

The long road home

A century after colonial body snatchers robbed the burial grounds of the Aborigines, British-held remains are finally being repatriated. But how does it feel to find the bones of your revered ancestors in the dusty archives of a Scottish museum?

By **Claire Scobie**
Portrait **Gary Calton**

When Tom Trevor was growing up on the banks of the River Murray in South Australia, white Australian farmers would drive around in big Chevies, proudly displaying an Aboriginal skull on the dashboard. “They got a kick out of it, a thrill,” he recalls. “It was a show-piece: ‘Look at me, I’ve got a real Aboriginal skull.’” This was the 1960s, when Aboriginal skeletons gathered grime in cabinets in museums throughout Britain and Australia. “A lot of scientists say they’re skeletal remains. To us, they’re family,” says Trevor, who for the past 20 years as chairman of the Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee has worked tirelessly to “bring his old people home”.

Just last month, a delegation from the Ngarrindjeri tribe collected three skulls from Oxford University, acquired in the 1860s. When Ngarrindjeri elder Major Sumner, his body painted in ochres, conducted the formal handover ceremony on the university lawns, he felt a sense of satisfaction. “It’s a big accomplishment, not only for us but for Oxford University, as it’s the first time they’ve agreed to repatriate,” says Sumner. “It sends a clear message to other British institutions. Why do they need to hold on to our ‘old people’?”

The three skulls, from Goolwa, in the heart of Ngarrindjeri traditional country, which stretches from where the Murray meets the Great Southern Ocean north to the Adelaide Hills, have joined hundreds of other remains awaiting burial at Camp Coorong, a tiny Aboriginal community 100 miles south of Adelaide.

In 2008, Edinburgh University returned the last piece of its collection – a solitary ear bone – to the Ngarrindjeri. To mark its homecoming, and that of two skulls brought back from an Exeter museum, a “smoking ceremony” to ▶





Unearthing the past: Major Sumner, an elder from the Ngarrindjeri tribe of South Australia, retrieving the remains of his ancestors at the National Museum of Scotland

◀ “cleanse” the bones was held at Camp Coorong. Similar to the Fens of East Anglia but on a vast scale, this area of wetlands and dunes surrounding the Coorong lagoon has been home for millennia to the Ngarrindjeri. Today, they number around 3,500.

Gales are forecast when I arrive at Camp Coorong, which Trevorrow and his wife Ellen founded in 1986 to promote reconciliation. Set on 250 acres, the camp is popular with tourists. At its entrance a flag in blues, reds and yellow, representing the 18 clans of the Ngarrindjeri nation, billows in briny air.

It was in the spirit of reconciliation that Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd made his recent apology to the “stolen generations” – children of mixed race removed from Aboriginal families in a policy to bleed the country white. After acknowledging the pain caused, Rudd promised a new chapter in the nation’s history. Today, Tom Trevorrow is still hoping for an apology for his tribe’s own “stolen generation”: hundreds of his ancestors whose remains were sent to the UK between the mid-1800s and early 1900s as anatomical specimens. During this era of prolific collecting, bones – especially skulls, believed to indicate racial characteristics – and soft tissue were studied according to Darwin’s theory that, “The civilised races will almost certainly exterminate ‘the savage races’.”

Among the many colonial collectors was Scottish-born William Ramsay Smith, who studied medicine at Edinburgh University and was responsible for the bulk of its collection, some 500 to 600 individuals. Smith left Scotland in 1896 to take up a role as physician at the Adelaide Hospital. Within three years he was Adelaide’s coroner, inspector of anatomy and chairman of the Central Board of Health. But his main interest lay in postmortem research for “medical purposes”, and Smith used his positions to illicitly dissect and remove human remains. Witnesses described how Smith would practise with a .303 rifle on corpses at the mortuary of Adelaide Hospital. Outside, it was not unusual to see the head of an Aboriginal in a kerosene tin, waiting to be sent to DJ Cunningham, professor of anatomy at Edinburgh, where Smith donated the majority of remains – including organs, skin, tongues and male genitalia – over at least a 15-year period.

