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Picking Over the Bones

Amalie Dietrich and Colonial Queensland

[Comment on Stefanie Affeldt and Wulf D. Hund: From 'Plant Hunter' to 'Tomb Raider'. The Changing Image of Amalie Dietrich]

Amalie Dietrich was clearly an outstanding pioneer naturalist-collector of plants, corals, shells, insects, spiders, fish, reptiles, birds, mammals and so on, continually lighting, as she wrote, 'upon treasures that no-one has secured before me' along the colonial Queensland coastal stretch from Brisbane to Bowen.¹ This is beyond dispute. During her nine year sojourn from August 1863 until February 1872, she collected possibly 20-25 000 species of flora and fauna new to Western science and had plants, moss, algae, wasps and a butterfly named after her.²

It is also beyond dispute that she assembled a small array of photographs, material possessions and human remains (specifically skeletons and skulls) of Queensland Aboriginal people. Her ethnographic efforts were comparatively modest though significant and enduringly controversial. In Brisbane, from 1863 to 1865 and Rockhampton from 1866 to 1867, she obtained and dispatched 'some of Queensland's first extant [...] photographs' of Aborigines to the Museum Godeffroy in Hamburg – fifteen studio portraits taken in Brisbane and four in Rockhampton.³ Later, mainly while in Bowen, North Queensland from 1869 to 1872, she sequestered more than 130 items of former Aboriginal ownership, mostly weapons, tools and implements, which were then consigned to Germany as artefacts.⁴

It was here in tropical Bowen, however, that she first alluded to obtaining the bones of deceased Aboriginal people in a letter to her daughter, Charitas, written on 20 September 1869. Johann Godeffroy had requested 'skeletons of the natives', she records and she had found it 'not unproblematical [...] to comply with his demands'. After observing that the bones of children could be obtained 'just stuck in a hollow tree' and, with more difficulty, those of adult 'warriors [...] ceremoniously buried in "flat mounds"', she indicated, as Affeldt and Hund show, that she was sending skeletons and skulls to the museum. 'Hopefully Godeffroy will be satisfied with this,' she adds, perhaps indicating a hope that she would

1 L. A. Gilbert, 'Dietrich, Amalie Nelle (1821-1891)' in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 4 (Melbourne University Press, 1972), <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/dietrich-amalie-3412/text5189>; 'I Light Upon Treasures', *West Australian*, 18 December 1948.

2 J. McKay, *Brilliant Careers. Women collectors and illustrators in Queensland* (A Queensland Museum publication, 1997), p. 7.

3 R. Sumner, 'The earliest photographs of Queensland Aborigines? Amalie Dietrich's collection for Museum Godeffroy 1863-72' in *Brisbane: Aboriginal, Alien, Ethnic* (Brisbane History Group Papers, 5, 1987), pp. 43-48.

4 McKay, *Brilliant Careers*, p. 7.

not be prevailed upon to dispatch more. Eventually ‘two skulls and eight skeletons’ are listed in the museum’s official inventory.⁵

It is this ‘gruesome anthropological work’, apparently involving the ‘desecration of corpses’ and ‘violating the memories of survivors’, that has given rise to severe academic critique in recent times.⁶ This has been further sharpened by the *ex post facto* charge that she, in her halting English, ‘made several ineffectual efforts to induce squatters to shoot an aboriginal [sic] so that she could send the skeleton to a museum.’⁷ Let us now examine each of these assertions in turn.

As Affeldt and Hund point out, ‘the Western bone trade’ can be traced back to early penal days in the Australian colonies. In the region eventually to become Queensland, from the time of the Moreton Bay penal station (later Brisbane) - 1824 until 1842 - ‘information exists [...] of Aboriginal burial sites being ransacked, and skulls, bones and other artefacts stolen near Breakfast Creek and Limestone [later Ipswich] by soldiers and predatory amateur ethnologists’.⁸ Such ‘skullduggery’ was still occurring across the State into at least the onset of World War II, more than a century later, when disruption to shipping lanes halted transactions.⁹ As a leading pastoralist from the Mitchell district, Thomas Gunn wrote to the Queensland Museum in April 1919:

