

## Bone Trade

Helen MacDonald, *Human Remains: Episodes in Human Dissections*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005.

*Human Remains* tells stories of the dissection of human bodies in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Great Britain and its colony Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania). The use of Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples' skeletons both as evidence for theories of human origins and as artefacts of relationship between British anatomists and educated colonists are also taken up. MacDonald's book is aptly subtitled "episodes" because this best describes the stories of the individuals involved: bone collectors, dissectors and dissected as well as the cultural dis/connections between them.

MacDonald introduces her first few episodes by explaining anatomy as not only science, but also art and performance: "Examination of the records reveals performative moments in dissecting that are extraneous to the learning and practice of anatomical science" (9). MacDonald argues, though too briefly, that all three aspects of anatomy contributed to a proprietary approach to dead bodies in medical culture, which continues to foster an environment wherein dead bodies may be unethically treated. The focus on performance in the introduction, and the linkages between dissection and current-day treatment of the dead, are best suited to the first three chapters of the book. The last three chapters, which I found the most compelling, are not as accurately introduced through the concept of performance as the first three. MacDonald explains that she weaves her social understanding of dissection from narratives of the lives of the individuals involved; overall, her goal is to "...explore[] dissecting as a cultural activity, rather than the foundational science of medicine, to reveal something about the societies in which such uses of the human body have been made" (9).

The first chapter "Companions with the Dead" provides an overview of the role of human dissection and anatomy in medicine in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain. Until 1832, and the passage of *The Anatomy Act*, the only way to legally dissect a body in Britain was if that body belonged to a person hanged for murder. Dissection was an additional punishment for murderers, and thus, dissections were publicly held in London's College of Surgeons, often to "excessive" applause (13). MacDonald explains:

That surgeons, like executioners, went to work on behalf of the law in punishing murderers was a matter of discomfort to many of them. They thought the association between themselves and the hangman was degrading, and preferred a self-image that tied dissection closely to the promotion of medical science, rather than to inflicting indignities on human bodies on behalf of the Crown (17).

This movement from association with the hangman to scientific theory is described by the last three chapters, wherein surgeons and "bone collectors" in Van Diemans' land seem to be quite happy to work on behalf of one or another scientific theory of human origins, certainly

without the consent of those who had died, and, finally, to the detriment of the reputations of both surgeons and the overall medical administration in the colony.

In the first chapter, MacDonald also begins her discussion of the interpretation and valuation of bodies marked by race and sex in dissection. She starts with those bodies marked by sex, bringing as much of the lives and dissections of Catherine Welch, Elizabeth Ross and Mary Paterson (all occurring in Britain) into coherent stories as is possible. These individual stories are used to explain contemporaneous assumptions about women, class and reproduction. MacDonald's explanation of the dissection of Catherine Welch is based on dissecting manuals available at the time rather than on any specific contemporaneous notes or descriptions of the dissection itself. While this is a very reasonable approach to explaining such an event, MacDonald does not clarify this to the reader. The writing style, "*Perhaps* Bell's students attempted to do the same....Bell *would* compare the clitoris to the male penis. *Perhaps* he sliced it in two for a more thorough examination...the students *would* fix the body 'in the same position as for the operation for the stone' (my *italics* 22), diverts attention from her sources to create a direct presence, for the reader, in the dissecting room. I found this distracting. MacDonald also explains that Bell cut off Welch's breasts so they could be displayed at the College of Surgeons (22). I have no doubt that Bell did so – similar scientific treatments of dead bodies have been documented - but I wonder why MacDonald does not give the reader a footnote on this practice.

The second chapter focuses on the dissection of Mary McLauchlan in Van Diemen's Land, in 1830, and a very effective "Dissection in Reverse" (54), the story of McLauchlan's short life. The story of McLauchlan's dissection also introduces the main characters of the medical, governmental and press establishments in Tasmania at the time – those who were entitled to "learn" from dissections. These stories provide glimpses into government, convict administration system and the roles of settlers, both men and women, in colonial Tasmania. McLauchlan's story is told through newspaper stories and official records, and supported by other historical explorations of life aboard convict ships. In the explanation of McLauchlan's dissection, the reader sees very clearly how human beings become bodies and then objects, losing all traces of humanity. The reconstruction of Mary McLauchlan's life is the heart of MacDonald's work, and is her potent counter to the always objectifying work of dissection: "I cannot leave Mary McLauchlan here, disintegrating beneath these men's hands and words" (53).

