

Chapter Three:

Scottish Head Case

20 July 1860

It was seven o'clock and darkness had long settled on Maitland by the time William House made his way to the inn of Mr Finch to respond to a request that he call upon one of the guests.¹

Upon his arrival, the man who had summoned him quickly materialised, a figure familiar not only to House, sexton of St Peter's Church of England cemetery in East Maitland, but also to other townspeople.² The phrenologist Archibald Sillars Hamilton, known professionally as 'AS', had been lecturing throughout the region for some four months, using skulls and casts of heads to illustrate his craft of reading moral and intellectual characters from anatomy.³

Now, he took House out to the inn's verandah, and asked him if he recalled the double execution of Jim Crow and John Jones, and could he say whereabouts in the graveyard the two men might be buried.⁴

Mr House told him they were in the corner closest to the gate. And in which direction did the heads lie? House replied that they lay to the west, in the manner of all Christian burials.⁵ In fact, Hamilton well knew where the graves were located. He had already visited the cemetery, and had confirmed the location of the graves with two people – an unknown young man, and the water carrier who had transported the bodies from gaol to cemetery.⁶

Now, Hamilton told House that he had observed the soil of the graves to be moist and easy to work with. He would pay the man one pound if he dug down to the coffins, unscrewed the lids and removed the heads of the two executed men. It was a simple task for a moonlit night.⁷ House recoiled. The law would not apply to these men, Hamilton counselled; they were executed prisoners, and the police magistrate, Edward Denny Day, would have let him take the heads on execution day had there not been so many people about in the gaolyard.⁸ The sexton said he would not do it and, even if he were permitted by church authorities, his health prevented it and he would need to hire an assistant. Nevertheless, he promised to call on Monday to provide his answer.⁹

Over the next few days, House began to wrestle with growing unease.¹⁰ On Sunday, he recounted the conversation to the Reverend John Albert Greaves, parson of St Peter's. The next day Greaves visited the police magistrate, Day, to report the matter, only to find that the church warden Edward Ogg had already beaten him to it.¹¹ Day, who later denied ever telling Hamilton that he could have the heads, issued a summons for the phrenologist's arrest.¹²

Hamilton may have etched a profile for himself in the district, but moonlit nights and posthumous beheadings were apparently beyond the pale. He was bailed and committed to stand trial. The alleged crime: inciting another to exhume corpses from a burial ground.¹³

Science with a shovel

Hamilton's request on a winter's night in pastoral New South Wales was hardly unique. During the nineteenth century, enthusiasts of comparative anatomy and practices such as phrenology were scouring Australia for the skeletal remains of Aboriginal people, often aided by a network of paid collectors. Other parties to this scramble included curio hunters, museum directors and amateur enthusiasts.¹⁴ This macabre fascination with collecting human remains resulted from a perfect storm of expanding empire, debates about human origin, and the rise of the discipline of anatomy.

Bronwen Douglas and Chris Ballard, historians of the body and colonialism, point to the era of oceanic exploration after 1750 as contributing to the development of a new idea of race in European scientific thought.¹⁵ This period, best characterised in the Australian context through the voyages of Captain James Cook, brought European naturalists into contact with an increasing range of exotic humans. In a time when savants of the British Royal Society and French Academy of Sciences were developing taxonomies for plants and animals, this human diversity seemed to call for its own system of organisation through the lens of comparative anatomy.¹⁶

These new ideas for categorising human 'types' signalled a divergence from the humanistic views of Enlightenment thinkers, who attributed the presence and absence of 'civilisation' in different cultures to environment and opportunity.¹⁷ In the Enlightenment conception, all humans, regardless of how far they progressed, had equal intellectual and moral potential. From the late 1700s, however, the view of a single origin, known as monogeny, was challenged by polygenists, who argued that different races were the product of divergent species.¹⁸ The boundaries were immutable, and white Europeans were necessarily at the apex.