“There is a suggestion that Smith was body shopping – collecting individuals of unusual pathologies or disease,” says Dr Mike Pickering, repatriation programme director at Canberra’s National Museum. “He was trying to buy favour and kudos with his alma mater.”

With Cunningham’s support, he became a member of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and

a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute. The professor did not seem interested in knowing how Smith procured the remains, making one request for soft tissue in 1906. “As for the soft parts, I shall do my best,” Smith replies. “I shall make a strong effort to get a whole young subject if I can. Much material is allowed to waste for lack of somebody on the spot to secure it.”

Aside from sourcing “fresh” corpses, Smith also robbed graves. Burial grounds littered the sand dunes of the Coorong, a day trip from Adelaide, as the Ngarrindjeri bury their dead facing the ocean. To source “good specimens”, Smith is thought to have destroyed five gravesides for one body. “He was very clinical and systematic,” says Chris Wilson, from Adelaide’s Flinders University. “Every time Smith removed someone from a burial ground, he marked it on a map with a cross. Sometimes wind had blown away the sand, so the remains were there. Other times there would be actual stealing.”

Like other collectors, Smith established a network to obtain indigenous remains. Government surveying staff and police would find Aboriginal bones and send or sell them. “In most instances, Aboriginals were not shot for remains,” says Professor Turnbull from Queensland’s Griffith University. “Why would you need to? There were so many actions of [white] native police who could collect for museums. They would get them from massacre sites.”

The tale of a “medicine man”, known as Wanamachoo, from near Innamincka, a blistering red-desert outpost in remote South Australia, encapsulates the colonial realities. Arrested in 1892 after a tribal killing, Wanamachoo was shackled, photographed and taken to Adelaide. Found unfit to plead because he could not understand English, he was committed to the Adelaide’s Parkside Lunatic Asylum, dying 10 years later. In 1903, Smith dissected him, sending the skeleton to Cunningham, with a note describing Wanamachoo as “the very lowest black-fellow [he’d] ever seen”. In Edinburgh his skeleton was “mounted, and judging by its blackened, soot-covered condition, spent many years exposed to view”, says Pickering, who cleaned it on its return to the National Museum in Canberra in 2000. Wanamachoo was finally laid to rest in his tribal country in 2007.

When I arrive at Camp Coorong, the first person I meet is Marshall Freeland Carter, a 62-year-old who tells me how terrible he feels that his ancestors are returning in “bits and pieces. Just coolis – heads – this time”. In 2003 he received the “shock of his life” when he discovered that the remains of his great uncle, Langan Carter, were among those returned from Edinburgh.

Carter pulls out a book, *A World That Was*, and turns to a page showing a photo of a group of Aboriginals – men with hoary beards, women in white pinafores. “That is Langan Carter,” he says, pointing to a young man with a floppy hat. “He lived at Point McLeay Mission. He was only in his 20s when he died in Adelaide hospital.”

