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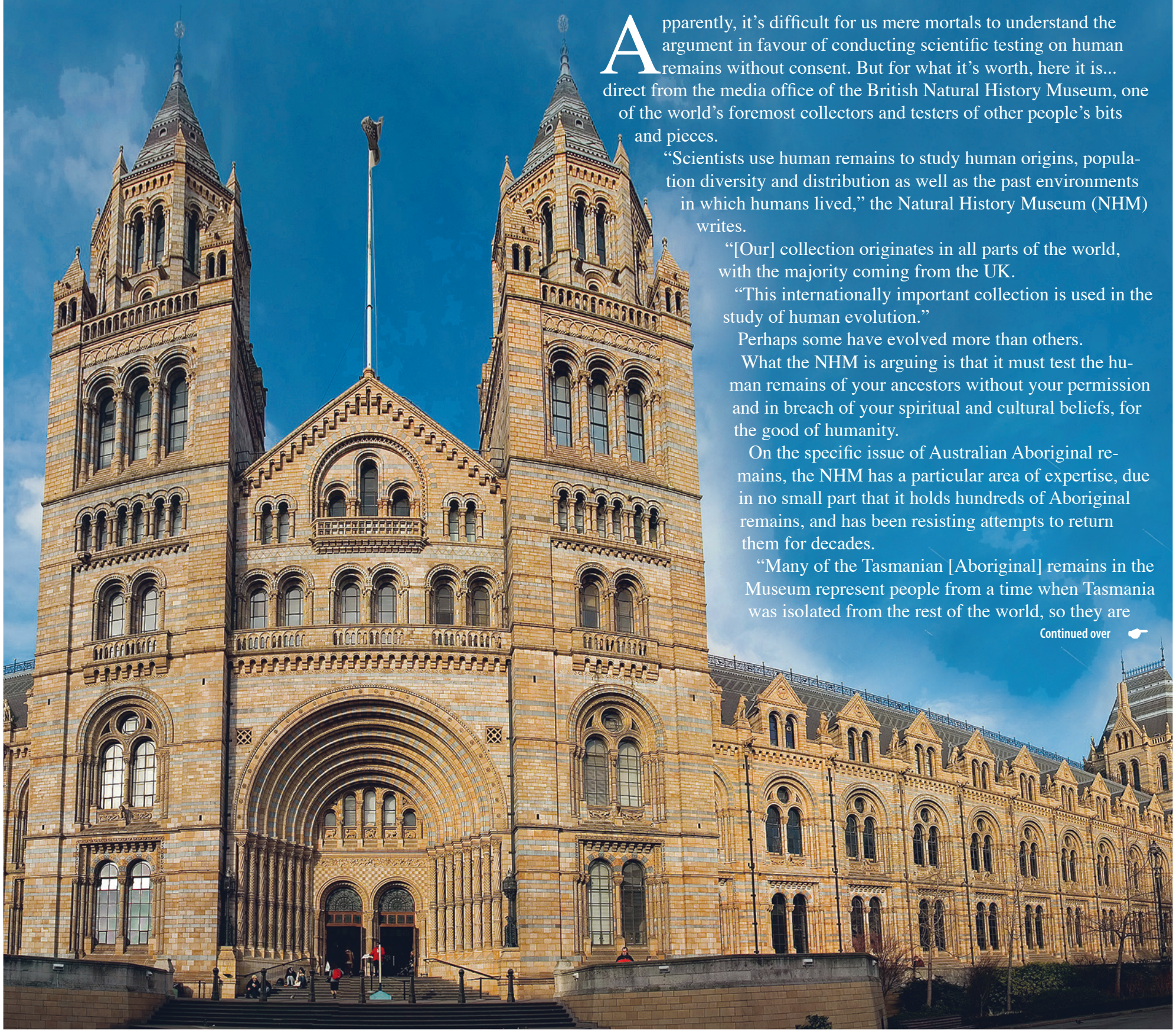


A tribute to the Minister for Indigenous Affairs and some inspiring poetry from a young (but quite dangerous) ANDREW BOLT.

THE BIG READ

BECAUSE THEY CAN...

Later this week Tasmania's most powerful Indigenous organisation, the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, will appear in a foreign court to try and stop a museum from conducting invasive testing on the remains of Aboriginal ancestors. CHRIS GRAHAM reports on a legal case that is being watched around the world.



