

IS IT UNFAIR TO JUDGE WILLIAM CROWTHER BY TODAY'S STANDARDS?

IN the early 1970s it was estimated that 60,000 Aboriginal remains were held in medical and scientific institutions and museums in Australia and overseas, with most in the UK.

For more than 150 years Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ancestral remains were removed from their communities and placed in museums, universities and private collections in Australia and overseas.

During the 19th and 20th centuries medical officers, anatomists, ethnologists, anthropologists and pastoralists collected ancestral remains for “scientific” research linked to explaining human biological differences.

Skulls were highly sought-after. Europeans judged members of other cultures by the standards and customs of their own culture, and saw them as primitive,

Anatomists and anthropologists believed that by examining skulls from different populations and cultures they would find physical explanations of

non-European primitivity (and, of course, European superiority).

Until relatively recently there was little questioning of the morality of collecting human remains in pursuit of scientific knowledge, and the issue of repatriation and return of skeletal remains to indigenous communities is still controversial.

This, then, is some background to the mutilation of William Lanne by Dr William Crowther in 1869.

Crowther was a surgeon and honorary medical officer at the Hobart hospital and had promised to send an Aboriginal skeleton to the Royal College of Surgeons in London, but was in conflict with the Royal Society of Tasmania, which claimed it had the right to the next available Aboriginal skeleton.

Lanne, whose Aboriginal name was never recorded, was born at Coal River in 1835, and was taken with his family to the Aboriginal settlement at Flinders Island and then to Oyster Cove.

Lanne was one of only 14 Aboriginal people who survived Oyster Cove. He became a sailor, with his shipmates referring to him as King Billy.

In March 1869, after returning from nearly a year at sea, he became very ill and died. After his death, Lanne's friends, worried about body snatchers, visited the premier, Sir Richard Dry, who agreed that Lanne should be buried on consecrated ground.

The body was then moved to the hospital morgue. The premier ordered the chief surgeon, George Stokell, a prominent member of the Royal Society, not to permit any mutilation of the body.

Crowther invited Stokell to his house, and then while Mrs Crowther detained Stokell in conversation, Crowther and his son went to the morgue. Using his surgical skills, Crowther removed Lanne's skull and inserted the skull from another body, that of a schoolmaster, William Ross.

When Stokell returned to the morgue and realised that Crowther had removed Lanne's skull, he and two other members of the Royal Society then cut off Lanne's hands and feet to discourage Crowther from stealing more of the skeleton. Two days later the mutilated body was buried at St David's Church, with about 120 mourners, although his wife Truganini was not allowed to attend.

There was wide indignation at the mutilation and the premier ordered an exhumation and inquiry, but Crowther stole the body from the grave, leaving only Ross's skull and some blood.

Crowther tried to blame Stokell for removing the head, but he was eventually dismissed from the hospital.

While it is important not to judge historical figures by current standards, even by the standards of his time Crowther behaved in a disgraceful, deceptive and unlawful manner. However, in his defence there is no evidence he was particularly racist by the standards of his time – he was equally contemptuous of the rights and dignity of the schoolmaster Ross as of those of Lanne.

One consequence of Crowther's actions was the introduction in the same year of the Anatomy Act, regulating the practice of anatomy in Tasmania.

Despite these events, Crowther remained very popular with his patients and the voters of Hobart. He was elected to parliament and was premier between December 1878 and October 1879.

Professor Stefan Petrow provides a much more comprehensive discussion of Crowther and the quite complex political context of the time, as well as the aftermath of this dreadful episode, in *The Last Man: The mutilation of William Lanne in 1869 and its aftermath*.

Crowther is too important a figure in Tasmania history to be “cancelled”, but is it appropriate that he continue to be celebrated by a statue in Franklin Square?

Certainly his story is too complex to be adequately covered by a plaque on a statue.

Should the statue be located in TMAG with interpretative material allowing us to reflect on Crowther and the very mixed history of Hobart, and on the treatment of Tasmanian Aboriginal people?

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