I looked up the local Golgotha, a large hollow box tree where 6 blacks were buried but some other body snatcher had been there and I could only procure two skulls and two lower jaws which I don’t think belong to heads [...] There are some whites living who knew these blacks when alive especially the Gins [i.e. women] [...] I will ask all the old hands for skulls for you. Mr Jack Marsh, Hillsborough, Mitchell should be a good mark [...] Let me know any time what sort of specimens you want and I will only be too pleased to get them for you and I am sure Mr Marsh will do so if you write him [...] My brother Donald [...] daresay [...] has told you there are many natives buried in trees and ground near his place, Boolarwell that if not removed should be easily got.¹⁰

Aboriginal artist and researcher, Judy Watson has recently uncovered the skull-retrieval efforts of the Matron of Burketown Hospital in the Queensland Gulf Country, Agnes Kerr during the 1930s. As Kerr wrote to the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum in Easton, England in 1933:

By this mail I am forwarding [...] an Aboriginal skull [...] It has no lower jaw [...] It comes from North of the Robinson River [...] The skulls unfortunately are extremely difficult to procure. I have asked dozens of people and have had ever so many promises but in three years have only been able to procure 2! The natives

- 5 S. Affeldt and W. D. Hund, ‘From “Plant Hunter” to “Tomb Raider”’. The Changing Image of Amalie Dietrich’ in *Australian Studies Journal | Zeitschrift für Australienstudien*, 33-34 / 2019-2020, pp. 94-97.
- 6 Ibid, pp. 90-94.
- 7 H. L. Roth, *The Discovery and Settlement of Port Mackay, Queensland [...]* (Halifax: King and Sons, 1908), p. 81.
- 8 Affeldt and Hund, ‘From “Tomb Raider”[...]’ p. 95; R. Evans, ‘The Mogwi Take Mianjin. Race Relations and the Moreton Bay Penal Settlement 1924-42’ in B. Shaw (ed.), *Brisbane: The Aboriginal Presence 1824-1860*, (Brisbane History Group Papers, 11, 2020), p. 17.
- 9 J. Watson, *skullduggery* (Brisbane, privately published, 2020), pp. 32 f.
- 10 T. Gunn, ‘Old Cashmere’, Mitchell to Director, Queensland Museum, 29 April 1919, Queensland State Museum Archives, quoted in R. Evans, K. Saunders and K. Cronin, *Race Relations in Colonial Queensland. A History of Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination* (St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1993), p. xxix.

are the trouble [-] they will not go near their burial places and resent any white person doing so. If a skull is procured it has practically to be smuggled.

Kerr then bewails difficulties involved in disturbing tree burials and how her pressing hospital work frustrates her best endeavours:

I should love to go skull-hunting myself. I hear most aggravating reports of "caves full of them" but always ungettable [sic] and of course I am tied to my duties [...] Matrons of little outback Hospitals don't get 'weekends' off.¹¹

In an ensuing correspondence, continuing into late 1940, Kerr is clearly aware that such activities constitute grave-robbing. She even includes a rough account, supplied by a missionary, of the mortuary rites of 'Tree Burial' in one of her letters. She further suggests that the famed anthropologist, Donald Thompson be approached to obtain a suitable tree burial specimen.¹² Yet the immorality of such desecrations entirely eludes both Gunn and Kerr. In their transparently frank correspondence, grave-robbing is presented as a regular, unproblematical and, indeed, enticing enterprise, undertaken with the complicity of established museums.

This then is the 'inhumane context of acquisition', fully institutionalized, neatly rationalized culturally by invasive colonialism and perpetuated across a vast time-frame. The ethics of such transactions do not merit serious consideration in contemporary Western minds. Amalie Dietrich operates within this frame without apparent discomfort, although it must be added that neither, seemingly, does any other non-Aboriginal person in Queensland at the time. So it is important to contextualize Dietrich's 'illegitimate appropriation' of bones thoroughly within the ambit of her colonial world.¹³