The next chapter "Interlude" shifts from Mary McLauchlan and gender to Tasmanian Aborigines and race. MacDonald explains that while she researched the fate of McLauchlan, she "kept stumbling across references to 'the Tasmanians'" (87). Relations between settlers and Tasmanian Aborigines were a central social issue at the time of McLauchlan's hanging. The Tasmanian Aboriginal population was rapidly dwindling, there was violence (on both sides), the government formed a committee to deal with this violence and finally, in 1836, the 200 remaining Tasmanian Aborigines were exiled to Flinders Island and "subjected to the benefits of civilisation and religion" (94). This is more than descriptive context for colonial

society: both gendered and racialized bodies were used to provide evidence for medical and scientific theories of the time. By the 1850s, the Tasmanians were seen as almost extinct, and much of their material culture, language and religious beliefs and rituals were collected and recorded for the benefit of “European scientific narratives” (94). MacDonald’s next two paragraphs, direct rather than descriptive, a style with which she nicely punctuates her story-telling, set up the next three chapters:

And, in the knowledge that the Tasmanians held strong beliefs about the due treatment of their dead, medical men contributed in the way to which they were ideally suited. They harvested their bodies...

Many of these body parts were sent to Europe, where metropolitan scientific gentlemen studied and interpreted them. Thus links were formed between colonial and metropolitan men through the exchange of Aboriginal bodies for rewards, and our focus on crime and its punishment as a way of gaining access to the dead is being replaced by one revealing scientific work on race and its...[author’s ellipsis] delights (94-95).

Here, also, is the salient question about human origins of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the frame for what will come: was there a single origin for human life, or several different origins? Contemporary human bones of all sorts, but especially those of Tasmanian Aborigines, were used as evidence to support one theory or the other of human origins.

Chapters four and five are structured much like the first two: individual stories of “bone collectors,” both British scientists and colonial professionals, are made coherent so that the reader can make sense of their lives and their societies. Detailed webs of connection between the self-taught physical anthropologists of the time (some trained in medicine), members of the Royal Society, colonial medical doctors, and other upper-middle class colonists are surveyed and explained in chapter four. Understanding the lives of these individuals is a necessary first step to following MacDonald’s analysis of the 1869 dissection scandal in Tasmania in chapter five.

Chapter Four focuses on the bone gatherers and analysts, referred to as “the foragers and cultivators of science” (109). Dr. Joseph Barnard Davis, a “cultivator” was interested in categorizing skulls racially – he began by making notes on his own patients in 1823, and by 1867 had a collection of 1474 skulls (98). After years of taking notes on appearance, questioning people on the street and his patients about their ethnic origins (and secretly doubting their replies, based on his interpretations of physiognomy), purchasing and receiving skulls, he published the grandiose *Crania Britannica* which presented “an account of regional differences between the British” (99) in 1865, followed by the *Thesaurus Craniorum* (a skull-type catalogue) in 1867. MacDonald’s account of Davis’ scientific and colonial connections and single-minded pursuit of skulls is fascinating. She explains the theories of Davis, and another scientist, Dr. William Flower on the single versus multi-human origins

debate and the implications of these theories for social relations between colonists and natives.

The lives of the colonial bone “foragers” Dr. William Crowther (who had asked permission to attend Mary McLauchlan’s dissection and been refused) and Morton Allport (a solicitor), their motivations, gathering activities and to whom they sent their gifts of bones are also set out in detail. Allport seems to have rivalled Burke and Hare in his grave robbing, both before and after the 1869 scandal, yet he “accumulated a large number of scientific honours” (117) during his lifetime. In this chapter, however, MacDonald exhibits a richer understanding and engages in a more detailed analysis of socio-cultural norms and structures than in the glimpses she gave the reader in earlier chapters:

The relationships formed through these desirable bones enable us to better understand the place of colonial collectors in these exchanges. Neither William Crowther nor Morton Allport was primarily interested in scientific questions about the Tasmanians’ place in the human scheme of things, but each had other interests that were well served through the links they made with metropolitan scientists. These relationships were complex: both scientific and personal and driven by local as well as metropolitan imperatives (134-35).

MacDonald pays more specific attention to her overall goal of understanding the culture of dissection here than in earlier chapters. The individual stories are smoothly synthesized in a manner that more strongly supports her investigation, allowing the reader to fully appreciate MacDonald’s scholarship.

In chapter five “Death and Dissection, 1869” MacDonald ties together the individuals involved, professional and personal rivalries, contemporaneous structures of health care, and the everyday dealings with the dead in the Hobart General Hospital – focusing on the impulsive scandal of “the theft of William Lanney’s skull” (138). William Lanney was, apparently, the ‘last’ Tasmanian Aboriginal man, and his death resulted in a struggle over the rightful (in scientific terms) possession of his bones; this included switching his skull with that of a white man, Thomas Ross, and hiding this switch beneath each man’s face, as well as a secret ‘resurrection’ of Lanney’s buried body. MacDonald’s skills at “reverse dissection” are challenged in this chapter, as there is little information on William Lanney and less on Thomas Ross - nonetheless, she succeeds. The scandal prompted two government enquiries (148), and much public media debate. Both Crowther and Allport participated in the switching and ‘resurrection’, but while the scandal followed Crowther for much of his life, Allport was able to continue (Tasmanian Aboriginal) grave robbing without censure. MacDonald carefully charts events and evidence following the scandal to explain the differential treatment of these two principal actors.