Apparently, it's difficult for us mere mortals to understand the argument in favour of conducting scientific testing on human remains without consent. But for what it's worth, here it is... direct from the media office of the British Natural History Museum, one of the world's foremost collectors and testers of other people's bits and pieces.

"Scientists use human remains to study human origins, population diversity and distribution as well as the past environments in which humans lived," the Natural History Museum (NHM) writes.

"[Our] collection originates in all parts of the world, with the majority coming from the UK.

"This internationally important collection is used in the study of human evolution."

Perhaps some have evolved more than others.

What the NHM is arguing is that it must test the human remains of your ancestors without your permission and in breach of your spiritual and cultural beliefs, for the good of humanity.

On the specific issue of Australian Aboriginal remains, the NHM has a particular area of expertise, due in no small part that it holds hundreds of Aboriginal remains, and has been resisting attempts to return them for decades.

"Many of the Tasmanian [Aboriginal] remains in the Museum represent people from a time when Tasmania was isolated from the rest of the world, so they are

Continued over ☛

genetically different from other human populations, including those in mainland Australia.

"The differences that continue to be identified tell us more about how people reached the island, how they lived and how those people were linked with other human groups."

You can't help but escape the feeling that most Aboriginal people aren't exactly feeling all that grateful for the 'new info'.

But the NHM is clearly not alone in its view.

From Great Britain, Germany, France, Italy, America, Sweden, Russia and Australia - museums, scientific institutes, universities and private collectors hold millions of human remains, much of it without consent. Still, it's the Poms that have resisted hardest in returning them.

The curiously named British Humanist Association perhaps bests sums up the attitude of a nation that has perhaps the worst record on earth for pinching other people's stuff.

"While we respect genuine feelings, including those of bereaved people and those of religious believers, and we understand very well the need to respect the dead as well as the living, we do not believe that exaggerated feelings, some of them arising out of political grievances, should be deferred to unduly, particularly if that deference will result in harm.

"For example, many humanists find it shocking that Indigenous peoples in North America can assert rights over ancient remains found in that continent, despite the fact that they may, in fact, come from people with no ancestral or cultural connection with them.

"Disposal of those remains could close down enquiry into their origins and other important areas of human history."

The British Humanist Association purports to represent the interests of "the large and growing population of ethically concerned but non-religious people living in the UK" and "people who seek to live good and responsible lives without religious or superstitious beliefs".

One of Australia's most prominent fighters for the return of Aboriginal remains, Bob Weatherall, is keenly aware that if that's what the "humanists" think, God only knows what the rednecks believe.

"They miss the point completely," Weatherall says. "They're misinformed, misguided - they're out there with the fairies, some of them.

"Most of these 'humanists' are people who study the sciences, anthropologies. They are the faceless people who continue to want access to human remains.

"They say they're doing this for the whole of humanity. Well explain to us what the benefit is to Aboriginal people.

"They've had these remains for 150 years. They've carried out enormous amounts of scientific research on them and they continue to access them without the explicit or informed consent of Aboriginal people.

"It's really all about the scientists acquiring greater recognition amongst the scientific community, and obtaining PhDs.

"No benefit has ever come back to us. There never has been and there never will be.

"These remains are not 'world heritage items' that need to be protected by scientists. They are human beings, part of humanity, part of the human race. They deserve to be respected."

That pretty much sums up both sides of the debate. And by the way, it's not a new one.

BECAUSE THEY CAN

The battle to retrieve Australian Aboriginal remains from museums and universities has been raging for a very long time.

The practice of pinching the remains of Aboriginal people - either by raiding graves or just accepting ill-gotten gains from other people who raided graves - was firmly entrenched within a very short time of British occupation.

Historical documents from the 1800's are littered with references to Aboriginal remains being shipped off to Britain for testing and study.



ABOVE: The proper and respectful return of remains, and the conducting of ceremony, is vital to Aboriginal people if they expect to be welcomed into the after-life by their ancestors, says Bob Weatherall. Pictured above (August 25, 2004) Aboriginal Elder Major Sumner prepares a traditional smoke ceremony at Melbourne Museum to mark the return to their Aboriginal descendants of the skeletal remains of 74 Ngarrindjeri people stolen from graves around 100 years ago. Members of the Ngarrindjeri community from south-eastern South Australia received the remains at the ceremony.

(AAP Image/Joe Castro)



RIGHT: Australian PM John Howard at his July 4, 2000 meeting with British PM Tony Blair, in which Howard secured a promise from the British government for the return of Aboriginal remains.