If it were not Aboriginal burial sites that were being despoiled, it might also be European-dug graves, prepared for deceased Aborigines that were enthusiastically robbed. A year before Dietrich appeared in Brisbane in 1862, there had been a notable scandal. The grave in the North Brisbane cemetery of an Aboriginal prisoner, Kipper Billy, shot while attempting escape, was opened; the corpse disinterred and then decapitated. The stolen head, as one account discloses, was then exhibited as 'a practical joke' at a dinner party 'garnished like a ham, with frilled pink paper and the thick mass of black hair [ornamented with] a dozen rosebuds inserted here and there'. Consternated guests decamped in panic.¹⁴ Another version of this story has the 'boiled down head' being extracted from 'a three legged iron pot' and exhibited before a table of dignitaries, several of whom 'lost their lunch'.¹⁵ The two principal perpetrators were a leading Brisbane chemist, Thomas Warry, a member of the Queensland Legislative Assembly, and Thomas Dowse,

11 A. D. Kerr, Hospital, Burketown to Captain L. W. Malcolm, Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, Euston, 26 August 1933 in Watson, *skullduggery*, pp. 6 f.

12 Kerr to Malcolm, 23 February 1934, enclosure "Tree Burials" by Revd A. J. Dyer in Watson, *skullduggery*, pp. 10-13.

13 Affeldt and Hund, pp. 90, 110.

14 'Brisbane Heritage - Paddington Cemetery Records of the Pioneers of Brisbane Qld' part 3. Genealogy Record Search (supplied to the author by Bron Larner).

15 K. Blanch, *White Lies, Black Blood. The Awful Killing of Kipper Billy* (Wynnum, Seagle Bookettes, 2015) quoted in *Brisbane Times*, 13 June 2017. See also *Sunday Mail*, 18 November 1990 and S. Sheaffe, 'A tragic injustice; the trial of Kipper Billy and Billy Horton', *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, 19, 5, February 2006, pp. 824-840.

an ex-convict merchant and Brisbane's first journalist. (Dowse and his son had previously been seriously injured in a frontier Aboriginal attack).¹⁶

The resultant press furore, raised by complaints from the Clerk of the Queensland Parliament, L. A. Bernays, was easily dampened by a sardonic *mea culpa* from Warry, suggesting that 'similar apologies might now be extracted from numerous Members of both Houses of our Legislature who are amenable to the charge of having brought many blackfellows to the condition in which "Kipper Billy" was unfortunately found'. The matter was rapidly dropped. Dowse became the new Town Clerk and the skull in question 'was exhibited to many people over ensuing years'.¹⁷

Brisbane, the new colony's capital, was emerging from its frontier years by the early 1860's when Dietrich arrived. Yet, as she travelled progressively northward in pursuit of botanical and other specimens from the close of 1865, she was literally entering into the heart of colonial darkness. First, Gladstone and then more extensively Rockhampton on the Tropic of Capricorn in 1866-67; Mackay and its hinterland 1867-69 and the Bowen district from 1869 to 1872 – her longest sojourn – were all caught in the throes of intense racial conflict, with frontier struggle reaching its height as she reached and inhabited each successive locale.

Gladstone was rapidly passed over, but, at Rockhampton, as Dietrich commenced collecting botanic specimens, the local newspaper, the *Bulletin*, noted in mid-1867 how 'massacres can be perpetrated within a few miles [of the township] with the most perfect impunity', after Native Police had opened fire upon a quiet Aboriginal encampment, killing and wounding around a dozen occupants.¹⁸ The town's southerly environs had previously been the locale of such intensive violence during the abortive Canoona gold-rush (mid-1858), that the German-born journalist, Frederick Sinnett had labeled it 'border warfare to the knife', where genocide was occurring in 'numbers impossible to estimate'. 'They are being killed officially by police and unofficially by settlers and diggers *every day*; nor are women and children by any means universally spared'.¹⁹

Severe Native Police sorties peaked between Rockhampton and Gladstone in 1855, 1858 and 1860. Aborigines, wrote one correspondent, were being 'shot down like dogs'.²⁰ A German bushman, Konrad Nahrung reported stumbling upon a massacre site at Raglan Creek. The Native Police 'avengers had not been particular in burying the bodies', he observed: 'corpses were lying everywhere'.²¹ Oxford-educated George Carrington, later a British journalist, recalled in this region how, all along the roadway 'for more than a quarter of a mile the air was tainted with the putrefaction of corpses, which lay all along the ridges just as

16 S. G. Gunthorpe, 'Dowse, Thomas (1819-1885)' in *Australian Dictionary of Biography* vol. 4 (Melbourne University Press, 1972), <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/dowse-thomas-3440/text5243>; D. Waterson, *A Biographical Register of the Queensland Parliament 1860-1929* (Australian University Press, 1872), p. 186.

