RESEARCH ARTICLE

Managing and mapping the history of collecting indigenous human remains

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Abstract

This article discusses Melbourne’s e-Scholarship Research Centre’s contribution of informatics expertise and technology to a major three-year research project funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC). The project, Return, Reconcile, Renew, aims to advance knowledge and understanding of the repatriation to Indigenous communities of ancestral human remains, and related important cultural property. Project participants include three major Indigenous Australian community organisations (the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre (KALACC), Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority (NRA), and the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA), university and Indigenous community-based researchers in Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand and Northern America, the Australian Federal Government’s Indigenous Repatriation Unit, and a number of cultural and research institutions nationally and internationally.

Keywords
Indigenous People; Human Remains; Scientific Collecting, Databases

Repatriation in historical context

In Australia, organised campaigning by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to secure the return of ancestral human remains from museum and other scientific collections for reburial dates back to the early 1970s. Museum records and observations by anthropologists disclose that some communities had tried much earlier to achieve the return of remains, in one well documented case as far back as 1892 (Turnbull, 2002, pp. 81-82). However, it was not until the 1970s that Indigenous Australians gained sufficient resources to begin concerted and coordinated efforts by newly founded representative organisations to have the dead returned.

The initial focus of their efforts was the reburial of the skeleton of Truganini, a woman of the Nuenonne people, endured the dubious fame in European eyes of supposedly being the last surviving ‘full blooded’ Indigenous Tasmanian (Ellis, 1981; Ryan, 1981). Nearly two and a half years after her death and burial in 1876 within the walls of Hobart’s female convict factory, her remains were secretly exhumed on behalf of Tasmania’s Royal Society (Council, 1876). Thereafter they lay stored for near a quarter of a century before the Society entrusted them to the
Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, which articulated her skeleton and put it on display after the completion of a new wing in 1905 enabled a substantial part of its Tasmanian Aboriginal collections to be exhibited (Mulvaney & Calaby, 1985, p. 254). The Museum and Art Gallery was founded in 1885. Ernest Westlake, an amateur palaeontologist who visited Tasmania between 1908 and 1910, dubiously claimed that the skeleton had been put in an old apple case that was mislaid and only re-discovered by chance (Westlake, n.d).

There were attempts to have Truganini reburied. In the early 1950s, Henry Brune Atkinson (1874-1960), a retired Tasmanian Anglican clergyman and social activist, sought Truganini’s reburial in fulfilment of a promise made to her as she neared death by his father, also an Anglican minister, that her body would not be dissected and her skeleton kept in a museum (Condon, 1979). The younger Atkinson’s campaigning led to a compromise of sorts, in which Truganini’s bones were removed from display to a store room where they would be kept reverently and accessible only to bona fide scientists (Anonymous, 1974b).

Many found this compromise acceptable. But as to what Indigenous Tasmanians thought, oral testimony suggests that it did nothing to diminish the distress and anger long caused by Truganini’s exhumation and the display of her skeleton (Michael Mansell, Patsy Cameron, Personal Communications, 1996; 2009). It also comes as little surprise that the vigorous re-assertion of Tasmanian Aboriginality that began influencing island and national politics from the late 1960s onwards found expression in a determined, ultimately successful campaign to have Truganini reburied (see Daniels, 1995, pp. 30-34). Shortly after the Aboriginal Information Service (AIS), the first formally constituted Aboriginal organisation in Tasmania, was founded in late 1972, its secretary, Rosalind Langford, publicly called on Gough Whitlam, as Federal Prime Minister, to act on behalf of Tasmanian Aboriginal people to pressure the Tasmanian state government into surrendering the bones of Truganini for reburial (Daniels, 1995, p. 32).

Whitlam did not intervene, mostly likely on the constitutional grounds that the power to rebury Truganini lay solely with the Tasmanian parliament. The AIS responded by securing support for Truganini’s reburial from Indigenous communities across Australia. Its representatives also gained the backing of the Federal Government’s National Aboriginal Consultation Committee (NACC), which called on the Tasmanian government to force the museum to give Truganini’s remains to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community for reburial (Anonymous, 1974a).