(AAP Image/Michael Jones/Pool)

"These remains are not 'world heritage items' that need to be protected by scientists. They are human beings, part of humanity, part of the human race. They deserve to be respected."
- Aboriginal leader, Bob Weatherall

It has been the life quest of people like Bob Weatherall to bring the remains home.

He estimates he's been fighting the issue for almost four decades but says Michael Mansell - Tasmania's most powerful Aboriginal leader - has been fighting it longer.

And they are by no means the only two.

One of the nation's most famous cases of the repatriation from Britain of Aboriginal remains is that of Yagan, an Aboriginal leader from the Noongar people in south-west Western Australia.

In the early 1800's, Yagan had led a resistance against the European invaders. A bounty was placed on his head and he was eventually shot by a settler.

His head was removed and shipped to London, where it was put on display as an "anthropological curiosity".

Yagan's head spent more than a century in the basement of a British museum, until it was buried in an unmarked grave in 1964.

But in 1993, following a lengthy battle by Noongar people, the location was identified and four years later the head was exhumed and returned to Australia.

The Ngarrindjeri people of South Australia have been particularly prominent in the battle to return remains, not least of all because the graves of their ancestors appear to have seemed particularly coveted by grave robbers and scientists.

A host of white Australians have fought alongside as well, including the most unlikely of allies - the Prime Minister.

John Howard can't really point to any area of Indigenous affairs where he's had any real success.

Except for the stolen remains issue.

Howard, a man prone to draping himself in the Australian flag and waxing lyrical about the Anzac legend, does seem to genuinely understand the importance to Aboriginal people of the respectful treatment of their dead.

So in July 2000 during a visit to the United Kingdom, Howard took up the cause.

He struck a deal with British Prime Minister Tony Blair which would eventually see legislation drafted in the UK to pave the way for the return of Aboriginal remains sitting in major institutions throughout Great Britain.

"The Australian and British governments agree to increase efforts to repatriate human remains to Australian Indigenous communities," Howard announced in a joint statement with Blair.

"In doing this, the governments recognise

the special connection that Indigenous people have with ancestral remains, particularly where there are living descendants."

The problem with the repatriation of remains up to that point had been that nine major institutions in the UK - such as the Natural History Museum - were governed by legislation that explicitly prevented their return.

The Human Tissues Act was introduced into British parliament in 2005, removing any legal impediment.

That should have been the end of the matter, pending the return of remains to Australia.

But late last year, the BHN threw a big spanner in the works.

A diplomatic row is now brewing.

In a media release issued in November last year, the NHM announced it was preparing to repatriate the remains of 17 Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

But there was a catch. A big one.

"We welcomed the legislation that came into force in 2005, as a mechanism that allows us, for the first time, to consider cases for the return of human remains to their countries of origin," Oliver Stocken, Chairman of the Trustees of the Natural History Museum announced.

"Our decision demonstrates the Museum's commitment to look at each case fairly and transparently, in line with the guidelines set out by the UK government."

Dr Michael Dixon, Director of the Natural History Museum added, '... We believe the decision to return the Tasmanian remains, following a short period of data collection, is a commonsense one that balances the requirements of all those with an interest in the remains."

The NHM decreed that the "data collection process" would be completed within three months, from January this year.

"It will compile as complete a record as possible of scientifically valuable information relating to the Tasmanian Aboriginal remains.

"This will include imaging, measurements and DNA analysis.

"Any material temporarily removed as part of this analysis will be replaced so the remains can be returned complete."

Michael Mansell was livid, and earlier this year he sought an injunction in the British courts to prevent the NHM from proceeding with any testing.

He got his stay, and the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre is scheduled to appear in the British High Court tomorrow (Australian time) to end the practice altogether.

But in a late twist on Monday morning, it seems Mansell's court action still hasn't stopped the British.

The invasive testing is already well underway, and what it actually entails is not just photographs and measurements, but the dismantling of skeletal remains, dental casts and peels, dental X-rays and the extraction of teeth from skulls to make casts.

"The processes necessarily involve crushing and destroying parts of the remains," said Mansell.

"We weep for our people."

Continued over



PROTEST: Australian Aboriginal Elder Major Sumner from the Ngarrindjeri people performs a smoking ceremony, outside the British Natural History Museum in London, in July 2003, demanding that the institution returns the Indigenous human remains collected during the colonial era. The museum is believed to have the remains of about 460 Aboriginal people, but wants to conduct invasive scientific testing before any remains are returned to Australia.
(AFP PHOTO Nicolas ASFOURI.)