17 *Brisbane Courier*, 16 April 1862; *ABC News*, 27 September 2018.

18 *Rockhampton Bulletin*, 28 June 1867.

19 F. Sinnett, *The 'Rush' to Port Curtis* (Geelong, Ray and Richter, 1959), pp. 70, 87 f. quoted in R. Evans, 'Queensland 1859: Reflections on the Act of Becoming', *Queensland Review*, 16, 1, 2009, pp. 7 f.

20 *Brisbane Courier*, 2 and 6 April, 30 May 1861.

21 K. Nahrung, 'My Life' (c. 1900; unpublished ms, in possession of author), pp. 39 f.

they had fallen'.²² At Raglan Station, it was subsequently reported 'the skulls of black warriors [...] had been made into an ornamental border for a large flower-bed in the garden'.²³

Such exterminatory scenarios and necrotic culture, displaying human remains at times like animal 'hunting trophies', alert us to the point that it was not necessary in Dietrich's colonial Queensland to find sacred locations where Aboriginal peoples had been 'ceremoniously buried' and 'ritually remembered' in order to secure skeletons and skulls.²⁴ Massacres were commonplace and entire communities might come close to annihilation by these forays. Although a resultant pile of bodies was at times incinerated to hide incriminating evidence - 'burned in the bush like dead cattle'²⁵ - there is also considerable witness to the slain being laconically left to rot where they fell and skulls souvenired as grisly trophies.

From Southern Queensland to the far North, there is ample evidence of this. For instance, pastoralist Frederick Bell recalled 'hundreds of blacks' shot or poisoned and 'left to rot like cattle' on stations near Dalby on the Western Darling Downs. A young Willie Walsh 'often picked up skulls and placed them at night on stumps around the camp'.²⁶ Near Cairns in the North, a combined week-long Native Police and private settler drive against the Yidinydji in 1884 resulted in a series of massacres at Skull Pocket and Skeleton Creek. Michael O'Leary later recalled: 'nearly every stump or tree had a nigger's skull as a trophy [...] I strolled round and counted sixteen of the gruesome relics'. At Skull Creek, noted one massacre participant later, 'a man loaded up a whole case of skulls and took them away as specimens'.²⁷ Even as late as 1934, an Engineer with the Queensland Department of Irrigation, Charles Ogilvie, noted on official letter-head paper that:

On my return from Croydon [in the western Gulf Country] - I came through the forest unaccompanied and without a road - I was informed that there were skulls at Kurrajong Springs and Pinaba bore drain, relics of the dispersal of blacks by Native Police. I will endeavour at some future date to look these up [for collection].²⁸

Thus, although Dietrich's private correspondence mentions tree and mound burials, it is still unclear how her bone samples were actually acquired. Thinking speculatively here, it would have been just as easy - and perhaps even less problematical - for her or her two assistants to collect specimens from abandoned massacre sites. While stationed at Lake Elphinstone, inland from Mackay in 1867-69, she was located adjacent to a Native Police barracks, Fort Cooper (later Nebo), under command of Sub-Inspector Robert Johnstone, one of the most notoriously

22 G. Carrington, *Colonial Adventures and Experiences* (London, Bell and Daldy, 1871), pp. 152 f.

23 *The Capricornian*, 16 June 1900, p. 41; 25 October 1924, p. 41.

24 Affeldt and Hund, 'From "Plant Hunter" [...] p. 110. R. Evans, 'Keeping Australia Clean White' in V. Burgmann and J. Lee (eds), *A Most Valuable Acquisition. A People's History of Australia* volume one, (Penguin, Mcphee Gribble, 1988), p. 176.

