United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
museum INTERNATIONAL

Returning a stolen generation

by Tristram Besterman

Continuing a career in UK museums that has spanned more than thirty years, Tristram Besterman works as a freelance in the museum, cultural and higher education sectors. The social purpose of museums as trusted, democratic places of cultural exchange is of particular interest to him. His work on professional ethics, engagement with source communities, management and leadership focuses on issues of social interaction, cultural identity, accountability and sustainability.

The recent return of human remains to the peoples of Tasmania from two British institutions provides two contrasting and instructive examples of repatriation in practice. These returns occurred at a time of political change in Australia, with the past colliding powerfully with the present. This article explores the politics of repatriating the ancestors of indigenous people held in UK museums in the context of history, shifting contemporary power structures and the rhetoric of science.

Mediation and cultural diplomacy are terms that apply to two rather different processes of engagement between peoples, whose values, interests and aspirations diverge. Cultural diplomacy appears to be the means by which the political interests of a society are advanced to achieve certain objectives. Mediation, on the other hand, is a technique of conciliation, whose principal purpose is to find common ground between parties who may be profoundly alienated from each other.

Anger, resentment, suspicion and fear: these are some of the familiar faces of alienated human beings, be they scientists or indigenous people. To mediate a positive relationship based

on trust and mutual respect requires courage, goodwill, a leap of imagination and effective communication. And in order to be good communicators, curators and scientists, who are used to telling people their story, need to hone their listening skills and to watch their language.

In the dialogue between museum and source community language creates pitfalls as well as bridges. For instance, the use of the term 'cultural object' would be deeply offensive to an indigenous group as far as human remains are concerned. To the source community these are *people*, not things. And we know that great wrong is done when humans reduce each other to the status of objects.

The failings of science

For nineteenth-century museums the remains of 'natives' lent weight to a Eurocentric human evolutionary narrative whose highest expression was the white European. Human 'specimens' were collected as 'evidence': 'Combining the concept of racial hierarchy with theories of social evolutionists […] Darwin concluded that each race represented a separate stage through which the human species had evolved.'[1] The catastrophic impact of colonial settlement on indigenous populations was reported even at the time:

> It is only on the margins of settlement now that the natives give much trouble; as civilisation advances they seem to give up the struggle. And though we hear occasionally of instances of surprise and slaughter, these are as frequently the result of cupidity and breach of faith on the part of settlers. […] Notwithstanding all efforts to civilise and Christianize the Australian native, and to preserve the race, there seems no chance of any prolonged success. A few generations more and he will become extinct.[2]

In the case of the peoples of Tasmania evidence of their place in a human racial taxonomy was rare – and therefore highly sought after – because colonial settlement had all but wiped out the Aboriginal population by 1850. In violation of indigenous custom and belief the remains of Tasmanian Aborigines were removed and shipped to museums in Victorian Britain. Taken without consent, human remains retained in Western institutions against the will of living Tasmanians compound the original violation. The reason usually given by scientists for holding on to indigenous human remains is that these form a unique and irreplaceable resource that enables humankind 'to understand human history and human diversity and […] human evolution. Not as a system of belief but as something that does have an empirical record and therefore some basis in science.'[3] Science – as all good scientists acknowledge – is not about some indisputable, revealed truth. The 'empirical record' is, of course, capable of different interpretations. A skull from an old collection that was recently examined by two leading bio-anthropologists was independently 'verified' by one as Australasian and by the other as South American. Each used the same measurements to reach a different conclusion. That is the way science proceeds: evidence is collected and then subjected to all too human interpretation, which can thereafter be revisited and reinterpreted. Scientific method is in part empirical, but the conclusions of scientists are necessarily open to challenge.

