

Paul Turnbull

Amalie Dietrich and Collecting the Indigenous Dead in Colonial Queensland

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

George Cain was a young, ambitious would-be pastoral entrepreneur. In the late 1860s, he tried his hand at raising cattle and sheep with two partners on extensive land leases some 285 kilometres inland of the north Queensland coastal port of Townsville. Men of the Gudjal people forcefully resisted Cain's occupation of their sovereign ancestral lands. In a family letter, addressed to his grandmother, of all people, Cain told of how after one shepherd had been frightened away from his sheep by Gudjal men, he and several of his employees had taken it upon themselves to ensure that 'some of them won't worry anymore shepherds'. The bodies of the Gudjal men they shot were left to rot and dry where they fell in the intense heat of the northern summer. '[P]recious queer looking articles they look too: dry and grinning', Cain wrote, adding 'Well, they don't cost me a moments uneasiness'.¹

By the time George Cain arrived in northern Queensland, white settlement had been underway for near a decade, although the official sale of land leases in the vast region by Queensland's government did not begin until 1860.² A wealth of surviving testimony like Cain's confirms that Indigenous dispossession was accompanied by often indiscriminate, murderous violence. By the 1890s, most of the region's first peoples had lost free usage of their country, waters and other natural resources sustaining their customary life-ways. By the turn of the twentieth century, Aboriginal men and women whose labour was surplus to the needs of pastoralists began to be forcibly removed from their ancestral lands under the Queensland government's so-called 'protection' legislation.³ They were condemned to live virtually enslaved on government or missionary run reserves. And until well into the second half of the twentieth century, they endured and resisted as best they could state-sponsored efforts to systematically destroy their languages, surviving lifeways and culture.⁴

- 1 George Cain, and Barbara Cain, *News from Nulla: Correspondence of Rebecca and George Cain*, p. 18. I'm not so sure Cain was not affected by murdering Gudjal men. I find the argument of Brian Dalton, who edited this correspondence, that if Cain felt no uneasiness he would not have spoken about to his grandmother, or anyone else beyond those involved.
- 2 Geoffrey Bolton, *A Thousand Miles Away: A History of North Queensland to 1920*; Jean Farnfield, *Frontiersman: A Biography of George Elphinstone Dalrymple*.
- 3 See Queensland Government, *A Bill to make Provision for the better Protection and Care of the Aboriginal and Half-caste Inhabitants of the Colony, and to make more effectual Provision for Restricting the Sale and Distribution of Opium*.
- 4 Rosalind Kidd, *The Way We Civilise: Aboriginal Affairs - the Untold Story*.

The dispossession of the Indigenous peoples of northern Queensland coincided with their becoming a prime focus of curiosity and considerable attention within metropolitan European and colonial Australian scientific and wider intellectual circles. This was largely due to the widespread, yet erroneous and socially pernicious idea that they were a relic of primordial humanity, whose study promised to open a window onto the deep human past.⁵ Curiosity about the bodily morphology, psychology, and material culture of the first peoples of northern Queensland fuelled widespread collecting of their material culture and bodily remains by many metropolitan European and Australian museums and universities between 1860–1914. Artefacts essential for the performance of sacred ceremonies and rituals were high on the list of desired objects. So too were crania and other remains of the Indigenous dead which could safely be assumed to be racially typical in their structural morphology.

As Stefanie Affeldt and Wulf D. Hund point out in their invaluable exploration of changing perceptions of Amalie Dietrich (1821–1891),⁶ this was the context in which the naturalist travelled central and northern Queensland between 1863–1872, collecting for Cesar Godeffroy's Hamburg museum. And as Affeldt and Hund also rightly observe, a satisfactory account of her activities must deal with the fact that she collected not only a remarkable number of floral and faunal specimens, as well as ethnographic material, but also the bodily remains of men and women of the Birri Gubba Nation and possibly other first peoples of central and northern coastal Queensland in the context of their violent dispossession by settler colonialism.⁷

As what I've written concerning Dietrich and her acquisition of ancestral bodily remains figure Affeldt and Hund's important article, there are some observations and points of clarification it seems worth making about her anthropological collecting in the context of the racialized construal and dispossession of the region's first peoples, and Dietrich's depiction since the early 1990s as the so-called 'Angel of Black Death'.

Perhaps the first point to make is that when looking into Dietrich's Queensland travels, we find ourselves confronting fragmentary evidence, much of which is of dubious quality. Consider, for example, the variously rehearsed claim that Dietrich 'asked an officer of the Native Police what he would take to shoot so and so, [for his skeleton] pointing to one of the Native Black Troopers'.⁸ Of course, it was not unknown for the white officers of this paramilitary force to kill their men. In 1858, for example, one sub-lieutenant was accused of having one trooper who had deserted shot while handcuffed.⁹ In late 1860, a trooper charged with murder in central Queensland was shot dead while attempting to escape, while another who deserted after being accused of involvement 'escaped into the bush' – never

5 Lynette Russell, *Savage Imaginings: Historical and Contemporary Constructions of Australian Aboriginalities*; Tony Bennett, *Pasts Beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism*; Paul Turnbull, *Science, Museums and Collecting the Indigenous Dead in Colonial Australia*.