25 A. Davidson, Brisbane to Aborigines Protection Society, London, 12 August 1875.

26 F. M. Bell, 'Camboon reminiscences', *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, iv, 1, p. 58.

27 T. Bottoms, *Conspiracy of Silence. Queensland's frontier killing times* (Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 2013), pp. 147 f.; R. Evans, *A History of Queensland* (Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 136 f.

28 C. Ogilvie, Department of Irrigation and Water Supply, Winton to A. D. Kerr, Burketown, 23 February 1934, quoted in Watson, *skullduggery*, p. 15.

violent Native Police officers.²⁹ In one incident during her sojourn in early 1869, at nearby Grosvenor Downs, the force shot ‘about sixty blacks’.³⁰ At Mount Spencer station, south of Lake Elphinstone, ‘more than a hundred’ Aborigines were ‘stretched out’ by strychnine-laced rations along the shoreline of Long Lagoon by a squatter. A little later, a visitor to Balnagowan station, north of Mackay, was proudly shown a collection of fourteen skulls ‘penetrated with bullet holes’.³¹ As race historian, Clive Moore summarizes frontier conflict in the region:

[...] the Native Police could easily have killed several hundred Aborigines between 1862 and 1870, most of it in the three years 1868-1870 [...] there is no doubt that the settlers mounted their own posses and went out hunting Aborigines. [They are] as likely to have killed as many [...] as the Native Police ever did [...] European women also wore pistols and revolvers and could easily handle shotguns and rifles. A conspiracy of silence covers their deeds.³²

Similarly, from the time Dietrich arrived in Bowen in late 1869, frontier dispersals there were rife. Bowen’s colonial origins had been ‘cemented in blood’³³ by George Elphinstone Dalrymple and his Native Police from 1861. In 1867, the town’s newspaper had advocated the massacre of fifty Aborigines for every colonist’s life taken, ‘exacting not only an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but as many eyes and teeth as we can possibly get’.³⁴ Bowen’s mayor, Korah Halcolm Wills later boasted of the number of casualties he had personally inflicted on Aborigines, while illegally accompanying Native Police raids. In one of these, probably during 1865, he decided ‘to get a few specimens of certain limbs and head of a Black fellow’, dissecting the body himself and later exhibiting the ‘skull [...] arms and legs’ at a function to raise funds for the new Bowen Hospital. As he wrote:

I remember I had to cover them up with a flag, the Union Jack and if anyone wished to see what was under the flag they had to ask the favour of one of the committee who were afraid the ladies might get a shock if they left it uncovered [...] it was a grand success in a monetary point of view.³⁵

A series entitled ‘Shall We Admit the Blacks?’ in the local *Port Denison Times*, appearing just before Dietrich’s arrival, disclosed how: ‘not long ago, 120 aboriginals disappeared on two occasions forever’ and how ‘the Native Police, to use the

29 J. Richards, *The Secret War* (St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 2008), pp. 25, 58, 94, 241; Bottoms, *Conspiracy*, pp. 115 f., 135 f., 145 f., 195 f.

30 Bottoms, *Conspiracy*, p. 110.

31 Ibid, pp. 72, 87 f., *Mackay Mercury*, 13 August 1875.

32 C. Moore, ‘Black Gin’s Leap. A Window into Aboriginal-European Relations in the Pioneer Valley, Queensland in the 1860’s’, *Aboriginal History*, 14, 1, 1990, p. 72.

33 *Port Denison Times*, 1 May 1869.

34 Ibid, 2 March 1867; see also B. Breslin, *Exterminate with Pride. Aboriginal-European Relations in the Townsville-Bowen Region to 1869* (James Cook University, Studies in North Queensland History, 18, 1992), p. 84.