From the fray between monogenists and polygenists the new discipline of anthropology emerged in the 1830s, embracing poly-genism in its study of humans.¹⁹ Polygenist intellectuals penned racially and politically influential texts such as *The Negro's Place in Nature* (by James Hunt), and the argument of multiple origins became popular in pro-slavery circles.²⁰ In arguing their cases, both sides sought skeletal remains from around the world, with the remains of Aboriginal Australians a particular prize.²¹

The arrival in 1859 of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* established a common origin for humankind,²² but the Darwinian position of shared ancestry did not signal a return to softer racial distinctions. Instead, Darwin's 1871 book *The Descent of Man* explained that 'primitive' races such as Tasmanian Aborigines were distant forebears, incapable of living like the 'civilised' Europeans whose world and intellect had evolved through millennia of development.²³ A racial hierarchy thus remained dominant in what historians today call Social Darwinism (Darwin's cousin Francis Galton, the father of eugenics, was highly impressed by *Origin of Species*).²⁴ The nineteenth century also saw a formalisation of dis-section within medical education, and broader debates took place in Britain about the supply of dead bodies to medical schools for training, culminating in the *Anatomy Act* of 1832.²⁵

But it would be incorrect to assume that this medical and scientific context rendered exhumation of Aboriginal graves universally acceptable. Paul Turnbull has documented examples from the first 50 years after 1788 that demonstrate the respect of many European settlers and colonial officials for Aboriginal graves and remains.²⁶ In Hamilton's case, the response by Reverend Greaves of reporting the phrenologist to the police indicates a belief that Jim Crow was as deserving of respectful burial as the European Jones.

Phrenology: all in the head

Hamilton's income and growing notoriety derived from a discipline that placed more emphasis on the head than ever before. At the end of the eighteenth century in Vienna, a physician named Franz Joseph Gall developed a new theory on the relationship between intellect, morality and the brain, and by extension its casing.²⁷ He identified twenty-seven sections of the brain – known as separate 'organs' – that controlled faculties as diverse as parental love, powers of concentration, attachment and social sympathy, secretiveness and friendship.²⁸ These corresponded with external regions of the skull. The number of organs would grow and their meanings would be adapted as its greatest proponents disseminated the

discipline across Europe and out to the colonies, but in all its iterations, phrenology still retained the fundamental idea of the skull's shape providing clues to the brain within.²⁹

Gall took his system abroad in the early years of the nineteenth century, accompanied by his assistant Johann Gaspar Spurzheim, but it was the latter's showmanship from 1814 on a lecture tour of Great Britain that catapulted the discipline into a position where, by the late 1830s, there were 29 phrenological societies in Britain alone.³⁰ Historian of science John van Wyhe writes that by the 1840s "phrenology was known to practically every person" in Britain, with thousands of phrenologists plying their trade.³¹ The great driver behind this popularity was a Scotsman named George Combe, who moulded phrenology into a system for self-improvement, and whose 1828 *Constitution of Man* has been described by historian Roger Cooter as "one of the most esteemed and popular books of the second third of the nineteenth century", selling 300,000 copies by 1860.³² Cooter argues that phrenology's great popular success derived from its allowing anybody to penetrate the depths of human character simply by running their fingers over a head, quite literally putting science in the hands of the populace.³³

While today we easily pin the term 'pseudoscience' onto this practice, we should remember that phrenology was the subject of serious academic debate among doctors, anatomists and naturalists for much of the nineteenth century. Its adherents included Alfred Russel Wallace, considered a co-founder of the theory of evolution, who stood by his belief in phrenology until his death in 1913.³⁴ Furthermore, the term 'pseudoscience' implies that the boundaries of 'science' themselves are watertight, rather than resulting from negotiations and debates within and around the academy. For many people of this period, phrenology *was* science, and Cooter points out that advances in neurophysiology in the later nineteenth-century lent new credence to phrenology by proving relationships between brain and behaviour.³⁵