6 Stefanie Affeldt and Wulf D. Hund, 'From "Plant Hunter" to "Tomb Raider": The Changing Image of Amalie Dietrich'.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 118.

8 Herbert Ling Roth, *The Discovery and Settlement of Port Mackay, Queensland*, p. 81.

9 'Parliamentary', *Darling Downs Gazette*, 29 July, p. 3.

to be seen again – while being brought back to the police barracks at Rockhampton.¹⁰ In 1876, reports circulated that near the western settlement of Aramac, an officer had shot and burnt one trooper, and flogged another to death.¹¹ But the idea that Dietrich would have asked an officer of the force to shoot one of his men is beyond belief. We find, moreover, that the accusation appears in a history of Mackay published in 1908 by Henry Ling Roth (1885–1925). Chiefly remembered today for his ethnographical writings and career as a museum curator, Roth lived in the north Queensland coastal city of Mackay between 1878–1884 promoting the region’s sugar industry. He arrived four years after Dietrich had sailed for Hamburg. His book appeared sixteen years after her death. Roth does not name his source, nor do his surviving papers and correspondence give any clue as to who told him about the supposed incident, or why he chose to rehearse the claim in his history of Mackay.¹²

Roth also writes in his history that Dietrich had also ‘made several ineffectual efforts to induce squatters to shoot an aboriginal, so that she could send the skeleton to the Museum!’¹³ Roth did not say who these squatters were, but Ray Sumner and others have drawn attention to a story passed down within the Archer family, that Dietrich had been a guest at their Gracemere homestead when their forbears, William (1818–1896) and Archibald (1820–1902), were raising sheep and cattle on pastoral leases on Fitzroy River in central Queensland.¹⁴ The story goes that when she asked the Archer brothers to kill an Aboriginal man for his skeleton, she was smartly shown off the property.

On the face of it, it’s a fanciful story, but it may have origins in actual events. The Archers had a reputation as humanitarians who let the Tarumbal clans of the Darumbal people continue to live on their ancestral Nunthi (country). They were also dependent on their labour and it was obviously in their interest to maintain good relations with them. So, what may have happened is that Dietrich asked one or both Archer brothers to help her obtain the bones of Darumbal people from where they had been buried in country. They refused, and either fearful that Dietrich might disturb their burial places, for which they would be blamed, or just morally outraged, they asked her to leave. We know of examples where pastoralists feared being implicated in the desecration of burial places. For example, when Edward Charles Stirling (1848–1919), the director of the South Australian Museum, was in England between 1891–1892, he sought the help of his elder brother, John Lancelot Stirling (1849–1932), to arrange for museum employees get him several complete skeletons to present to British colleagues. They were to be got by plundering burial sites on or near a pastoral station leased by the Stirling family on the Mundi Mundi Plains of central western New South Wales. However, Robert Kay (1825–1904), the Museum and Library Board’s long-time secretary, prevented their acquisition, fearing that the museum staff who would

10 Alma, *Native Trooper*, 1859. JUS/N3/61/14; Item ID ITM2720215.

11 *Miscellaneous Letterbooks: Dispatch 25, 1876*. COL/A227/76/2698; ITM861049.

12 Roth’s Papers are now held by the John Rylands Research Institute and Library, University of Manchester.

13 Roth, *The Discovery and Settlement of Port Mackay, Queensland*, p. 81.

14 See Lorna MacDonald, *Over Earth and Ocean: the Archers of Tolderodden and Gracemere: a Norse-Australian Saga*.

collect the remains did not, in his view, 'have judgment enough to be trusted in a rather delicate matter as any row or squabble might I suppose have grave consequences'.¹⁵ John Stirling responded that his brother would regret being unable to present skeletons to his metropolitan colleagues, assuring Kay that the museum's men would not be at any risk – although he confessed that he did not want any of his employees involved. As he explained to Kay,

The reason for our Station people not desiring to appear in the matter is merely from the fact of our employing a good many natives and our men doing anything in the matter would probably make them shy of remaining where their last resting place may be disturbed.¹⁶

One is inclined to think the Archers were likewise motivated by fearing the loss of Darumbal labour. For we find that Alexander Archer appears to have been involved in the removal of Ancestral remains, probably from either Tarambul or Warabal clan Nunthi. He is listed as the donor of three skeletons, two crania and a lower jaw acquired by the Anatomy Institute of the University of Christiania (Oslo) by Christian Boeck (1798–1877), Professor of Physiology.¹⁷ How and when exactly the remains got to Oslo has yet to be determined, but they were there by 1869. They could have been brought to Norway by Alexander or another member of the Archer family visiting Norway (the family were originally Scottish but moved to Norway to develop their business in trading timber). Possibly they were just shipped to Oslo.

We therefore cannot rule out that Alexander, or possibly his brother William, plundered graves when there was no chance of discovery, or came across unburied remains, either on or in the vicinity of remote parts of their pastoral leases. Records held by the University of Oslo may tell us more about how the remains of these people were obtained. However, we will never know what occurred between Dietrich and Archers.