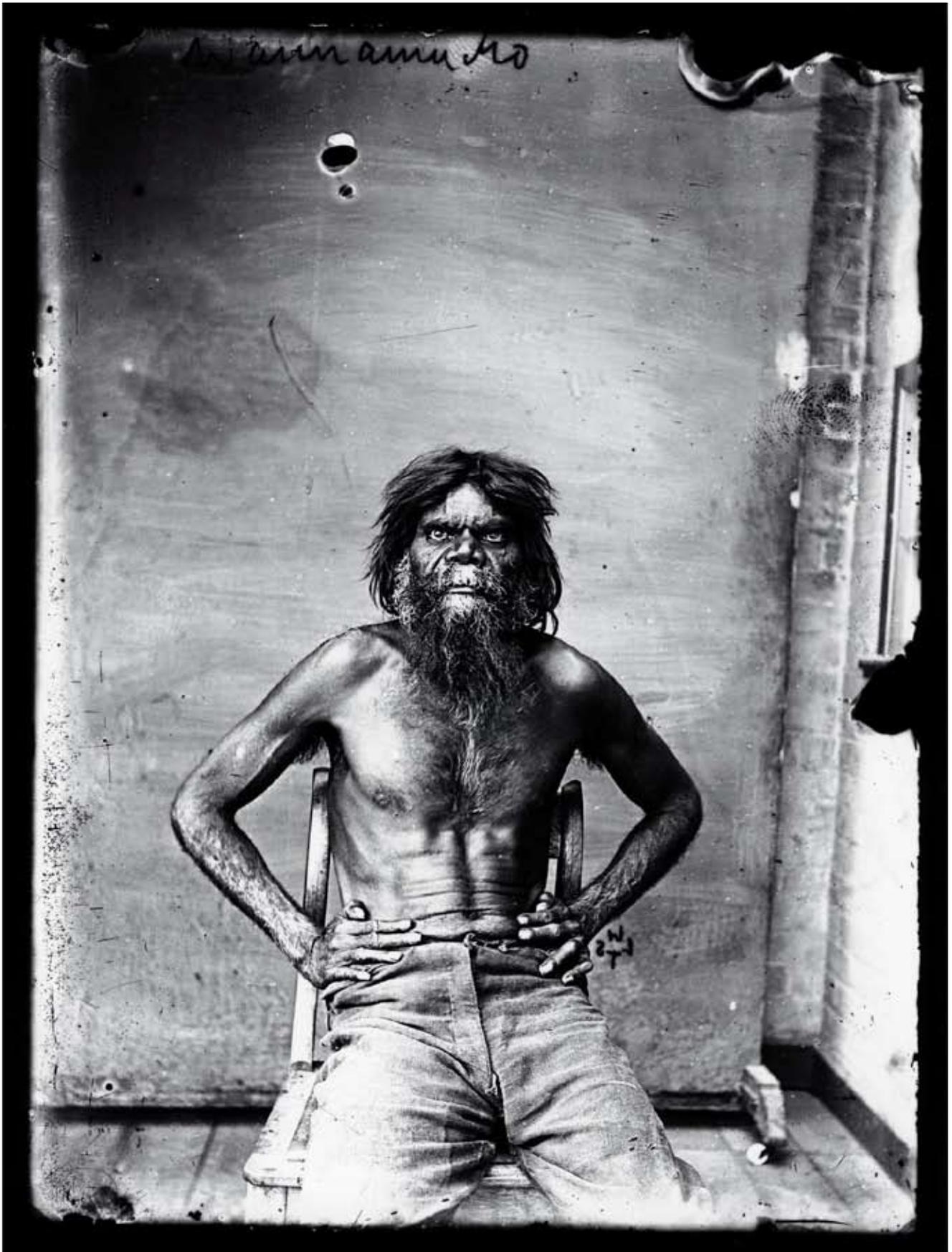
In the early 1990s, Edinburgh University was the first UK institution to begin repatriating Aboriginal bones. After the first batch was returned, a second room of remains was discovered by archaeologist Dr Cressida Fforde. By 2000, hundreds of remains had been sent to Canberra’s Repatriation department, where Mike Pickering reconstructed many of the “dislocated” individuals. Langan Carter’s remains were returned without a head. “We can’t bury him till we find it,” says Marshall. “It feels no good speaking about it.”

In the Camp Coorong museum there is a series of arresting mug shots taken in 1939 of Aborigines living at Point McLeay Mission. Their unflinching gazes have the weary, vulnerable quality of a people stripped bare. Until 1967 all Aborigines were wards of the state, their lives controlled by the government. Today, Tom and George Trevorrow are fighting to redress the past. George, 57, the rupelli (chief) of the 18 Ngarrindjeri clans, runs the nearby Coorong Wilderness Lodge; Tom manages the educational camp. In preparation for the “smoking ceremony”, they stoke a smouldering fire of ti-tree and eucalyptus.