35 K. Wills, ‘Reminiscence’, Brandon Papers, OM 75/75/3, Oxley Memorial Library, Brisbane; see also R. Evans and B. Thorpe, ‘Indigenocide and the Massacre of Aboriginal History’, *overland*, 163, winter 2001, pp. 31 ff.; R. Evans, ‘The country has another past. Queensland and the History Wars’ in F. Peters-Little, A. Curthoys and J. Docker (eds), *Passionate Histories. Myth, Memory and Indigenous Australia* (ANU E Press, 2010), pp. 15-20.

words of an eye-witness, visited the public house after their work at the shambles, “the heels of their boots covered in brains and blood and hair”.³⁶

So it is important to grasp that Dietrich’s skeleton collecting, which was possibly, though not conclusively, all done in the Bowen region, does not proceed singularly upon a blank historical canvas. Instead, she progressively moved through a colony that might well be designated a rogue state, in tandem with its violent advancing frontier. Additional to wondering how she obtained her cache of bones, we might also ask why her letters never reference the intense human mayhem continually erupting around her. Was she perhaps observing a customary, protective ‘conspiracy of silence’³⁷ on such matters; or maybe simply acting as the complete scientific collector, head down, bent industriously to her task and oblivious of anything else? Given what was unfolding, however, it is difficult to conclude that she would have remained personally unaware of serial massacres, chronologically accompanying her odyssey from Rockhampton to Bowen.

Dietrich’s silence is in sharp contrast to the accounts of other visiting naturalists and collectors who freely expound on local race relations, usually through a Eurocentric lens often smudged with deprecatory racism; but, at other times, expressing a modicum of sympathy and concern. The Victorian botanic collector and illustrator, Ellis Rowan, for instance, reported from North Queensland in 1890-92 that Aborigines were ‘a wretched-looking, misshapen and repulsive race’, nevertheless adding: ‘It is sad to see the numbers [...] wounded by guns and here, at any rate, they have been shamefully treated by white people’.³⁸ Similarly, the Scottish animal-hunter and taxidermist, James Craig, at Moreton Bay in 1875-76, made a point of learning about its violent frontier history, recording how local Aborigines, who had originally considered the colonial invaders to have had a spirit origin now referred to them as ‘burrut’ meaning ‘devil’ or ‘muthar’, meaning a ‘spider’ or ‘murderer’. When he asked an Aboriginal man ‘if he could get me the skull of a blackfellow, he was horrified at the idea and said the blackfellow (evidently meaning his spirit) would come after him’.³⁹ The transaction did not proceed. Dietrich, on the other hand, remained tight-lipped about her dutiful and single-minded gathering activities as well as the various conflictual scenarios she inhabited.

The disturbing features of her Queensland story may also be interrogated to cast a critical eye over the charge that she attempted more than once to induce Queensland squatters to kill Aborigines for her. The claim arises from one account, composed many years later, and tends to present her as the tainted outsider and the local squattocracy as, somehow, ethical exemplars in refusing her repugnant request. This hardly appears plausible. Indeed, both Carl Lumholtz, the Norwegian ethnographer and explorer, visiting in 1882-3, and Richard

36 *Port Denison Times*, 17 April and 1 May 1869; see R. Evans, ‘Queensland’s First Aboriginal Reserve. Part One: The Promise of Reform’, *Queensland Heritage*, 2, 4, May 1971, pp. 26 f.

37 R. Evans, ‘Foreword’ in Bottoms, *Conspiracy*, pp. xviii-xix.

38 E. Rowan, *A Flower Hunter in Queensland and New Zealand* (London, John Murray, 1898), pp. 82, 114.

39 J. Craig, *Diary of a Naturalist, being the record of three years work collecting Specimens in the South of France and Australia, 1873-1877* (Paisley, J. and R. Parlane, 1908, private circulation), pp. 152, 171, 191.