In her 1993 biography of Dietrich, 'A Woman in the Wilderness', Ray Sumner wrote of Dietrich having acquired the dried skin of an Aboriginal person at some point during her travels in central and northern Queensland. Affeldt and Hund take Sumner to task as retelling a lurid tale involving the presentation of oral history as fact. They are of the view that 'There is ... every indication that this is an artefact of fiction altogether'.¹⁸ They also draw attention to my reproducing in a 1997 essay 'without comment' the 'story' that Dietrich acquired the 'skin' of an Aboriginal person, the implication being that I too have unreflectively endorsed fiction as fact.

Is Dietrich's having acquired the skin of a person so obviously fiction? She could have acquired a skin from a ceremonial ground or burial place, a possibility of which I was persuaded by talking with Mr. Monty Pryor and Mr. Peter Pryor, senior Elders of the Birri Gubba Nation, and also Dr. Ernie Grant, a senior Elder of the Jirrbal tribe from the Tully area of coastal North Queensland. All explained

15 Robert Kay, Letter to Stirling, 8 February 1892. GRG 19/14/3/140.

16 John Lancelot Stirling, Letter to Robert Kay, 7 February 1892. GRG 19 Series 24A.

17 J. Nicolaysen, 'Voss: Skeletter og Kranier fra Australien...', pp. 2-4.

18 Stefanie Affeldt and Wulf D. Hund, 'From "Plant Hunter" to "Tomb Raider": The Changing Image of Amalie Dietrich', p. 100.

that it was the custom in the funerary ceremonies for some of their Ancestors that their outer skin would be ritually removed in course of helping their spirit return to the care of their ancestral country. There are also references to similarly prepared skins of Ancestors having been acquired by Western medico-scientific institutions. For example, England's Royal College Surgeons acquired one in the late 1820s. It was obtained by Allen Cunningham (1791-1839), the botanist on John Oxley's second expedition to Moreton Bay in 1824. Cunningham reported that 'he frequently heard of this Custom of the Indians in these parts', and while in Brisbane he been given a portion of one by the commandant of the Morton Bay penal colony. It had been found in a rush bag suspended beneath a bark shelter 'in a very brushy recluse part of the Forest'. Cunningham also learned that the first peoples of the region kept skins removed before burial and other dried body parts 'from the sight of the Whites [to] Serve as a memento to awaken their recollections of an individual who was in life either eminent for his bravery or was endeared for his kindness of Heart or other esteemed qualifications'.¹⁹ In 1827, London's Zoological Society appealed for specimens through the colonial press, with the result that, among other items, they received 'the bones included in the dried skin of a female Native of Australia'.²⁰ The Society offered the woman's remains to the Royal College of Surgeons in return for duplicate specimens of insects and other invertebrates. Curiously, Affeldt and Hund, note the Society's having been sent these remains, but maintain that its interest in the remains was not scientifically motivated.

Affeldt and Hund's case for seeing the acquisition of a skin as an artefact of fiction largely rests on Birgit Scheps having found no reference to the skin in relevant museum records.²¹ Scheps is an immensely knowledgeable, meticulous researcher. However, I don't think it can be said that the presence of a ritually prepared skin in Hamburg is therefore improbable. In near 30 years of repatriation research, there have been various occasions when I and my colleague Cressida Fforde have discovered bodily structures and organs removed from the bodies of Indigenous Australians in anthropology or comparative anatomy collections that have been neither listed in catalogues, nor mentioned in medico-scientific publications.²² Affeldt and Hund also give little credence to the other evidence we have concerning the skin: a popular article about Dietrich, published in a late 1932 edition of the 'Hamburger Anzeiger'. They suggest that the article's author had doubts about Dietrich's obtaining it. However, what the author of the article appears to have doubted was whether Dietrich herself had flayed the man whose skin was reported as having been in Hamburg, and which had photographed at some point after arriving at the museum (a copy of the photograph said to be the skin appears in the article).

19 Allan Cunningham, 'Memoranda to accompany the Specimen of a Native's Skin to Sir Everard Home Bt. from Allen Cunningham. Australia', 1 August 1829, MS 275.g. 9.

20 William Clift, 'Occupations During the Year, 1831', MS0007/1/4/2/22.

21 See Birgit Scheps, 'Die Australien-Sammlung aus dem Museum Godeffroy im Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig', p. 197; also, 'Skelette aus Queensland - Die Sammlerin Amalie Dietrich', pp. 130-145.

22 We discuss the challenges of repatriation research in Cressida Fforde, Lyndon Ormond-Parker, & Paul Turnbull, 'Repatriation Research: Archives and the Recovery of History and Heritage'.

Turning to consider the issue of Dietrich's depiction as the 'Angel of Black Death',²³ Affeldt and Hund disagree with my describing David Monaghan's Bulletin article in which she was so named as 'a sensationally inaccurate piece'. They also dismiss my suggesting that Monaghan was drawing a 'crude parallel' between Dietrich and Irma Grese, the infamous 'Blonde Angel of Auschwitz'. As to the inaccuracies of the article, there is no evidence, as Monaghan claimed, that Indigenous Australians were 'murdered to obtain specimens for science'. Australian colonial museums did not, as he states, 'run their own system of organised grave desecration'. Collecting by museums was sporadic and opportunistic, except for the discovery of large burial grounds in the vicinity of the Murray River in northern Victoria and the Coorong region of South Australia in the early twentieth century. Charles Darwin did not position Indigenous Australians as crucial proof of his theories. That was done by influential younger anatomists and anthropologists in British universities who embraced aspects of his 'long argument' for evolution by speciation. It is not true that 'The brains of Aborigines were being used to theorise why the race was so difficult to civilise'. The brains were of interest because what they thought likely to yield new knowledge of the evolutionary history of the human brain. It was not the case that 'Hypotheses resulting from studies of skulls were used to justify laws governing Aborigines'. Nor did politicians making such laws refer to studies of the structural morphology of bodily structures in Indigenous Australians. And one would like to know what National Socialists of the 1920s got out of the craniometric analyses of the pioneer French anthropologist Paul Broca (1824–1880).