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From previous page

Mansell has accused the NHM of failing to tell the Australian government that scientists were already "hacking at Aboriginal remains" after they had been explicitly asked not to begin testing.

"Richard Alston, at the Australian High Commission in London, wrote a very good letter on 8th January to the Natural History Museum asking for the Tasmanian remains to be handed over without testing," Mansell says.

"When the Museum responded on 23rd January, there was no mention that testing had already begun on 6th December 2006.

"The failure to point out to the Australian government that testing had already begun was calculated to deceive the government.

"Like the TAC, the Australian government was led to believe by NHM that testing would not begin until January, 2007. This was because the Museum had announced in its press statement dated 17th November 2006, 'that the data collection process would be completed within three months from January'.

"The Museum was also careless with the facts when, in acknowledging the letter from Mr Alston, the Museum said, 'Any decision to halt this data collection is a decision that would be made by the Museum's Trustees... it would not be appropriate for the Museum management to prejudge the outcome of the Trustees consideration'.

But apparently, the Australian government's request was never put to the Trustees.

In other words, it's a big betrayal.

The Howard government is reportedly furious with the NHM, and none too happy with the British government.

The actions of the NHM bare little resemblance to the accord struck by Howard with Blair in 2000.

It's the sort of incident that can seriously damage relationships between foreign countries.

But in this case, Britain stands to harm more than just its relationship with Australia.

The NHM - and numerous other British institutions - hold the remains not just of Aboriginal Australians, but thousands of Indigenous peoples from around the globe, including the Americas, Asia and New Zealand.

Most of them want their ancestors back and Bob Weatherall says they are all watching the case closely.

"If Tasmanian Aborigines lose the case in London, it will set a dangerous precedent for remains held in other British and European institutions.

"Losing the current legal case against the mad scientists at the Natural History Museum will give a green light to scientific abuse of all Aboriginal remains that are to be sent back to Australia.

"It will be a landmark decision setting a precedent with the potential to affect all Indigenous people throughout the world."

If you're still having trouble getting your head around just how offensive the NHM's actions are, then there's a very recent and very 'mainstream' precedent that might help.

Private Jake Kovco is the only Australian soldier to have died so far in the war in Iraq.

He was killed on April 21, 2006. A subsequent government inquiry found Kovco had accidentally shot himself in the head with his service pistol, a finding Kovco's family has rejected.

The cause of Kovco's death may be a matter of dispute, but the grief of the Kovco family has never been in doubt.

It's been played out on the front pages of every major Australian newspaper in the country, and on countless news and current affair broadcasts.

While most Australians were not truly able to share in the Kovco family's grief, most were appalled at a remarkable series of mix ups with his remains.

Rather than returning Jake Kovco's body in the dignified way deserved, the Australian Defence Force instead brought home the body of a deceased Bosnian contractor, Juso Sinanovic.

Such was the media saturation over the scandal - and the genuine contrition of the government - that both the Prime Minister John Howard and the Minister for Defence, Brendan Nelson attended Kovco's funeral.

Kovco now has his own very lengthy entry on Wikipedia - the internet-based encyclopaedia. And typing his name into Google brings with it almost 33,000 search results.

In short, Kovco's death was big news.

But just imagine the outcry if the return of Kovco's body had not just been mishandled and delayed, but a group of American scientists had also ignored the pleas of the Kovco family and the Australian government and decided to conduct scientific experiments on his remains.

That is precisely the situation confronting Aboriginal Australians in their fight against the Natural History Museum.

And it's part of the reason why people like Bob Weatherall are so determined to fight the British for the dignified return of Aboriginal remains.

There is, for good reason, no room for negotiation.

"Museums and scientists see human remains and corpses. Aboriginal people see something very different," Weatherall says.

"We see them as still living, they've just gone into the life-death cycle. They're living in the spirit land, the spirit world."

There are a broad range of beliefs among Aboriginal people about why the repatriation of remains - and their subsequent burial - is so important.

Some Aboriginal people believe that an Aboriginal spirit can't move on to the after-world unless the body is buried wholly intact.

Weatherall says that's a bit too simplistic an explanation, particularly for Aboriginal people still alive.

The reasons respect and ceremony are important are also to do with the future of those yet to cross over.

"If we don't carry out our customary responsibilities to our ancestors, then we won't be welcomed into that world when it's our time to go.

"We'd be left wandering aimlessly, not in the spirit world, not back to our spirit place."