Around 40 locals gather, and Major Sumner begins the ritual. Stripped to the waist, his body painted, with a kangaroo bone through flared nostrils and a crown of emu feathers, he invokes the ancestors. Next to him, Tom Trevorrow thanks the Australian Commonwealth and British government for their support. His voice deepens. “This is part of the reconciliation process that must take place to heal the pain and suffering. Why have we got droughts? Problems with our land?” He pauses. “As Ngarrindjeri people, we believe that when one of our elders dies they’ve got to go back to the land. If they are disturbed [we’ll] be punished. We believe terrible things are happening today because their spirits aren’t at rest.” (The Ngarrindjeri are witnessing the collapse of their environment as the Coorong silts up and the entire Murray river system is devastated by drought.)

Trevorrow motions to members of the Ngarrindjeri delegation to place three black boxes next to the fire. Inside, the two skulls from Exeter sit in eggshell-blue boxes; the tiny piece of stirrup bone, which once belonged to an Aboriginal woman, is in a plastic container. Out of respect, all are hidden from view. ▶

Outside Adelaide Hospital, it was not unusual to see the head of an Aboriginal in a kerosene tin, waiting to be sent to the professor of anatomy at Edinburgh University



Body of evidence: medicine man Wanamachoo, on his arrest in 1892. He was incarcerated in Adelaide's lunatic asylum and died 10 years later. Adelaide coroner William Ramsay Smith dissected his remains and sent the skeleton back to Scotland, describing Wanamachoo as "the very lowest black-fellow (he'd) ever seen"

◀ They have been on a long journey – leaving on a steamship and coming back on a Boeing 747. As the boxes are prised open – to allow smoke to cleanse the contents – a sudden wind whistles through the clump of she-oak trees, and smoke billows in crazy gusts. A murmur ripples through the crowd. The boxes are carried to a nearby room where, since 2003, 16 large cardboard crates have been stored. They bear labels: “Human skeletal remains.” “Dry bones only.” “Age 100 yrs.” Whorls of smoke drift in and, lit up by sunbeams, hang curiously suspended between ceiling and floor. For Tom Trevorror this part “tears him to pieces”. After getting his “old people” home he doesn’t have the resources to rebury them. “Culturally and spiritually it’s wrong. But we decided as a committee that they’re better off in our possession.”



“It’s as if they are sleeping,” says Marshall Carter, who absent-mindedly lifts up the paper covering one cardboard box. It’s a shock to see a partial skeleton with a caved-in skull and yellowing teeth. Next to it is a plastic bag bulging with red dirt-encrusted bone fragments from a nearby farm, dated 6/11/07. It’s improbable to think that when the Trevorrows were growing up, it was, says George, “a fad to have a skull of an Abo on the mantelpiece”. Since the Ngarrindjeri advertised in local papers asking people to return remains, there has been a steady flow.

Nonetheless, the decision to hold on to them at Camp Coorong concerns the community. “People feel scared,” says Chris Wilson, a 26-year-old Ngarrindjeri academic. Only 23 out of 400 have been reburied. Wilson estimates that burying the remainder would cost around £500,000 – “nothing for the government over a 10-year period”.

Since indigenous groups from Australia, New Zealand and America first made requests for the return of ancestral remains 30 years ago, many scientists have resisted, arguing that remains are a vital source of information on human evolution, migration and the impact of disease. In Britain alone, there are at least 61,000 remains in around 132 different collections. The largest repository is the Duckworth Laboratory, at Cambridge University. To date, none of the collection has been repatriated, despite formal requests from Australian indigenous groups. This may change, as in December 2008 the university finally published its repatriation policy on human remains.