One could go on, but the quality of Monaghan's 'research' is exemplified by the inclusion of a photograph, with no caption, of Robert Etheridge (1847–1920) and Australian Museum staff at work excavating what the reader could be forgiven was an Aboriginal grave, when in fact they were investigating the discovery of dugong bones.²⁴

On the matter of Dietrich's depiction as the 'Angel of Black Death', Affeldt and Hund are right, insofar as David Monaghan does not overtly liken the naturalist to Grese, or any other of the several sadistic death camp guards tried after World War Two. But it seems worth putting on record that Monaghan interviewed me at length on several occasions in mid-1991. I gave him two of my then unpublished articles, which were used in his Bulletin article and in the 'research' that he (presumably) did in several British and Australian archives in developing a film documentary entitled 'Darwin's Body-Snatchers'. In our conversations, it became clear to me that he was drawing parallels with the medical killings of the Holocaust and was intent on finding evidence of murder in the name of science. Whether he or a sub-editor at the Bulletin was responsible for the article's title, the intention was, to my mind clear, and has since been so interpreted, not least because of his writing in the article that the campaigning by Indigenous Australians for the unconditional repatriation of their Old People was 'taking on the dimensions of the fight by Jewish people over the disposal of Holocaust material

23 David Monaghan, 'Angel of Black Death', 12 November 1991.

24 'Angel of Black Death', p. 30.

gathered by Nazi doctors'. Indeed, I suspect that Monaghan was aware that Bob Weatherall, the director of the Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action (FAIRA) – who by the early 1990s had been campaigning for the unconditional return of Ancestral remains for over a decade – had publicly condemned, on various occasions, the refusal of scientists to agree to their repatriation as no different from keeping the remains of the victims of National Socialism in medico-scientific collections. Moreover, Affeldt and Hund themselves note that 'Fiona Foley, a Badtjala artist from Fraser island, claimed in 1999, referencing 'The Bulletin' that Dietrich was "known to have offered financial incentives to local settlers in return for the shooting of healthy Aboriginal specimens'. What Foley also recalls in the article to which they refer, is her going on a field trip during an academic symposium in Berlin to Leipzig's Grassi Museum:

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'.²⁵

Another legacy of Monaghan's article, as I discovered when talking with Birri Gubba Elders in Townsville, not long after its publication, was that they claimed to have been told by their ancestor about 'the Angel of Black Death'. To be honest, I was sceptical. When I worked with Mr. Monty Pryor on researching the theft of the remains of his ancestors in 1989–1990, it was after he had come to learn of the outrage from information provided by Bob Weatherall and researchers associated with FAIRA. In my many years of living in northern Queensland, I never heard anyone speak of Dietrich as the 'Black Angel' who had not read the 'Bulletin' article.

It also seems worth pointing out that in mid-1991 I was interviewed on camera for 'Darwin's Body-Snatchers'. The interview was not included in the documentary, nor was my research acknowledged, because I suspect, I had been keen to explain that Ancestral Remains came into scientific hands in a variety of ways, including erosion and unearthing by rabbits, and said that while there was widespread theft of remains from burials, there was no credible evidence that Dietrich or anyone else sought to have people killed for medico-scientific ends.

What is indisputable, however, is that Dietrich secured at least eight skeletons, two skulls, and one lower jaw by the time she left Queensland. It is possible that she acquired more Ancestral remains which were not obtained by Leipzig's Museum für Völkerkunde after the closure of the Godeffroy Museum. However, when we seek answers to the questions of where, how and when Dietrich got these remains, we run up against the fact that the sole source of evidence we have are 'letters' that Dietrich supposedly sent from Queensland to her daughter, Charitas Bischoff (1848–1926). And as Ray Sumner has convincingly shown, these 'letters' have clearly been fictionalised, with much of what Dietrich has to say about 'botany, zoology, Aboriginal customs, and artefacts' being plagiarisms

25 Fiona Foley, 'A Blast from the Past', p. 46.

from Norwegian zoologist Carl Lumholtz's (1851–1922), 'Unter Menschenfressern. Eine vierjährige Reise in Australien', the 1892 German edition of his 1880–1884 field work in North Queensland.²⁶