For its part, the Tasmanian museum stressed that Truganini’s was ‘the only remaining full skeleton of a Tasmanian Aboriginal in the world’ and had yet to be extensively studied by anthropologists and medical experts (Anonymous, 1974b). This was untrue, in so far as Truganini’s was not the only Tasmanian skeleton in scientific hands. The British Museum of Natural History had one, and two others were in continental European collections (Turner, 1911; Plomley, 1962; Davis & Galloway, 2008). Yet the Museum was right in claiming that Truganini’s skeleton had yet to be the subject of detailed investigation. Like most skeletal remains then in Australian and overseas scientific collections, it had been obtained during the half century or so after 1860, in the belief that comparative morphological examination of these bones would yield new knowledge of human evolutionary history (Turnbull, 2008). However, after the First World War, a mixture of scientific and social factors caused scientific interest in the collection and analysis of Indigenous bodily remains to decline sharply in favour of
physiological and anthropometric investigations of living Indigenous populations (Barkan 1993; Anderson 2002). Research on cranial and other bones in Australian museums and medical schools were few, and mostly small scale studies of specific osteological structures. In the case of Tasmanian remains, significant craniometric studies were published by William Turner (1911), and his one-time pupil, R.J.A. Berry (1909; 1914). But thereafter, only one comparable investigation (Wunderly & Wood-Jones, 1933) took place. It was not until the 1990s saw the development of new modes of computational and genetically based investigation of human prehistory, that comparative examination of Tasmanian Aboriginal bodily structures attracted significant scientific interest.

By the 1970s, it was impossible for the Museum to speak of Truganini so as to suggest or imply that she had been the last surviving Tasmanian Aborigine. What is more, several Aboriginal people living in various parts of Australia now claimed to be descendants of Truganini, thus opening the way for legal proceedings to secure her reburial. In June 1974, representatives of several state and national Aboriginal organisations pledged to support the engagement of counsel to lodge a writ on behalf of Truganini’s descendants in Tasmania’s Supreme Court, in order that as her executors they be allowed their common law right to bury her skeleton (Anonymous, 1974c). Yet, the state government was now of a mind to agree to Truganini’s reburial on the hundred anniversary of her death.

Finally scattering Truganini’s ashes in 1976 on the waters off Bruny Island, the ancestral country of the Nuenonne people, proved to be the beginning of long and determined campaigning by Indigenous Australians which has seen the gradual repatriation of ancestral bodily remains from Australian and overseas scientific collections. Since the mid-1970s, the remains of around 5000 people held in Australian museum and medical school collections have been the focus of repatriation negotiations, with the origins of the remains of 1000 people unlikely to be identified (Hanchant 2002, p. 312). By 2010, the remains of approximately 1250 people had been successfully returned from overseas institutions, the majority with sufficient information to determine their communities of origin. The Australian Government’s International Repatriation Program estimates that the remains of another 1000 or so people still lie in overseas collections, most of which are in the United Kingdom (Department of Families, 2010, p. 8).

Repatriation has been an extraordinary achievement; all the more so as Indigenous people have largely achieved it themselves. As archaeologist Colin Pardoe observed in the early 1990s, in the wake of the return of a number of substantial collections of remains, repatriation has not been something conceptualised by scholars for the good of indigenous people. What Indigenous people wanted was control and information, and they have fought for it. It is salutary for us to remember that we are not bestowing control; indigenous people have demanded it as a right (Pardoe 1991, p. 17).

**Documenting difficult history: the Return, Reconcile, Renew project**

Pardoe’s point has been recognised by the Return, Reconcile, Renew project, which aims to consolidate research expertise to support and empower community-based repatriation programs,
and to assist in answering community-defined research questions about the history, effects and transformative opportunities of repatriation. Indigenous representative organisations partnering in the project have determined that the relationship between repatriation, wellbeing and broader community development initiatives must be a major research priority (see Wilson, 2007). However, partnering organisations have also put a high value on the project providing the communities they represent with whatever information survives, in scientific and other western archives, that might shed light on the identity of those of their ancestors whose remains are the subject of current or future repatriation claims, or furnish communities with other relevant information, such as the location and circumstances in which their remains were collected, or reportage by those who collected remains on matters of cultural significance to claimant communities (see Pickering, 2011; Fforde, Ormond Parker & Turnbull, 2015).