Phrenology, and how it could best be applied, meant different things to different people, and it was by turns applied to a range of reform causes including universal suffrage, temperance, health and slavery abolition.³⁶ That it could serve contradictory purposes is evident from the fact that it was on one hand viciously attacked as a materialist system that denied the role of God in human thought or behaviour but, on the other, was also adopted by scientifically minded clergyman, a group whom David de Giustino terms 'Christian Phrenologists'.³⁷ An Australian example of this latter group was the Reverend B Bottomley, phrenologist and physio-gnomist, who delivered lectures and gave readings in Queensland

during the 1890s.³⁸ Phrenology's use as a tool for self-improvement also correlated with a nineteenth-century preoccupation with keeping working classes appropriately occupied so as to reduce time available for social disturbance,³⁹ a principle that explains its prominent role within mechanics' institutes.⁴⁰ In the spirit of social experimentation, phrenology would also play a role in the administration of prisons and mental asylums.⁴¹

Antipodean story

In 1896, one of the canonical Australian writers of prose and verse, Henry Lawson, published a major collection of short fiction that included the melancholy 'Story of Malachi'.⁴² In this sometimes heart-wrenching, sometimes sentimental tale set on a cattle station, the unnamed narrator describes the practical jokes that he and his fellow workers played on the simpleton labourer Malachi. For their greatest joke, the men convinced Malachi that a visiting bricklayer who knew some phrenology "was suspected of having killed several persons for experimental purposes". On the last night that "Bricky" stayed at the station, he entered Malachi's hut, carrying a bag with a pumpkin at the bottom of it. To the amusement of the men observing through a crack in the bark, Bricky began to make overtures towards Malachi's skull.

"I've got Jimmy Nowlett's skull here," and he lifted the bag and lovingly felt the pumpkin... "I spoilt one of his best bumps with the tomahawk. I had to hit him twice, but it's no use crying over spilt milk." Here he drew a heavy shingling-hammer out of the bag and wiped off with his sleeve something that looked like blood. Malachi had been edging round for the door, and now he made a rush for it. But the skull-fancier was there before him.⁴³

As a popular work of literature from the late nineteenth century, 'The Story of Malachi' demonstrates just how familiar the tropes of bump reading and skull thieving had become in Australia's colonies. The public understanding of phrenology can also be inferred from a short story by the lesser-known author 'Tasma' (Jessie Couvreur) published in 1878, in which she describes her female character as "romantic – for romantic, read largely endowed with the organ of Ideality".⁴⁴ Published in a collection of short stories for Christmas, the story never mentions the term 'phrenology', assuming literacy of the system among its readers, and particularly what the "organ of Ideality" would signify.

Phrenology arrived in Australia as early as the 1820s, claims Jan Evelyn Wilson, whose 1994 PhD thesis charted the practice's position alongside other nineteenth-century concerns – religion, penal reform, treatment of lunatics.⁴⁵ Wilson's is the most conclusive study of phrenology across the century, but phrenology has also been examined by various historians interested in its ties to race or crime.⁴⁶ In 1993, John Thearle tried to chart the clear point of decline for phrenology in Australia, but we should be wary of attempts to map an even rise and fall of such a popular practice.⁴⁷ As demonstrated by the resurgence of scientific interest in phrenology during the late nineteenth century, fantastically popular practices are protean – they will be applied in a variety of ways and will come in and out of fashion. In recent years, reproductions of the iconic phrenological head produced by the enterprising Fowler family of the US have come to populate gift shops, decorative pieces that exemplify the tongue-in-cheek antiquarian aesthetic currently in vogue. Online poster dealers sell large-scale phrenological charts. Do purchasers appreciate these artefacts just for their beauty, their artful representation of the human form, or do they perhaps also see in them a connection between mind and body that resonates with contemporary alter-native health philosophies?