When George Trevorror and Major Sumner were last in Britain, aside from bringing back the three skulls from Oxford, they also negoti-

ated the repatriation of a Ngarrindjeri skull, used as a “water vessel”, from a Brighton museum and collected unprovenanced remains from a Liverpool museum and a private collection in Cheshire (both were sent to the Australian Museum in Canberra). And in a major breakthrough, they had their first meeting at Cambridge University and spent time privately with two Ngarrindjeri skulls held at Duckworth.

“We had a very good reception from Ian Leslie, the pro-vice-chancellor at Cambridge,” says George. “We had a little ceremony with the remains of our ‘old people’. It was a real wrench, knowing we had to leave them.” At Duckworth they met the director, Marta Mirazon Lahr, and Professor Robert Foley, who have both expressed strong reservations about repatriation. Foley has claimed that “destroying” remains is like “saying we no longer need the texts of Shakespeare”.

At the core of this emotive debate between scientific rationality and cultural identity is the question of who owns the past. Kenan Malik, British author of *Strange Fruit: Why Both Sides are Wrong in the Race Debate*, takes it further in his essay “Who Owns Knowledge”: “The battle over the bones is also a battle between those who believe in the possibility of universal knowledge and those who view truth as culturally constrained.”

Yet examples where research on contested remains has yielded medical breakthroughs are rare. Most of the collections are from people who have died in the past 150 years; only a few date back more than 500 years. “For any research to be legitimate, you need an extensive number to make sense of it,” says Chris Wilson.

Such diverse viewpoints were aired in the landmark 2003 UK Parliamentary Working Group on Human Remains, which produced a code of practice for museums. Crucially, it found that remains had the right to be treated as “humans” rather than specimens. A year later the Human Tissue Act legally allowed

museums to repatriate human remains. This act was a turning point, says Professor Richard Lane, director of science at the Natural History Museum, which holds around 10,000 remains. Lane dealt with the recent claim by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC) for 17 individuals to be returned. In November 2006, when the museum agreed, DNA extraction had already been carried out on four individuals. The museum then wanted to perform more tests on the others, against the wishes of the Tasmanian Aboriginals. “The TAC were very unhappy about this,” says Lane. “The board of trustees had to make a

difficult decision to balance the needs of the broader scientific community and the wishes of one group. We compromised to return the remains after DNA collection, so access to the knowledge [collected] would be preserved.”

To stop further testing, an injunction was brought by the TAC, and the case went to the High Court. After mediation, both sides agreed that only non-invasive testing, such as photographs and measurements, would be carried out. It was also agreed that the Forensic Science Service of Tasmania would store the DNA already gathered. This material has been frozen and is under the joint ownership of the NHM and TAC. The rest of the remains were returned in May 2007 and were later reburied at Oyster Cove, south of Hobart.

But the Ngarrindjeri still have a long road ahead before all their “old people” can be reburied. After the ceremony at Camp Coorong, cake and sandwiches are laid out and I catch up with Sumner, now dressed in a tracksuit. Sumner doesn’t know how many Ngarrindjeri are still held in Britain. But, he says: “Attitudes are changing. I said to the people in London that by the time I finished, our footprints are going to be all across this country. It’s not that we are coming in anger, but to take our people home.”

As he talks, the sky turns sepulchral and the predicted storms lash down. Tom Trevorror comes in, looking shattered. “It takes a lot of work to get to where we are today,” he says. “But I believe the healing is beginning.” His voice drops to a whisper: “Sometimes I go into the room and tell the old fellows: ‘I’ll have you back in your burial grounds. Give me a little more time. I’m dealing with some hard issues here. You gotta help me.’” He gives a half-smile. “I talk to them just like people go into a cemetery and talk to their loved ones. I think they are the ones giving me the strength to carry on.”★

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End of the journey: Major Sumner presiding over a smoking ceremony to “cleanse” the remains contained in the black boxes, including two skulls from Exeter and a tiny piece of ear bone