In other words, Weatherall and the many Aboriginal people who share those beliefs, are compelled to battle for the respectful return of remains.

It is literally a fight for life after death.

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ABOVE: Melbourne, September 10, 2003. Chairman of the North-West Region Aboriginal Heritage Board Gary Murray carries the remains of the Jarra Charlton baby wrapped in Wallaby skins from the Melbourne Museum. The approximately 150-year-old remains were returned to the Dja Dja Wurrung people in a traditional ceremony.
The remains were taken from the hollow of a tree in 1904 and had been stored in a museum drawer for research purposes. Dja Dja Wurrung elders staged a ceremony the following day, where the remains were returned to the place where the tree (which has subsequently been felled) once stood.
(AAP Image/Julian Smith)

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It perhaps shouldn't be lost on mainstream Australia that Weatherall's explanation of the conditions of entry to an Aboriginal after-life are similar to those embraced by billions of Christians, Muslims and Hindis around the world.

But he notes that the situation faced by Aboriginal Australians is even more fraught, because generations of people have been prevented from practising their traditions, culture and ceremonies.

"[Our old people] remember those times. They are the killing times, the times when they could not fulfil their cultural obligations because of the power of the gun.

"People were removed from their places, they couldn't continue to look after their country.

"Part of the land rights fight has always been about being able to care for country, and what's in country, such as sacred burial grounds.

"The blood, the bones and the hair of the people lie in the country.

"That country is important. It's not just real estate to Aboriginal people. That country is your mother, your father, your grandmother, your ancestors. And you have a responsibility to care for it.

"That's our environment, our society, our world. The civilisation we come from.

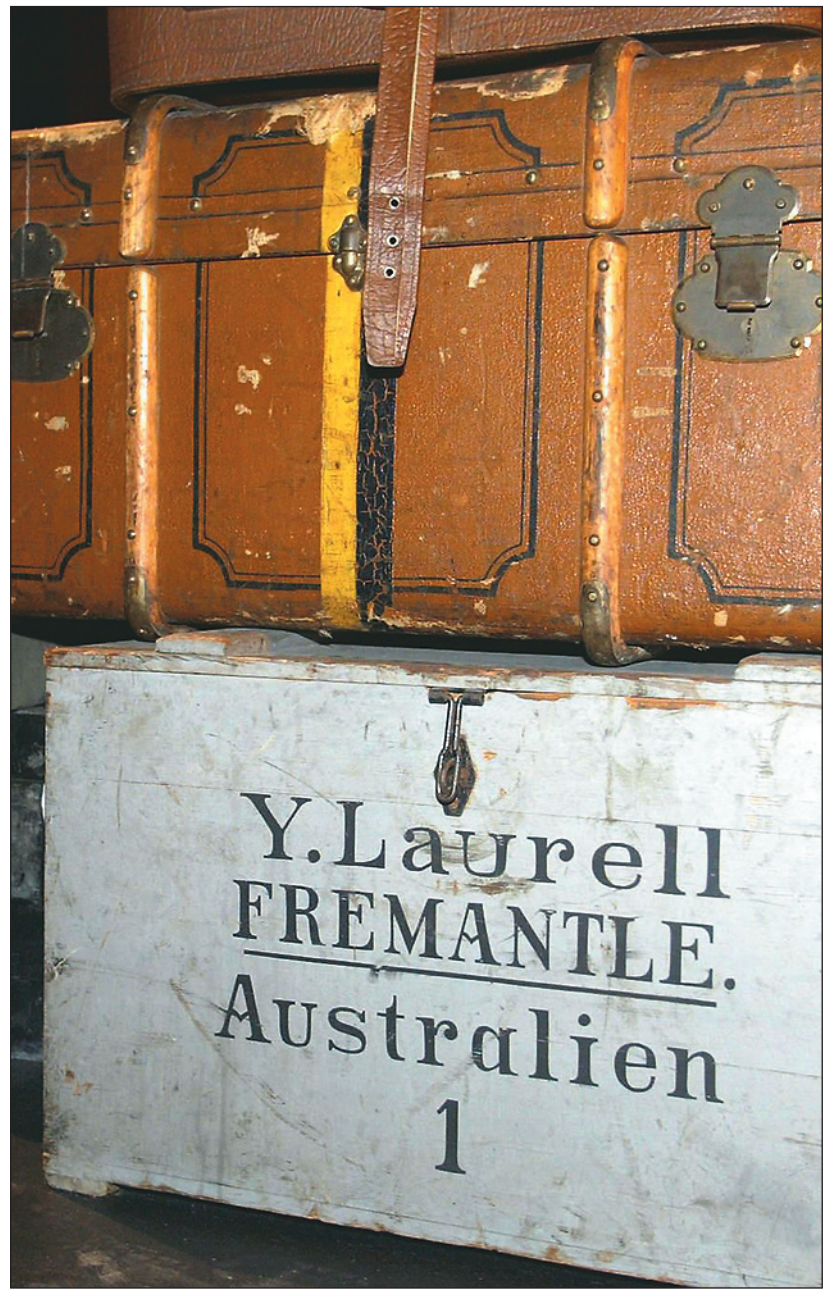
"Most civilisations have [something like] that, but there are also members of some civilisations, like these scientists, who only believe in their own self-interest, their own wealth and their own comfort."