What is indisputably the case, however, is that human remains in museums have in most cases lain unexamined in stores for many decades prior claims for repatriation. Moreover, the argument of actual or potential utility to science cannot, in my opinion, justify holding on to something that does not belong to you. One is struck by two points concerning the rhetoric of scientists who continue to oppose repatriation. The first is the asserted universality of science, whose entitlement to serve the whole of humankind transcends the parochial claims of any particular group. Ironically, this supra-human positioning of science has, to some ears, a distinctly pantheistic ring to it. It is also an expression of precisely the same Eurocentric rationalist quest that fuelled the illicit removal of human remains in the first place. The second is the dismissal by scientists of claims for repatriation as merely 'political'. The implication is, presumably, that 'political' can be equated with devious, cunning and self-serving forms of behaviour that have, of course, no place in the laboratory. But in a democratic society politics, like science, is a product of the restless human quest for betterment: it is the means by which humankind progresses. If repatriating human remains to a democratic society is part of a political process by which an oppressed minority reclaims cultural territory of which it has been undemocratically dispossessed, then who from the enlightened democratic world can with a clear conscience gainsay them?

Restoring dignity

Many – but regrettably not all – of the ancestors held in the UK have recently been returned to resume their place in the lives of their descendants in Tasmania and other parts of Australia. Because the original dispossession typically occurred at a time of gross inequality of power, repossession provides some remedy. The balance of power is still unequal: the Western institution holds all the cards. Surrendering them requires the institution to show leadership, humility and generosity of spirit. When we return their ancestors, we repatriate authority to the source community and control over their history and culture. With that simple act some dignity is restored. There are gains for the returning museum too: if the process of repatriation is handled appropriately, the museum grows in stature and benefits from new forms of cultural exchange. A holding institution that fails or refuses to engage positively with claimant communities is guilty of an abuse of power more inexcusable in our more enlightened times today than when the original acquisition occurred.

Sometimes it takes a surge in the tide of national politics to move these issues forward. In 2000 John Howard and Tony Blair pledged 'to increase efforts to repatriate human remains to Australian indigenous communities. In doing this, the Governments recognize the special connection that indigenous people have with ancestral remains, particularly where there are living descendants.'[4] The joint statement of the UK and Australian prime ministers led, within five years, to a change in English statute law that enabled national museums to repatriate human remains to source communities. In early 2008 Kevin Rudd, the newly elected Prime Minister of Australia, publicly apologized to Australia's indigenous nations for the 'stolen generations', a government-sponsored violation of human rights perpetrated over six decades of the twentieth century. This was

20

20. Bob Weatherall, representing the Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action, receives the documents that record the return of his ancestors from Tristram Besterman, Director of The Manchester Museum, at a public ceremony held outside the museum in July 2003.

swiftly followed in the UK Parliament in February by a motion signed by forty-nine Members of Parliament, which stated:

> This House recalls Great Britain's role in the colonisation, settlement and early governance of Australia; acknowledges Great Britain's responsibility for the suffering and degradation inflicted on indigenous Australians, including the removal of indigenous human remains and material culture; supports the Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, in his apology to the stolen generations and other indigenous Australians for the pain, loss, deprivation and abuse they have suffered.[5]

In 2006 I was taken by an Aborigine to Wybalenna, a desolate, windswept place on Flinders Island, just off the coast of Tasmania. Here rows of unmarked graves bear silent witness to near genocide. Close by is a memorial to Aunty Ida West, a Tasmanian who died in 1995. The inscription ends with her words: 'Where the bad was, we can always make it good.'[6] What better expression of cultural diplomacy could there be than that?

NOTES

1. C. Fforde, (2004) *Collecting the Dead: Archaeology and the Reburial Issue*, London: Duckworth, p. 28.

2. *The Illustrated Sydney News*, 16 March 1878, in T. Besterman, (2005) *Returning the Ancestors: Repatriating Human Remains from The Manchester Museum to Australian Aboriginal Communities*, 2005, p. 1.

3. R. Foley 'Human Remains: Objects to Study or Ancestors to Bury?' Transcript of debate at the Royal College of Physicians, 2003.

4. *The Report of the Working Group on Human Remains. London:* Department of Culture Media and Sport, 2003, p. 3.

5. Early Day Motion 1000. 'Indigenous Australians', UK Parliament, 2008.

6. T. Besterman, (2006) *Returning the Stolen Generation.*