to have Indigenous men shot to obtain their skeletons (Monaghan 1991).

Given the murderous violence that occurred in many frontier regions of Australia during the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even scholarly books have endorsed claims that massacres were committed to enable 'tens of thousands of body parts' to be shipped to European museums and medical schools (Fesl 1993, p. 30). However, as I discuss in Chapter 10 of this study, there is no conclusive evidence that Indigenous people were killed to supply scientists with anatomical material. But this said, there were, nonetheless, disturbing connections between anthropological science, racialised perceptions of Indigenous Australians, and frontier conflict, notably from the late 1860s to the early years of the twentieth century—the era in which pastoralism and mining ventures were often established by the violent pacification of Indigenous communities across northern Australia. In the early years of colonising Far North Queensland, for example, Archibald Meston amassed an impressive personal collection of weapons and many other kinds of object. Two years before collecting for the Australian Museum, an anonymous northern settler who clearly knew him accused him in the Brisbane press of taking part in armed raids on native camps during which he not only secured artefacts but also, on one occasion, tried but failed to shoot a man (Smith 1885).

By the turn of the twentieth century, natural history museums existed in every Australian state capital city. Then as now, museums rarely had the funding to match their ambitions. Curators could sometimes afford to employ professional collectors, but they relied heavily on public donations of specimens. With the exception of the Western Australian Museum, founded in 1897, these institutions had for forty or so years cultivated and jealously maintained separate yet invariably overlapping networks of amateur naturalists and collectors, extending across much of Australia.

It was largely through these networks that museums secured skeletal material. Their contributors pursued a variety of occupations. Medical

practitioners were the most active donors, followed by surveyors, police and other public employees willing to plunder graves for the benefit of science. There were also missionaries and superintendents of Aboriginal reserves who judged the sanctity of burial to be outweighed by the benefits to be gained from scientific investigation of the Indigenous body. Bones (mostly skulls) were also supplied by settlers in rural and frontier regions who had interest in various aspects of natural history or the lifeways and cultural practices of local Indigenous communities. These benefactors of colonial anthropology were overwhelmingly but not exclusively men. Women were sometimes directly involved or otherwise implicated in plundering Indigenous graves, or in donating or selling bones and other bodily structures to museums and medical schools.

Collectors were not always motivated by scientific curiosity. Museum records disclose that there were sufficient government employees, pastoral workers and miners in rural and frontier regions willing to plunder Indigenous burials for money so that from the late 1860s until the late 1920s there was a steady market in remains, with the price that museums were prepared to pay for a well-preserved skull with mandible fixed at around ten shillings. The price for more or less complete skeletons ranged between £10 and £15. These may not seem high prices today, but in the second half of the nineteenth century sending three or four skulls to a museum would have earned a bush worker the equivalent of a week's wages.

What we know of the interactions of these collectors with museum curators provides no evidence that remains were murderously acquired, but it is apparent that museum personnel and colonially-based scientists with anthropological interests were aware of the profound distress and anger that the disturbance of burial places caused Indigenous people, and that a number were knowing beneficiaries of their deaths at the hands of colonial military, police and armed parties of settlers.

Surviving letters between museum curators and collectors also provide insights into the nature and causes of late nineteenth century Australian frontier violence. Among other things they challenge the adequacy of recent revisionist claims that, in the Australian colonial context, frontier violence occurred sporadically and was never systematic. While there are evidential and methodological grounds for challenging, as Keith Windschuttle notably has done, the explanatory validity of conceptualising frontier violence as genocide (Windschuttle 2002), the sum of the evidence illustrative of the collecting of