

# Skeletons in the closet: hidden, or just forgotten?

Every now and then a padded parcel is delivered to the Indigenous Cultures Department at Museum Victoria (MV). If there is no return address and little or no paperwork, then there is a good chance that the contents bundled in tissue are skeletal remains—usually a skull and jaw—and if so, there is a very good chance that the remains are Aboriginal. On occasions, a brief but anonymous note will refer to the remains as having been ‘found’ many generations ago, and been amongst the family possessions—hidden or forgotten—ever since. Despite the anonymity of the donations, and the scant and guarded information, it is a sign of the times that the senders obviously felt that it was no longer appropriate ‘to possess’ the remains—Aboriginal ancestral remains.

After more than a century of active collecting, Australian museums have also come to recognise the inappropriateness of having Indigenous skeletons in their cupboards. Last year MV—along with a number of other Australian museums—commenced a nationally funded program for the Return of Indigenous Cultural Property (RICP). In response to priorities identified by MV’s Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Advisory Committee (ACHAC), the Museum proposed to return Ancestral Remains, and Secret/Sacred objects.

How has MV acquired its collection of Indigenous ancestral remains? The earliest donations to the then National Museum of Victoria—two crania from Clarence River, NSW—were received in 1865. This was six years after the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of the Species*, two years after Huxley’s *On Man’s Place in Nature*, and in the same year as both Lubbock and Tylor published their theories on pre-historic times. With the appointment of Baldwin Spencer, an

evolutionary biologist, as Director of the Museum in 1898 ‘collecting’ skeletal remains became more active and deliberate.

In 1902, Spencer wrote to the Victorian Chief Commissioner of Police asking that officers in charge of districts throughout the colony send “Aboriginal skeletons, skulls or other parts” to the Museum to augment the existing collection. A copy of his letter was “circulated amongst the Officers in charge...as desired”. Almost 250 sets of remains were transferred from various departments of the Victorian Police; it is the largest source of Victorian remains in the MV collection (followed by 180 donations). The accompanying Police Reports vary in detail, but most sets of remains were reported as a result of being unearthed by farming or building activities (including roads), or exposed from the quarrying of sandpits and from erosion by wind, rain and flood. However, records of approximately 80 purchases indicate that there were a number of collectors who received payment for remains, especially crania.

The main source of skeletal remains since the 1970s has been the Victorian Archaeological Survey (now Heritage Services—Aboriginal Affairs Victoria). When discovered, burial sites are generally managed/protected, but not disturbed. Significantly, any ‘salvage’ excavation that is required is approved and monitored by Indigenous Cultural Heritage Officers, and the remains are accurately provenanced and well documented.

Initially under the State Archaeological and Aboriginal Relics Act (1972), and now the Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act (1984), MV is the only official place of lodgement of Indigenous remains

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in Victoria. The introduction of the former legislation required groups, institutions and individuals—government and private—to either apply for a permit to keep remains, or to transfer their collections to MV. In the 1970s, a number of regional museums and societies ‘donated’ their collections to the Museum. Legislation was enforced in the mid 1980s, when the extensive Murray Black Collection was transferred from Melbourne University by court order.

But news of legislation does not reach every management committee or household, and sometimes only an accident brings the existence of collections to the attention of the authorities. On a number of occasions police have found human skeletal remains while visiting the scenes of minor burglaries, fires or domestic incidents. One can imagine how difficult it might be for an individual to explain away a set of human remains no matter how long they had been in the family: “Ah, yes, well, I’d forgotten about those”.

Undoubtedly, there are many other small, unknown collections across the state of Victoria. The histories of the collections—where, when and how the remains were found—may be scant or detailed, however, it is time for them to be returned, and with as much information as possible. The possession or custodianship of skeletal remains—of Aboriginal ancestral remains—is now, rightly, the preserve of the descendants.

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**Note:** To report Aboriginal Burial Sites contact your State Department of Aboriginal Affairs (for Victoria: 1300 888 544). To transfer Indigenous Remains from private or government collections in Victoria, contact Rob McWilliams at Museum Victoria: (03) 8341 7331.