Although how comfortable some of them will be when they have to confront Weatherall and others face-to-face later this week is anyone's guess.

Because as *NIT* spoke to Weatherall this week, he was organising to fly to London to attend the court case, seek a meeting with British Prime Minister, Tony Blair and confront the Natural History Museum.

We'll keep you posted on his progress.

Note to readers: No scientists were harmed in the writing of this feature.



THE photo above shows the travel case of Swedish scientist Yngve Laurell, which was used to smuggle Aboriginal bones out of Australia.
The luggage is on permanent display at the National Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm. In November 2003, Sweden agreed to return the remains of 13 Aboriginal people collected illegally in Australia almost 100 years ago, thereby becoming the first European government to do so, Australian and Swedish officials said.
"This is a very powerful event for us. Our spirits, and who we are, come directly from these people," former ATSIC Commissioner Rodney Dillon said at a handing over ceremony.
The 13 skulls and remains of two skeletons were reportedly examined by Swedish and Australian experts to determine their identities, before being repatriated back to Australia in October 2004.
(AFP PHOTO / SVEN NACKSTRAND)

Someone else's shoes

SOME psychologists believe that the best way to understand someone else's feelings is to put yourself in their shoes. So *NIT* decided to give the theory a fly. Last week, we wrote to the British Natural History Museum with the following questions and comments for the Director of the Museum, Michael Dixon, and the Chairman of the Museum Trust, Oliver Stockton.

"Dear [Media office],
1. Is Mr Dixon's mother or father currently deceased? If so, could you detail at which cemetery they are interred?
2. If Mr Dixon's parents are not deceased (or have been cremated) could you please pass on details of any other close family members of Mr Dixon's (such as a sister, a child, an aunt or uncle or grandparents) who may have passed, and not been cremated, and where their bodies are interred?
Our intention is to locate a close relative of Mr Dixon's and apply for the body to be exhumed so that we can organise DNA testing for a variety of scientific and other reasons.
We're also interested in a similar process for relatives of Mr Oliver Stockton, and presume you might be able to assist on this front as well.
Kind regards
National Indigenous Times."

A few days later, we received the following typically polite British reply.
"I'm afraid I don't think I'm going to be able to help you on this one. The Museum doesn't actually hold records on the location of deceased kin of members of staff, and individual arrangements for organ donation are ultimately a personal matter."
Undettered, we sent three more questions.
"1. Is Mr Dixon listed as an organ donor, in the event of his death?
2. Is Mr Stockton listed as an organ donor, in the event of his death?
3. If either answer no, could we get a brief explanation why?"
At the time of press we were still awaiting a response. But either way, the hunt is officially on.

We're interested in hearing from anyone - particularly from our many friends and readers in the United Kingdom (via www.nit.com.au) - who might be able to shed some light on where relatives of Michael Dixon or Oliver Stockon might be buried.

We're also interested to hear from anyone with information about where the relatives of Daniel Alexander QC, Louise Charlton, Sir William Castell LVO, Professor Dianne Edwards CBE FRS, Professor Alexander Halliday, Professor Michael Hassell CBE FRS, Mr Ian J Henderson CBE BSc FRICS, Professor Georgina Mace OBE FR, Professor Jacqueline McGlade, Sir David Omand GCB and Professor Linda Partridge CBE FRS FRSE are interred.

All of the above are members of the Natural History Museum's Board of Trustees. They're the folk who authorised the invasive testing of Aboriginal remains before their return to Australia.

Information should be sent to editor@nit.com.au


Oliver Stockton, Chairman of the Natural History Museum Board of Trustees.


Michael Dixon, Director of the Natural History Museum.

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