Providing communities with detailed information on the scientific collecting and uses of their ancestors’ remains is a challenging task, although it is one that is helped by the project already having a wealth of information at its disposal. This has been collected by members of the project team with long-standing research interests who have published extensively in the history of scientific collecting of Indigenous remains. What they have separately accumulated, since the early 1990s in the case of Cressida Fforde, Lyndon Ormond-Parker and Paul Turnbull, amounts to well over 3000 separate files. These deal with many different events, from when the first Indigenous remains were acquired by European scientists in the late eighteenth century (Turnbull, 1999), to the early 1980s when Indigenous Australian communities were able to prevent the excavation of traditional burial places and the removal of remains to museums and university collections (Lahn, 2007). The files are in diverse forms. Many comprise pages of hand-written notes on unpublished documents and rare publications. Some are verbatim transcriptions of documents; others are brief summaries. Many files contain complete or partially annotated photocopies of archival material. Others are copies of nineteenth and early twentieth century scientific journals and books. And there are ‘born digital’ files in a variety of formats, most of which are readable in current versions of widely used database and word-processing software, although there are also a large number that are ASCII text dumps of files written in defunct proprietary software.

The creators of this data continue to be actively engaged in researching European scientific collecting and uses of Indigenous remains. New material will be added to the existing corpus of information over the life of the project. Moreover, files already contributed to the project reflect the fact that what research there has been to date has focused on the collecting and uses of remains by Australian museums and university medical schools, and on museums and other scientific institutions in the United Kingdom which were the recipients of the majority of remains sent overseas by Australian-based collectors. There are, however, other important collections of documents in Australian and British archives that are yet to be examined. The project is particularly concerned to explore continental European scientific archives, nearly all of which lie unexamined, starting with those holding information relating to the acquisition by German and Austrian museums of remains from the communities represented by the project’s partner organisations. In short, while the project has already amassed a wealth of information, much more will be acquired during the life of the project.

* This paper has been double-blind peer reviewed to meet the Department of Higher Education’s Higher Education Research Data Collection (HERDC) requirements.
Early in the planning of the project, it became clear that its capacity to assist communities engaged in repatriating remains, and also provide information on related matters of cultural or historical significance, would depend on how well it could provide community members (and assisting researchers) with the ability to extract and analyse material within the corpus of information it would create. It further seemed logical that this corpus should take the form of a digital repository enabling the management and mapping of scientific collecting and uses of Indigenous ancestral remains.

Building such a repository is no trivial undertaking. There is the time and expense of making usable digital facsimiles of a wealth of research data in a variety of print-based forms. But this is a relatively easy undertaking compared to that of creating a repository enabling users to make connections between individual collectors, museum personnel and scientists active in the acquisition of human remains, in both colonial and metropolitan institutional contexts, over a time span of over two hundred years. The capacity of users to make connections is vital. The experience of researchers on the project team has been that locating surviving information bearing on the provenance of remains often entails following investigative leads requiring the examination of what can be many different documentary sources held in geographically dispersed museum archives, research libraries and government records. Often what information a museum may hold about items in its collections is only the entry point into a complex historical web of interactions between collectors, museum personnel and scientists that may have occurred over a considerable period of time (Fforde, Ormond-Parker & Turnbull, 2015).

To give one concrete illustration of the challenges repatriation research presents: in 2013, the Australian Government’s International Repatriation Program learned of the existence of the mummified body of an Indigenous man in the collections of Munich’s Five Continents Museum, formerly the Bavarian State Museum of Ethnology. All that existed in the museum’s archives was a reference to the body having been obtained in Sydney in 1889 by Maximilian Buchner (1846-1921), the museum’s director, from Ludwig Bruck, whom other sources disclosed was a Sydney-based medical publisher, importer of surgical instruments, anatomical models and human skeletons (Turnbull & Appel, 2016). However, documents on the other side of the world, in the Queensland Museum, that had previously been examined by project personnel, proved to be the beginning of an evidential trail that ultimately led to information disclosing where the body of the man had been obtained, and thus the community to which it most likely belonged. The documents in question were several letters disclosing that in 1885 Charles de Vis (1829-1915), the director of the Queensland Museum at that time, had arranged for his son to examine the mummified remains of a man put up for sale in Sydney and to convey an offer on the museum’s behalf. The young de Vis reported that the body was being sold by Ludwig Bruck, that it was ‘in a very good state of preservation’, and moreover, that Edward Ramsay, the curator of Sydney’s Australian Museum, had already offered Bruck £20 (de Vis, 1885). Bruck, however, declined both Ramsay and de Vis’s offers, intimating that he expected to get a much higher price from a European museum.