MacDonald, further, explains the connections between individual actions, reactions and the cultures of medicine and colonialism in clear and convincing terms:

Lanney's death set Tasmania's *savants*, several of whom were medical men, quickly into action, for it turned him into a rare collectable.... Such an object would guarantee a collection's continuing and unique importance, for extinction meant that the Tasmanians could now only be known through such physical remains. It placed them more firmly than ever as a people of the past, who could be mapped and interpreted as inanimate objects (146).

The best example of this clarity of connection is in her thorough use of the transcripts from one of the government enquiries to illustrate the cultural gap between medical treatment (and categorization) of the dead, and public expectations of what respect is due dead bodies. Her approach in this chapter is especially energetic and its management of detail makes it compelling.

There is, however, a dissonance of style in the book which, by its end, reveals itself as a strength rather than a drawback. Although MacDonald frames her work in both performance and the culture of dissecting, a more subtle, not hidden but not quite acknowledged theme weaves its way through her work, a theme that tends to slow argument and allow a different kind of thought. MacDonald is herself performing a kind of mourning work for the individuals objectified through dissection: Elizabeth Ross, a poverty-stricken woman of London, hanged on doubtful evidence of murder; Mary McLauchlan, transported for a minor theft and hanged on weak evidence of killing her newborn infant; Mary Paterson, murdered by Burke and Hare, her body then sold to Robert Knox, the famous anatomist who "preserved her whole in a tub of whisky for three months" (34) as she was so beautiful; William Lanney, the 'last' Tasmanian Aboriginal, a whaler, whose friends attended the hospital where he died and ordered the coffin sealed as soon as rumours of the degradation of his body reached them; Thomas Ross, whose friends did not get to the hospital in time to prevent the dissection and later use of his body as a foil for collecting bits of Lanney's; and the bones of several Tasmanian Aboriginals, carelessly exhumed and made into gifts. Without this acknowledgement – that these were persons - MacDonald's critique would have been less powerful. It is in weaving the slow-paced and individual recognition of mourning work, with analyses and evidence of the medical and scientific culture of the times, that the yawning cultural gap between medical and non-medical treatment of the dead, both in the 1800s and today, can be fully grasped.

MacDonald concludes by drawing parallels to more recent examples of objectifying treatment of the dead, such as the unauthorized collection of children's organs at Alder Hey hospital in Liverpool in the 1980s and 1990s, and transfers of adults' organs for research without consent in Manchester. Moreover, she gives additional examples of the secret collection of dead bodies within medical institutions. There are other parallels that can be drawn to MacDonald's work, however, that echo the racist and colonialist attitudes of collectors and scientific theorists, rather than medical attitudes towards the dead. MacDonald's explanations of how Tasmanian Aboriginal bones were used to argue specific theories of human origins were reflected in the Human Genome Diversity Project (HGDP),

proposed in the 1990s. This goal of this project was to document human genetic variation by ensuring that gene samples were collected from non-European and, in particular, relatively isolated populations (often indigenous – North American indigenous peoples are mentioned as an example). The North American Committee of the Project explained in 1994 that such collection of diverse gene samples “...may help clarify the major human migrations...And it may settle the continuing debate about whether *Homo sapiens* evolved to modern humans in Africa or over the whole world”.<sup>i</sup> It is the same argument as that engaged in by Davis and Flower in the 1800s: a singular origin for humanity, or several? The historical, colonialist objectification of Tasmanian Aboriginal lives and bodies for the sake of scientific knowledge is further repeated in this Project:

And if sampling is too long delayed, some human groups may disappear as distinct populations, usually through urbanization or other forces leading to the loss of their language or the other characteristics that identify them as a discrete group.<sup>ii</sup>

Extinction by a gentler name – and thus, evidence, bits of peoples’ bodies, blood and skin cell samples, must be preserved, made into things, studied, and perhaps, though not by the HGDP itself, made profitable.<sup>iii</sup> MacDonald focuses on the culture of dissecting historically – and allows readers to ask similar questions in contemporary frames. Gene sampling of some of the poorest people on earth continues to build scientific careers today, just as well as the collection of Tasmanian Aboriginal skeletons did over a hundred years ago.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> North American Committee of Human Genome Diversity Project, “Human Genome Diversity Project”, Morrison Institute for Population and Resource Studies, Stanford University, 1993-1994. <http://www.stanford.edu/group/morrinst/hgdp/faq.html> (retrieved May 3, 2006). According to this site, the HGDP is a non-profit group unrelated to the Human Genome Project.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid. The HGDP is non-profit, but “...it would try to guarantee that, if any products were developed as a result of samples obtained from sample repositories or data banks operated by the Project, some reasonable financial benefits would flow back to the sampled populations.”