Sumner has warned against trusting what the 'letters' have to say about Dietrich taking Ancestral bodily remains from burials, maintaining that 'purchase and exchange were Dietrich's methods of acquiring ethnographic and anthropological specimens'. Several observations seem warranted here. Firstly, we have the problem that we don't know to what extent these 'letters' are fictional. And here I must confess that when I wrote of Dietrich in a 1997 essay as 'combing the Birri-Gubba country taking the bones of ancestral dead from hollow trees and burial platforms', I placed unwarranted trust in the authenticity of the 'letters'.²⁷ This was due to my having spoken with Birri Gubba Elders Mr. Monty and Mr. Peter Pryor about the ways in which their Ancestors were traditionally buried. Nothing they told me was at odds with what appears in Bischoff's book of her mother's 'letters' concerning their burial. But, the fact remains that I trusted the 'letters'; and as I have told Ray Sumner, I probably should have given greater weight to the possibility that Dietrich bought the remains she sent the Godeffroy Museum from someone willing to collect on her behalf. Indeed, as time goes by the more unlikely it seems that Dietrich would have gone alone, or with one or two guides, to where the dead were buried, given what we know about the determination of Indigenous communities in Queensland frontier regions to protect the dead from white desecration. However, all this said, there is no evidence confirming Dietrich acquired Ancestral remains by purchase or exchange.

Then there is the issue of Dietrich's representation as 'an archetype of female evil'. Affeldt and Hund suggest that Sumner 'herself contributed massively to the recent spread of the 'black legend' about Amalie Dietrich' by including in her biography of Dietrich, without critical commentary, the story heard by Henry Ling Roth, and oral tradition within the Archer family, that Dietrich had asked an Aboriginal man to be shot for his skeleton or skin. As Affeldt and Hund point out, one reviewer of the biography was at a loss to understand why Sumner appeared to uncritically accept a story surviving as folklore.²⁸ Plus we find one other reviewer was sufficiently impressed by the overall quality of Sumner's scholarship to take at face value Sumner's apparently accepting that Dietrich had indeed asked for a man to be shot, difficult though it was to accept.²⁹ Moreover, in the same year that her biography of Dietrich appeared, Sumner published an article on the naturalist's anthropological collecting, again accepting the Archer family story that she had made such a 'dreadful request', and going to some length to explain that

Dietrich showed an attitude to the Aborigines which was not at all uncommon amongst Europeans at that time, both in Europe itself and amongst the white settlers in Queensland. At its worst level was the prevalent view that the Aborigines were not members of the human race at all, but were some kind of animal, so that

26 See Ray Sumner, 'Combinatorial Creativity and the Australian Letters of Amalie Dietrich', pp. 199–208.

27 Paul Turnbull, 'The Body and Soul Snatchers' p. 36.

28 Linden Gillbank, '[Review of] Ray Sumner, *A Woman in the Wilderness*', p. 192.

29 Vivian Courto, '[Review of] Ray Sumner, *A Woman in the Wilderness*', p. 183.

a specimen of an Aborigine was not regarded as different from a specimen of, say, a kangaroo, and local pastoralists mostly believed both should be exterminated if they threatened the raising of live-stock.³⁰

The history of Queensland settler colonialism is terrifyingly stained with the blood of the land's first peoples. However, the notion that there were scientists and field naturalists who, like Dietrich, regarded collecting 'a specimen of Aborigine' as no different from collecting fauna specimens is erroneous, to put it mildly. Likewise Sumner is wrong in describing the 'study of the physical remains of human specimens in order to verify the theory of biological superiority was avidly pursued by nineteenth century anthropologists, who regarded such activity as a legitimate scientific enterprise'.³¹ No anthropologist of the time that I can think of undertook comparative investigation of what they took to be racially representative Australian crania, or other bodily structures, because they sought to verify the biological superiority of European racial types. They had no need for they implicitly assumed Indigenous psychological inferiority. What interested them was what investigating the structural morphology of crania, brains, and other structures – pelvises and long bones – obtained from the bodies of Aboriginal Australians, might disclose concerning the nature and origins of human variation. Further, in support of her claims that Dietrich, and presumably other contemporary nineteenth century anthropologists, held views which in their extreme form denied Aboriginal people their humanity. Sumner quotes Rudolf Virchow (1821–1902) as having said, when addressing the *Versammlung Deutscher Naturforscher und Ärzte* (Association of German Natural Scientists and Physicians) in 1879, that in his view

The Papuans have until most recently been regarded as the lowest stage of mankind at present (but) the missing link has still not been located [...] to a certain extent the Australian (Aborigine) is such³²

However, what Virchow actually told his colleagues was that in his view studying the skulls of Papuans disclosed similarities to those of peoples in more 'culturally advanced peoples' (*höherer Kulturvölker*); and while he conceded that, in some respects, the morphology of Aboriginal Australians could be said to present simian characteristics, the degree to which they did, was, in his view, less than others had claimed (Virchow's target here was undoubtedly Darwinian comparative anatomists). Moreover, Virchow was of the view that these similarities were certainly not enough to say that there existed 'a gulf deep enough between them and us that one could say that the Australians are closer to the apes than to us'. 'They always remain', Virchow pointedly added, 'human beings in our sense, and next of kin to us, whom we must acknowledge [as such]'.³³

Sumner's defence of Dietrich is puzzling. It entails accepting, on dubious evidence, that the naturalist made so 'dreadful request' as to ask that an Aboriginal man be killed. It involves caricaturing contemporary anthropology in mitigation

30 Ray Sumner, 'Amalie Dietrich and the Aborigines: her Contribution to Australian Anthropology and Ethnography', p. 5.

31 Dietrich and the Aborigines, p. 3.

32 Ray Sumner, 'Amalie Dietrich and the Aborigines', p. 5.

33 Rudolf Virchow, 'Die Ziele und Mittel der modernen Anthropologie', pp. 51-52.

of her supposed request to argue that she was one (woman) among many (men) who were prepared to go about procuring a 'specimen' of an Aboriginal person much as they would a 'specimen' of a kangaroo.