Semon, the German zoologist and evolutionary biologist in 1891-3, experienced an alternative scenario, spurning the offers of Queenslanders who, as Lumholtz writes: 'offered to shoot blacks for me so that I might get their skulls [...] men [...] [who] think as little of shooting a black man as a dog'.⁴⁰

The colony was replete with pioneers who believed they could, with impunity, kill indigenes for their bones. Native Police officers collected skulls and artefacts for museums after conducting their frontier dispersals.⁴¹ In early 1879, the crusading Danish journalist, Carl Feilberg wrote with dark jocularly in the *Queenslander* newspaper, concerning an invitation from a visiting French anthropologist to the colony:

Thanks to [...] M. Charnay, a French *savant* [...] we now understand that the aboriginals were created for the purpose of supplying skulls for museums [...] the skull of a blackfellow is invaluable in the eyes of the anthropological connoisseur. It appears that we are surrounded with scientific treasures [...] Let us not allow a single blackfellow to go down to his grave with peace – at least with his headpiece [...] we knew that nature had destined the whole race to be shelved, but we didn't particularly connect this destiny with the shelves of museums [...] We [...] look on a living blackfellow now as but a craniological specimen in course of preparation; and on a dead one simply as "an exchange" [...] In all events, thanks again to M. Charnay, we have no longer any difficulty in assigning to the aboriginal black his exact position in the great human establishment. His place is in the skullery.⁴²

Archibald Meston, eventually to become principal architect of twentieth century 'native policy' throughout much of Australia, would earlier boast of the number of Aborigines he had killed at the Barron River and on Dunk Island. In 1887, he wrote to the Curator of Sydney's Australia Museum:

Re skulls and skeletons of the festive myall!! To what strange use are our noble primeval inhabitants to be devoted! At your prices I could have procured about 2000 pounds worth in the last six years. I shall be on the warpath again! Hope to succeed in slaughtering some stray skeletons for you.⁴³

The very topography of Queensland became littered with such resonant locational titles as Skull Creek, Skull Pocket, Skull Hole, Skull Yard, Skeleton Creek and so on.

The author of the contentious sentence in 1908 condemning Dietrich was Henry Ling Roth, at first sight a most reliable witness. He was himself an ethnographer and later a British museum curator who had studied natural science in Germany. Among his wide range of publications is an authoritative 1890 text on the Tasmanian Aborigines – a compassionate study with a foreword by E. B. Taylor, the founder of British anthropology. His younger brother, Walter Roth became the Northern Protector of Aborigines in 1897.⁴⁴

40 C. Lumholtz, *Among Cannibals. An Account of Four Years Travel in Australia and of Camp Life with the Aborigines of Queensland* (London, J. Murray, 1889), p. 373; R. Semon, *In the Australian Bush and on the Coast of the Coral Sea: Being the Experiences and Observations of a Naturalist in Australia, New Guinea and the Moluccas*, (London: Macmillan, 1899), pp. 266 f.

41 R. Ørsted-Jensen, *Frontier History Revisited. Colonial Queensland and the 'History War'* (Brisbane, Lux Mundi Publishing, 2011), pp. 74 f.

42 C. Feilberg, 'Specialities', *Queenslander*, 18 January 1879, in Ørsted-Jensen, *Frontier History*, p. 77.

43 Evans, 'The country [...]', pp. 15, 20.

44 H. M. Griffin, 'Roth, Henry Ling (1855-1925)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 11 (Melbourne University Press, 1988), <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/roth-henry-ling-8278>.

Yet Roth's damning reference to Dietrich is essentially hearsay. He did not arrive in the Mackay district from overseas until 1878, six years after she had left the colony and nine years since she had quit Mackay itself. It is also worth mentioning that Dietrich was herself quite handy with both gun and knife. She had learned 'the handling of firearms' before leaving for Queensland and, while in Rockhampton, she had expertly dissected a 6.7 metre (22 foot) crocodile.⁴⁵ If she was truly as bloody-minded as Roth implies, surely she would have been able to 'shoot an aborigine' herself and obtain the bones, without imploring unresponsive squatters to do so. Furthermore, immediately prior to her arrival in Mackay, she had been 'rescued by Aboriginal people from a swamp while attempting to secure a splendid water lily'.⁴⁶ It strains credulity to suggest that, hard upon this, she would have repeatedly requested the cold-blooded murder of an Aborigine in the name of science.