The newspaper digitisation project of the National Library of Australia, Trove, is now unveiling the true penetration of phrenology in the mid-to-late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with Hamilton just one among a constellation of showmen and women winking at the historian from advertisements and articles. The entertainment goal of many popular phrenologists is evident from an 1877 advertisement for a lecture by phrenologist Dr Carr, whose show included “laughable and marvellous experiments in electro-biology, hypnotism, mesmeric, somnambulism and electrical psychology”, all accompanied by “appropriate music”.⁴⁸ A performance by phrenologist Madame Sibly in South Australia in 1880 also included “a mesmeric extravaganza”.⁴⁹ A sobering reminder of phrenology's cooption as a race science resonates in an 1890 advertisement for a lecture by “Professor J.A. Fritz, phrenologist and anatomist, who brought with him “a family of Bosjesmans, the smallest human race in the world, natives of Central Africa”.⁵⁰

In this dubious collective, few phrenologists command as many column inches as Archibald Sillars Hamilton.

(Chapter 3 continues)

Notes

- 1 *Empire*, 30 July 1860, p. 5.
- 2 Ibid.; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 August 1860, p. 3.
- 3 *The Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser*, 15 March 1860, p. 1.
- 4 *Empire*, 30 July 1860, p. 5; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 August 1860, p. 3.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 *Empire*, 30 July 1860, p. 5.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 *Empire*, 30 July 1860, p. 5; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 August 1860, p. 3.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 *Freeman's Journal*, 8 August 1860, p. 3; *Bendigo Advertiser*, 18 August 1860, p. 3.
- 13 *Empire*, 30 July 1860, p. 5.
- 14 Pickering, Michael, 'Where are the Stories?', *The Public Historian*, Vol. 32 (1), 2010, pp. 82–84. For more about the role of amateur collectors, see Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors*, Oakleigh, 1996. For a discussion of the role of paid collectors, see Paul Turnbull's 'The Body and Soul Snatchers', *Eureka Street*, Vol. 7 (7), September 1997, pp. 34–38.
- 15 Bronwen Douglas and Chris Ballard (eds), *Foreign Bodies: Oceania and the Science of Race 1750–1940*, ANU Press, Canberra, 2008, p. xii.
- 16 Douglas identifies the Linnaean system of classification as a turning point in the development of a biological idea of race. See: Douglas, 'Climate to Crania: Science and the Racialization of Human Difference', in Douglas & Ballard.
- 17 Paul Turnbull, 'Phrenologists and the Construction of the Aboriginal Race, c.1790–1830', *History Compass*, Vol. 5 (1), 2007, p. 27.
- 18 Helen MacDonald, *Human Remains: Episodes in Human Dissection*, Carlton, 2005, p. 104.
- 19 Douglas, p. 53.
- 20 Paul Turnbull, 'British Anthropological Thought in Colonial Practice', in Douglas and Ballard (eds), p. 207; Cressida Fforde, *Collecting the Dead: Archaeology and the Reburial Issue*, London, 2004, p. 20.
- 21 MacDonald, 2005, p. 108; Turnbull, 2008, p. 213.
- 22 Fforde 2004, pp. 27–29.
- 23 Ibid., p. 28.
- 24 Michael Bulmer, *Francis Galton: Pioneer of Heredity and Biometry*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2003, p. 32.
- 25 Helen MacDonald, *Possessing the Dead*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2010.
- 26 Paul Turnbull, 'Scientific Theft of Remains in Colonial Australia', *Australian Indigenous Law Review*, Vol. 11 (1), 2007, pp. 97–98.
- 27 Roger Cooter, *The Cultural Meaning of Popular Science: Phrenology and the Organization of Consent in Nineteenth-century Britain*, Cambridge University Press, New York, p. 3.
- 28 Ibid., p. 522; AS Hamilton, *Practical Phrenology: A Lecture on the Heads, Casts of the Heads, and Characters of the Maungatapu Murderers*, Nelson, 1866.
- 29 Spurzheim added three organs to Combe's system – Conscientiousness, Time and Order – and George Combe contributed Concentrativeness. Cooter, p. 116.
- 30 Roger Cooter, pp. 89, 283, 296; John van Wyhe, *Phrenology and the Origins of Victorian Scientific Naturalism*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2004, pp. 27–28.
- 31 John van Wyhe, 'The Diffusion of Phrenology', in *Science in the Marketplace*, Aileen Fyfe and Bernard Lightman (eds), University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 82.
- 32 Cooter, p. 120.
- 33 Cooter, p. 117.
- 34 Ibid, p. 83.
- 35 Cooter, p. 21.
- 36 David de Giustino, *Conquest of Mind: Phrenology and Victorian Social Thought*, Croom Helm, London, 1975, p. 136. Orson Squire Fowler, part of the influential Fowler family that made phrenology a household practice in the US, published a pamphlet called *Temperance, Founded on Phrenology and Physiology*, which ran to more than 20 editions. The 24th edition, published in 1846, can be viewed as a free Google Book online.
- 37 David de Giustino, 1975, p. 119.
- 38 *The Brisbane Courier*, 6 August 1896, p. 6; *The Northern Miner*, 25 July 1893, p. 3.