De Vis’s correspondence with his son further revealed that Bruck was selling the body on behalf of one Leo Ferdinand Sachs, a man with various business interests in the North Queensland coastal town of Townsville. This in turn led to the discovery of contemporary newspaper reportage, and a hand-drawn map in the possession of Queensland’s Department of Natural

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Resources. These sources confirmed that a survey party led by Sach had taken the body from a traditional ceremonial site inland from Trinity Bay, on the Far North Queensland coast, in 1876 (Anonymous, 1876). Sach had displayed the body with a view to selling it at the Sydney International Exhibition of 1879-82, and then the Melbourne Exhibition of 1884-5 (de Vis, 1885). He had then commissioned Bruck to sell it on his behalf, although Bruck had failed to find a buyer at the agreed price before Sach was forced to file for bankruptcy in 1887 – whereupon Bruck took the body in lieu of his promised fee (Anonymous, 1887). He may then have continued trying to sell the body, but in 1888 he presented it to Maximilian Buchner, possibly thereby hoping to secure future purchases of ethnographic objects by Munich and other central European museums (Klaatsch, 1904).

Equally complex stories could be told about the fate of many other Indigenous ancestral remains that were acquired by Australian and European scientific collections (See especially, Fforde, 2004; MacDonald, 2005; Roque, 2010; Fabian, 2011; Turnbull, 2016). Also, research such as that disclosing the origins of the body found in Munich has often led to the discovery of other information of cultural value or historical significance to Australian claimant communities (Department of Families, 2010). In the case of the Munich body, new information was found concerning the location of a ceremonial site and the domestic architecture of people in the Cairns region at the time of first contact with European settlers. In another instance, having special relevance to the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre, one of the project’s three Indigenous partner organisations, research undertaken in connection with the repatriation in 2004 of the remains of fifteen people to the Kimberley’s Urandangie, Bermagui and Camperdown communities from Sweden’s Museum of Ethnography, led to the discovery of culturally important information in journals kept by Erik Mjöberg (1882-1938), the zoologist with anthropological interests who obtained the remains in Western Australia in 1910-11 (Neil Davis, Personal Communication, November 2014).

The aim, then, of this project is to create a repository providing detailed information about the activities of collectors, museum personnel and scientists with interests in Indigenous ancestral remains. Besides meeting the information needs of Indigenous communities currently engaged in repatriation processes, or likely to be so in the near future, the repository will be an invaluable resource for historians and other scholars interested in how scientific collecting and analyses of Indigenous human remains figured in the cognitive development of European thinking about Indigeneity in colonial and metropolitan contexts from the late eighteenth century to our own time. Also, importantly, the project’s Indigenous partner organisations envisage the repository as not being exclusively focused on the past. They are keen to see it serve community aspirations into the future by the addition of material documenting community members’ experiences and thoughts on repatriation. Partner organisations see this information as enabling the development of educational resources for programs promoting well-being through strengthening knowledge of culture and history amongst younger community members. They are also look forward to their communities sharing their experiences of repatriation, by using repository content to create guides for others embarking on repatriation.

Partnering with the e-Scholarship Research Centre

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This, broadly sketched, is the background to the participation in the Return, Reconcile, Renew project of Melbourne University’s e-Scholarship Research Centre (ESRC). The decision to create a digital repository documenting the history of scientific collecting and uses of ancestral remains was taken with ESRC’s Online Heritage Resource Manager (OHRM) in mind. The system had already been used by one member of the project team to create three significant online resources (*South Seas: Voyaging and Cross-Cultural Encounters in the Pacific* (1760-1800), http://southseas.nla.gov.au; *The Solomon Islands Historical Encyclopaedia*, 1893-1978, http://www.solomonencyclopaedia.net; *The Companion to Tasmanian Arts, Heritage and History*, http://www.utas.edu.au/tasmanian-companion/index.html). This enabled project participants to see that the OHRM had advantages over comparable content management systems. Importantly, this project requires a system that enables the contexts in which ancestral remains were collected and acquired by scientists to be reconstructed by drawing meaningful connections between multiple sources of historical evidence. Hence it must be capable of managing and mapping what are likely, in many instances, to be complex connections between people, places and specific events within the history of scientific disciplines with interests in human remains over long periods of time.

The OHRM meets these requirements well. Other systems, including several created to provide Indigenous communities with the means of documenting and selectively publishing cultural information online, were found to pay less attention in their design to providing well structured and navigable information – thus enabling its meanings and significance to be well understood. Over the past two decades, the OHRM has undergone a development path reflecting the goal of its developers, notably Joanne Evans, Gavan McCarthy and Tim Sherratt, to contribute to the development of contextually structured public knowledge information spaces (McCarthy, 2011). The OHRM achieves this by exploiting the capacity of referential database software to enable potentially complex relations between entities to be specified, and by some clever coding producing stable and dynamic HTML pages in which these relations are expressed so as to provide the context for understanding the meanings and significance of the information the system provides.