Even so, it seems to me wrong to say that Sumner 'contributed massively' to Dietrich's misogynistic portrayal as the 'Angel of Black Death'. In mid-1991, Sumner was approached by David Monaghan, and just as I did, she provided information and answered questions in good faith, as historians do when they speak with supposedly bona fide journalists or media researchers. There is no reason to disbelieve Sumner, however, when she says that she never told Monaghan that she was 'certain Dietrich had Aborigines killed'.

One can appreciate Sumner's frustration, indeed anger when Dietrich's portrayal as the 'Angel of Black Death' captured imaginations in the wake of the publication of Monaghan's Bulletin article. Grotesquely so, for by the late 1990s, fundamentalist Christian websites were claiming that Dietrich was seduced by Darwin into killing Aboriginal people for stuffing and mounting in museums as tangible proof of his wicked theory of evolution.³⁴ One can also sympathise with Sumner on being distressed to find that even reputable scholars were convinced by Monaghan's depiction of Dietrich as proof that Aboriginal people were sometimes murdered 'to obtain specimens for science'.³⁵ And then there is Dietrich's depiction in the 2011 Terra X documentary, 'Mordakte Museum', as the archetypal body-snatcher, creeping furtively through the bush with a handcart, bent on a ghoulish quest for bones.³⁶ Here, I can empathise with Sumner, having also been interviewed by the documentary's creator, Matthias Glaubrecht. Glaubrecht pressed me on the question of whether Dietrich or other collectors had murdered Indigenous Australians. On my responding there was no credible evidence they had, he tried several times to get me to agree that it was at least possible some people were killed for scientific ends. I replied, by then a little irritated, that I couldn't see why one would have needed to kill anyone, given that there were probably enough bones to be had in the aftermath of killings by Queensland's infamous Native Police and well-armed parties of settlers.³⁷

34 See, for example, Carl Wieland, *Darwin's Bodysnatchers: New Horrors*.

35 For example, Megan-Jane Johnstone, 'Research Ethics, Reconciliation, and Strengthening the Research Relationship in Indigenous Health Domains: an Australian Perspective', p. 395.

36 Jens Monath, *Mordakte Museum*, ZDF-Magazin "Terra X" über ein dunkles Kapitel der Wissenschaftsgeschichte.

37 An over-statement on my part. The claim by Affeldt and Hund that officers of the force 'frequently combined their often-deadly missions with a side-line as bone gatherers' arguably overstates the number of officers involved and the extent to which they engaged in collecting Ancestral remains. A week or so before being interviewed for the 'Mordakte Museum' documentary I discovered that in the late 1880s the journalist, politician, and occasional plunderer of traditional burial places, Archibald Meston (1851-1924), had announced, in the Cairns Post newspaper, that he intended to go to the Russell River to get skeletons for the Sydney's Australian Museum, as actions by Native Police and armed settlers against Idinji and Wanyurr-Majay men defending their Ancestral country gave him reason to think he was likely to find them easily. This led me to investigate the involvement of Native Police officers in the collecting of Ancestral remains, and whether the remains of people killed in police actions - 'dispersals' to employ the euphemism of the time - were acquired for medico-scientific collections. See Turnbull, *Science, Museums and Collecting the Indigenous Dead in Colonial Australia*, pp. 279-299.

Finally, there is Sumner's maintaining that Monaghan's and other popular accounts of Dietrich's collecting Ancestral remains are implicitly misogynist in accusing her of 'fanciful evil activities', in that the many proven cases of scientific grave-robbing by men are ignored. Certainly, popular representations of Dietrich in Australia since the early 1990s strike one as disturbingly misogynistic. But it is not true to say that the plundering of Indigenous Australian burial places by male scientists and natural history collectors, who collected independently or were employed by museums, has been ignored. There is, for example, Cressida Fforde's 2004 book, *Collecting the Dead: Archaeology and the Reburial Issue*.³⁸ There are also important studies by Helen Macdonald,³⁹ and of course there are my own publications since the early 1990s.⁴⁰

This said, there is more work to be done. Affeldt and Hund rightly see this work as including our satisfactorily explaining how, in the context of settler colonialism, scientists and scientific field workers like Dietrich could 'integrate dehumanising practices in an endeavour viewed by her and her contemporaries as "collecting"'. I would add that we would do well to engage in close contextual investigation, not only of how collecting integrated dehumanising practices, but also how collecting the dead, as a social activity, gave factual concreteness to perceptions of Australia's first peoples beyond scientific circles that perniciously affected the lives of Australia's first peoples in the aftermath of dispossession – so profoundly that we continue to struggle to overcome its material, social and psychological legacies.