- 39 Fforde p. 23; A rationale for establishing the National Museum of Victoria was to prevent the 'dissipation' of working classes (David Goodman, 'Fear of Circuses: Founding the National Museum of Victoria', *Continuum*, Vol. 3 (1), 1990, p. 21.)
- 40 George Nadel, *Australia's Colonial Culture*, FW Cheshire, Melbourne, 1957, pp. 139–142.
- 41 David de Giustino, p. 145; Cooter, p. 32.
- 42 Henry Lawson, *While the Billy Boils* (ebook), University of Adelaide. Available online: http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/l/lawson/henry/while_the_billy_boils/complete.html. Accessed 19 May 2014.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 'Tasma' (Jessie Couvreur), 'What an artist discovered in Tasmania', in *A Sydney Sovereign: Tasma* (Introduced and Edited by Michael Ackland), Angus & Robertson, Pymble, 1993, p. 15. The story was published in Garnet Walch (ed), *Australasia: An Intercolonial Christmas Annual*, George Robertson, Melbourne, 1878.
- 45 Wilson, Janice Evelyn, 'Signs of the Mind: Science, Psychological Knowledge and Social Hegemony in Colonial Australia', PhD Thesis, University of Western Australia, 1994, Microfiche mc G 6631, National Library of Australia.
- 46 Australian scholarship that touches on phrenology's impact in Australia includes: Jill Dimond, 'Ned Kelly's Skull', Issue 211, *Overland*, 2013; David de Giustino, 'Reforming the commonwealth of Thieves: British Phrenologists and Australia', *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 15 (4), 1972, pp. 439–461; Paul Turnbull, 'British Anatomists, Phrenologists and the Construction of the Aboriginal race, c. 1790–1830', *History Compass*, Vol. 5(1), 2007, pp. 26–50; Paul Turnbull, 'Rare work amongst the professors', in Barbara Creed and Jeanette Hoorn (eds), *Body Trade: Captivity, Cannibalism and Colonialism in the Pacific*, pp. 3–23; Dean Wilson, 'Explaining the 'Criminal' Ned Kelly's Death Mask', *The La Trobe Journal*, No 69, 2002, pp. 51–58. Phrenology is also discussed as a dominant idea in Australian culture within broader works. For example, Michael Roe, *Quest for Authority in Eastern Australia 1835–1851*, Halstead Press, Kingsgrove, 1965, pp. 161–164, and Nadel, pp. 139–142.
- 47 M. John Thearle, 'The Rise and Fall of Phrenology in Australia', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 27, 1993, pp. 518–525.
- 48 *The Brisbane Courier*, 1 August 1877, p. 1.
- 49 *South Australian Chronicle and Weekly Mail*, 13 November 1880, p. 26.
- 50 *South Australian Register*, 31 July 1890, p. 3. The contemporary term for this group is 'Bushmen'.