Yet, most crucially, as Roth's biographer reveals, he had gathered information for his text, implicating Dietrich, from two close associates while Secretary of the Mackay Planters and Farmers Association.⁴⁷ The first, John Mackay was the town's founder and namesake who went on to become a notorious 'blackbirder' – i.e. a kidnapper of indentured Melanesian labourers.⁴⁸ The other was John Ewan Davidson, a sugar and cotton plantation owner whose enterprises were based upon massive profits from West Indian plantations, where his family has commanded 4 000 slaves.⁴⁹ He was personally involved in a number of violent Native Police raids, beginning in 1866, and afterwards donated Aboriginal artefacts, seized on such occasions, to the British Museum and the Dresden Museum of Ethnology in 1881.⁵⁰

Both these men thus carry tainted racial biographies themselves; and, as Roth's biographer comments, the information they imparted to him was 'somewhat inaccurate'.⁵¹ These land-takers, whose actions had, in effect, instituted all the mayhem, were basically 'pointing the bone' at Dietrich. Furthermore, it is worth noting that an earlier Roth publication on Mackay were pilloried in press reviews as 'misleading' - 'a partly ludicrous testimony', containing 'very little that is trustworthy'.⁵²

One can therefore conclude that Amalie Dietrich certainly collected a number of Aboriginal skeletons and skulls in Queensland, probably from the Bowen district, rather than from around Mackay. Such remains were possibly taken

45 McKay, *Brilliant Careers*, p. 5.

46 Ibid, p. 6.

47 Griffin, 'Roth', op. cit.

48 *Queenslander*, 22 August 1868; *Maryborough Chronicle and Wide Bay News*, 6 July 1869; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 June 2013.

49 E. Christopher, 'Dreams of a new plantation society: Legacies of British Slavery in Queensland, Australia' Legacies of British Slave-ownership Project, UCL Database, 25 July 2018.

50 R. Poignant, *Professional Savages. Captive Lives and Western Spectacle* (Sydney, UNSW Press, 2004), pp. 40-43; see also T. Barnard, 'Objects of Possession. Artefact Transaction in the Wet Tropics of North Queensland' Project.

51 Griffin, 'Roth', op. cit.

52 *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 28 June 1880; *Daily Observer*, 1 July 1880 in Henry Ling Roth, *Cutting Books: Newspaper Cuttings related to the Queensland Sugar Industry 1878-1884* (Royal Commonwealth Society Library, London).

from traditional gravesites but may perhaps have been sampled from numerous massacre locations near Bowen (or, indeed, adjacent to every location where she obtained her natural trophies). She inhabited, for almost a decade, a place where many colonizers 'had come to regard the Aborigines as noxious wild beasts to be cleared out of the way by the readiest methods'.⁵³ She herself referred to Aboriginal people as 'uneducated children', existing 'at a rather low level'⁵⁴ – a somewhat milder reproof than the excoriating views held by most colonials about them. It is, however, highly unlikely that she tried to cajole others to kill any of them for her.

In order to understand Amalie Dietrich in Queensland therefore, it is essential to understand the colony of Queensland itself. It was unerringly volatile, violent, cruel and expropriative in its land-hungry quest. During a prolonged saga of territorial seizure:

The land and its resources, upon which all other material wealth was based had been successfully taken with virtually no recompense. It had been a comprehensive plundering; land, lives and labour power; a radically reconstructed environment; theft of children and women; extensive sexual exploitation; looting of weapons and implements, grave sites, bones and skulls. Everything had been up for grabs.⁵⁵

So an extensive sampling of the skeletal remains of the evicted and slain, in which so many appear to have blithely partaken, was basically a final act of desecration. Even the dead, it seemed, must be disturbed and exploited in the cause of scientific curiosity, racist profiling and capital gain. Many professionals and amateur collectors in the West, across many decades, would sit undisturbed at this Imperial table, picking through these bones, following prior, general satiation by bigger players in a gargantuan dispossession feast. The grisly materials sampled became intellectual proofing for the ideological corner-stones of western expansionism. Amalie Dietrich, for all her otherwise admirable scientific credentials, was nevertheless one such participant in this collation, present at a height of carnage in colonial Queensland, and seated for a limited time as guest at this sad and tawdry repast.

53 *Australasian*, 8 May 1883.

54 Affeldt and Hund, 'From "Tomb Raider" [...]', pp. 94, 104.

55 Evans, *History of Queensland*, p. 145.