So far only a relatively small percentage of the total information relating to the collecting and use of ancestral remains that the project has assembled has been put into an instance of the OHRM. But already the system has proven highly effective in historically contextualising the activities of a number of collectors and scientific institutions, and in several instances has furnished clues as to the possible existence of documents providing information concerning remains awaiting repatriation from several museums in central Europe.

A further attraction of the OHRM is that it meets the project’s need for a system that can integrate information in a wide range of formats. While the bulk of the material put into the project’s instance of the system will be in the form of PDF copies of research files on scientific collecting and use of remains, the OHRM will be able to accommodate whatever photographs, audio and visual files are required to serve community-based explorations of the relations between repatriation, well-being and broader community development initiatives. Given that the OHRM can provide access to these types of content via stable and citable HTML pages, there is nothing to stop a community from deploying its own OHRM instance, and arranging for locally created content to be linked to a main project system, and possibly other locally situated set-ups.

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Indeed, there may well be advantages in putting community-created content into locally sited OHRMs, for this would enable interface and other design elements of the system to be tailored to suit community preferences.

While the OHRM necessarily continues to rely on proprietary software (the database at the core of the system is Microsoft’s Access), the system has been available since it was first released in the late 1990s under license at no cost for non-commercial, heritage and public good purposes. A number of projects using the OHRM have contributed to the further development of its features and functions. This project hopes to do likewise, probably by contributing to one of the most exciting aspects of the system – its use with open-source software to visually map and analyse the relations between entities. An important feature of the OHRM is that content can be exported in the Encoded Archival Context for Corporate Bodies, Persons, and Families (EAC-CPF) XML format. The logic of building this feature into the OHRM is to facilitate the exchange of data with other comparable systems, enabling, for example the discovery and analysis of information about particular phenomenon within two or more publicly accessible web-based resources. However, the ability to export OHRM content as EAC-CPF records has opened up the further possibility of using these records as a data source by which the relations between entities can be visualised so as to highlight historically important connections and patterns in the history of collecting and use of Indigenous remains.

The project also looks to contribute to the development of the OHRM in one further respect. This is its capacity to manage a large repository of information in which there is material to which Indigenous communities may want to restrict access to particular information concerning the collecting of remains on cultural or religious grounds. So far the development path of the OHRM has been a tangible expression of the commitment of its developers to free and open exchange of information as a public good. The Return, Reconcile, Renew project presents the challenge of restricting information, as is generally agreed to be for the public good when done out of respect for the wishes of Indigenous communities to restrict access to traditional knowledge, or other culturally sensitive information. At this point in time, discussions with representative partner organisations are underway aimed at developing workable protocols governing access to and use of potentially restricted or sensitive information. So far it seems that the challenges are unlikely to be in the realm of ethics. There has been agreement that much of the information that communities are likely to want to restrict is of little or no significance when it comes to understanding the history of scientific collecting and use of remains, and is of no public importance. Rather, the challenges are likely to be modifying the information architecture and interface design of the OHRM, so that communities are able to control the sharing of information within public and restricted areas, depending upon the cultural sensitivity of the data and the authority of the viewer.

Conclusion

Within the next ten years, near all the Indigenous dead and their funerary possessions that have lain in scientific collections – some for as long as two centuries — will likely have been returned for burial or keeping either in their ancestral country or within – as seems likely at some point in the near future – a national keeping place. However, little good would be served if the redressing...
of this dark aspect of the colonial past fell short of providing the communities that it affected with whatever information still exists in scientific and other archives that may be of assistance in returning the dead to their ancestral country. Nor should we ignore the value of communities exploring the history, effects and transformative opportunities of their remarkable achievement of repatriation.

Notes on contributor

Paul Turnbull is Professor of History and Digital Humanities at the University of Tasmania, and an Honorary Professor of History at the University of Queensland. He has written extensively on racial anatomy, scientific collecting and interpretation of Indigenous Australian bodily remains, and the meanings of repatriation. His book, *Science, Museums and the Plundering of Indigenous Bodily Remains in Colonial Australia*, will be published in late 2016.

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