When looking at collecting and the science it enabled, we enter a complex and contradictory historical landscape. In previous writings, I have drawn attention, for example, to what the biologist Richard Semon (1859–1918) had to say about his collecting in the context of frontier violence in far northern Queensland. When he visited Cooktown, in mid-1892, Semon learnt that he might be able to secure the skeletal remains of victims of a Native Police 'dispersal' for Munich's Royal Museum of Ethnology. He later wrote that he had been appalled to learn from a local resident that the bones of people killed by the police 'had for a long time been left to bleach in the open bush'. Nonetheless, he confessed,

my humanity did not go so far as to prompt me to exert myself in order to obtain an honourable burial for these bones. On the contrary, I had the ardent desire to secure the remains of these poor victims for scientific purposes, the study of a series of Australian crania being of considerable anthropological interest.⁴¹

Semon was not alone in being horrified by the nature and scale of frontier violence across northern Australia. And yet he was ready to see science become a beneficiary of the bloodshed that accompanied the opening of central and northern Australia to pastoralism, mining and off-shore pearling between 1860 and 1920. Surviving correspondence and published writings of other collectors

38 Cressida Fforde, *Collecting the Dead: Archaeology and the Reburial Issue*.

39 Helen Macdonald, *Human Remains: Episodes in Human Dissection; 'A Scandalous Act: Regulating Anatomy in a British Settler Colony, Tasmania 1869'; 'The Anatomy Inspector and the Government Corpse'; Possessing the Dead: The Artful Science of Anatomy*.

40 Turnbull, *Science, Museums and Collecting the Indigenous Dead in Colonial Australia*.

41 Richard Wolfgang Semon, *In the Australian Bush and on the Coast of the Coral Sea ...*, pp. 266.

similarly contain observations and reflections in which dismay or condemnation of the brutality of frontier expansion is accompanied by affirmations of the scientific importance of collecting the bodily remains of Indigenous Australian peoples.

We will never know the Dietrich who inspired the ‘letters’ published by Charitas Bischoff, or what Dietrich said about collecting the dead to the Archer brothers, or what contact, if any, the naturalist had with officers of the Native Police stationed in Bowen. My inclination is to think that Dietrich was much like Semon. Her sense of her humanity and that of Birra Gubba and other peoples of coastal Queensland did not go so far as to quench her desire to secure their bones for science.

Whatever the truth, it is the letters and other writings of other collectors with trustworthy provenances that require our close attention, for what they can tell us about the play of culturally ingrained ideas of human difference and the ideology of settlerism in collecting, and also for what they can tell us about how and why the activity of collecting gave a new degree of scientific credibility to long-standing racialized perceptions and assumptions about Aboriginal Australian people and Torres Strait Islanders. Affeldt and Hund have done great service in this respect. Their critical investigation of changing representations of Amalie Dietrich is essential ground-clearing, helping us to move beyond obfuscating caricatures, such as Dietrich’s portrayal as the ‘Angel of Black Death’, and to engage in useful decolonising of the past – by understanding and endeavouring to explain the complexity of the connections between scientific collecting of the Indigenous dead and settler colonialism – the points of contradiction, moral ambivalence and inconsistency, as well as the dehumanising effects of collecting.

Bibliography

- Affeldt, Stefanie and Hund, Wulf D., ‘From ‘Plant Hunter’ to ‘Tomb Raider’. The Changing Image of Amalie Dietrich’, *Australian Studies Journal / Zeitschrift für Australienstudien*, 33-34, 2019-2020, pp. 89-124.
- Colonial Secretary’s Office, Miscellaneous Letterbooks: Dispatch 25, 1876, COL/A227/76/2698; ITM861049, Queensland State Archives, Brisbane.
- Bennett, Tony, *Pasts Beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism*, Routledge: London, 2004.
- Bolton, Geoffrey, *A Thousand Miles Away: A History of North Queensland to 1920*, Jacaranda Press: Brisbane, 1963.
- Cain, George, and Barbara Cain, ‘News from Nulla: Correspondence of Rebecca and George Cain’ in Brian J. Dalton, ed., Department of History and Politics, James Cook University, Townsville, 1991.
- Clift, William, Occupations During the Year, 1831, Diaries 1811-1842, MS0007/1/4/2/22, Royal College of Surgeons of England Archives, London.
- Courto, Vivian, ‘[Review of] Ray Sumner, A Woman in the Wilderness’, *Aboriginal History*, 18, no. 1/2, 1994, pp. 181-183.
- Cunningham, Allan, ‘Memoranda to accompany the Specimen of a Native’s Skin to Sir. Everard Home Bt. from Allen Cunningham. Australia’, 1 August 1829, MS 275.g. 9, Royal College of Surgeons of England Archives, London.
- Farnfield, Jean, *Frontiersman: A Biography of George Elphinstone Dalrymple*, Oxford University Press: Melbourne, 1968.
- Fforde, Cressida, *Collecting the Dead: Archaeology and the Reburial Issue*, Duckworth: 2004.

- Fforde, Cressida, Lyndon Ormond-Parker, and Paul Turnbull, 'Repatriation Research: Archives and the Recovery of History and Heritage' in: Ruth Redmond Cooper, ed., *Heritage, Ancestry and Law: Principles, Policies and Practices in Dealing with Historical Human Remains*, Institute of Art and Law, Wells, 2015, pp. 39-59.
- Foley, Fiona, 'A Blast from the Past' in: Joseph May, and Jennifer Natalia Fink eds., *Performing Hybridity*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, pp. 46-58.
- Gillbank, Linden, '[Review of] Ray Sumner, A Woman in the Wilderness', *Historical Records of Australian Science*, 10, no. 2, 1994, pp. 190-192.
- Inquest Files, Alma, Native Trooper, 1859, JUS/N3/61/14; Item ID ITM2720215, Queensland State Archives, Brisbane.
- Johnstone, Megan-Jane, 'Research Ethics, Reconciliation, and Strengthening the Research Relationship in Indigenous Health Domains: an Australian Perspective', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 31, 2007, pp. 391-406.
- Museum Correspondence - Letters Received, Kay, Robert, Letter to Stirling, 8 February, 1892, GRG 19/14/3/140, State Records of South Australia.
- Kidd, Rosalind, *The Way We Civilise: Aboriginal Affairs - the Untold Story*, University of Queensland Press: St Lucia, Qld., 1997.
- MacDonald, Helen, *Human Remains: Episodes in Human Dissection*, Melbourne University Press: Melbourne, 2005.
- , 'A Scandalous Act: Regulating Anatomy in a British Settler Colony, Tasmania 1869', *Social History of Medicine*, 20, 2007, pp. 39-56.
- , 'The Anatomy Inspector and the Government Corpse', *History Australia*, 6, no. 2, 2009, pp. 40.1-40.17.
- , *Possessing the Dead: The Artful Science of Anatomy*, Melbourne University Press: Melbourne, 2010.
- MacDonald, Lorna, *Over Earth and Ocean: the Archers of Tolderodden and Gracemere: a Norse-Australian Saga*, University of Queensland Press, Central Queensland University Press: Rockhampton, 1999.
- Monaghan, David, 'Angel of Black Death', *The Bulletin and Newsweek*, 12 November 1991, pp. 30-38.
- Monath, Jens, 'Mordakte Museum, ZDF-Magazin "Terra X" über ein dunkles Kapitel der Wissenschaftsgeschichte', 2011, <https://zdf-enterprises.de/programmatalog/international/zdfeunscripted/history-biographies/mordakte-museum> (retrieved: 27 April 2021).
- Nicolaysen, J., 'Voss: Skeletter og Kranier fra Australien, Norsk Magaz, f. Lägevid. B. 23, Forhandl. S. 83', *Nordisk Medicinskt Arkiv*, 2, no. 14, 1870, pp. 2-4.
- 'Parliamentary', *Darling Downs Gazette*, 29 July 1858, p. 3.
- Queensland Government, 'A Bill to make Provision for the better Protection and Care of the Aboriginal and Half-caste Inhabitants of the Colony, and to make more effectual Provision for Restricting the Sale and Distribution of Opium', Queensland Government Printer, Brisbane, 1897, https://www.foundingdocs.gov.au/resources/transcripts/qld5_doc_1897.pdf (retrieved: 19 April 2021).
- Roth, Herbert Ling, *The Discovery and Settlement of Port Mackay, Queensland.*, F. King and Sons: Halifax, 1908.
- Russell, Lynette, *Savage Imaginings: Historical and Contemporary Constructions of Australian Aboriginalities*, Australian Scholarly Publishing: Melbourne, 2001.
- Scheps, Birgit, Die Australien-Sammlung aus dem Museum Godeffroy im Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig, in: Jahrbuch des Museums für Völkerkunde in Leipzig, 40, 1994, pp. 194-221.
- , Skelette aus Queensland - Die Sammlerin Amalie Dietrich, in: Holger Stoecker, Thomas Schnalke, Andreas Winkelmann, eds., *Sammeln, Erforschen, Zurückgeben? Menschliche Gebeine aus der Kolonialzeit in akademischen und musealen Sammlungen*, Berlin: Ch. Links 2013, pp. 130-145.
- Semon, Richard Wolfgang, *In the Australian Bush and on the Coast of the Coral Sea ...*, Macmillan and Co. limited: London, New York, 1899.
- Museum Correspondence - Letters Received, Stirling, John Lancelot, Letter to Robert Kay, 7 February, 1892, GRG 19 Series 24A 1892, State Records of South Australia.
- Sumner, Ray, 'Amalie Dietrich and the Aborigines: her Contribution to Australian Anthropology and Ethnography', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 2, 1993, pp. 3-19.

- , 'Combinatorial Creativity and the Australian Letters of Amalie Dietrich', *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers*, 78, 2016, pp. 192-215.
- Turnbull, Paul, 'The Body and Soul Snatchers', *Eureka Street*, no. 7, 1997, pp. 34-38.
- , *Science, Museums and Collecting the Indigenous Dead in Colonial Australia*, Palgrave: London, 2017.
- Virchow, Rudolf, 'Die Ziele und Mittel der modernen Anthropologie', *Beilage zum Tageblatt der 49. Versammlung deutscher Naturforscher und Aerzte...*, L. Friederichsen & Co.: Hamburg, 1876 pp. 51-55.
- Wieland, Carl, 'Darwin's Bodysnatchers: New Horrors. People deliberately killed to provide 'Specimens' for Evolutionary Research, Creation Ministries International', <https://creation.com/darwins-bodysnatchers-new-horrors> (retrieved: 27 April 2021).