Where human skulls were concerned, English surgeon Joseph Barnard Davis was the epitome of private collectors. By 1867 he had amassed 1,540 of them, which made his collection larger than those of all the public museums in Britain put together, in fact the largest in the world (Anon. 387). All crowded into the house of a country doctor, in the market town of Shelton in Staffordshire.

In 1856 Davis wrote a letter to Alfred Bock, an artist living in England’s most distant colony, Tasmania. He asked Bock to put him in touch with a local medical man who would be in a position to obtain Tasmanian Aboriginal bones for his collection, and explained to Bock precisely how a skull could be extracted from a body with no-one being the wiser (Rae-Ellis 113). The technique required uninterrupted access to the bodies of two people, which made a hospital dissecting room the ideal place in which to perform it. Next time an Aboriginal person died in the colony’s public hospital, Davis instructed Bock, a surgeon should make an incision along the side of the face, carefully peel back the skin, remove the skull, replace it with a substitute skull taken from the hospital’s dissecting room, then draw up the skin so that it assumed the shape of a face once more.

Eight years later, another Englishman with an interest in human skulls, William Henry Flower, also wrote to Tasmania to request some Aboriginal bones. Flower was the Conservator of the Hunterian Museum at London’s Royal College of Surgeons. He longed to obtain a skeleton of a sperm whale for the Hunterian, and most of the words in the letter he wrote to Tasmanian surgeon William Lodewyk Crowther, concerned this request.
But then, just dropped in the midst of all that talk about the cetacea, Flower tentatively enquired ‘I suppose there is no further chance of obtaining a skeleton of … one of the aboriginal human inhabitants [of Tasmania], or a pair, male & female?’ (Flower 3 Mar. 1864).

When that letter arrived in Crowther’s hands, it set off a chain of events that has not ended yet. Passions were aroused and reputations were lost and made. Pleasures were taken in gossip and revenge. And the bodies of two dead men – one black, one white – were mutilated in a public hospital in exactly the way that Davis had suggested thirteen years earlier.

Histories of science generally interpret the relationships that developed between nineteenth-century colonial and metropolitan scientific gentlemen by using a centre/periphery model. It places the colonists as men who gathered the kind of raw material upon which European scientists then performed the more prestigious task of interpretation and theory-making. These men have respectively been designated the ‘foragers’ and ‘cultivators’ of science (Fleming in Home ix; Hunt 12). However these relationships were more complicated than a centre/periphery model suggests. Bone collecting is performed in particular societies, in which those doing the collecting are much more than scientific gentlemen who work with an eye to metropolitan rewards. Exploring specific episodes of this activity enables us to understand the interweaving contexts in which it took place, what historian Inga Clendinnen has called the ‘muddy actuality’ of things (Clendinnen 21). What might an examination of the relationships formed between two metropolitan scientists, Davis and Flower, and the two Tasmanian settler-colonists who sent them gifts of Aboriginal skeletal material, reveal about the intricacies in which local cultural authority was being claimed and contested through this collecting, in a new society at the far end of Britain’s world (MacDonald)?

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Tasmanian Aboriginal bones were objects of scientific desire, and Davis and Flower were two
Victorian men engaged upon the task of determining the answer to fundamental questions about humankind, in light of increasing understanding that the earth had a history that was exceedingly deep. Important questions remained to be answered, and there were two main threads to scientific speculations. At its core the debate was between monogenists, like Flower, who believed humankind had had a common point of origin and that differences between the races were a matter of degree rather than kind; and polygenists, like Davis, for whom the races were both distinct and immutable, and always had been. However, these two perspectives did share some priorities (Stocking 148). For both, distinctive races of human beings did, empirically, exist, and the differences between them were so marked that they both needed to be explained and could be placed on a linear scale of humankind, with so-called savages like the Tasmanians occupying one end, and Europeans the other.

By mid-nineteenth century, it was believed that the Tasmanians were on the brink of extinction, and this turned scientific work on them into an urgent project. It was one to which colonial medical men contributed in a particular way. They were ideal collectors of Aboriginal bodies, an activity in which they had been engaged since the British arrived in Van Diemen’s Land. In 1804 the penal settlement’s first surgeon, Jacob Mountgarrett, collected and preserved the remains of a man who had been shot at Risdon Cove, which he subsequently packed in a barrel and shipped to Port Jackson.¹ Such activities were one way in which medical men sought to make what historian John Harley Warner has called ‘satisfying’ identities for themselves in a new world (Warner 6). Through such settler-colonists, metropolitan scientists like Davis and Flower were well placed to obtain the kind of skeletal material upon which the science of humankind was being

¹ A sceptical Keith Windschuttle questions the accuracy of this contemporary report (Windschuttle 24). Had he read extensively about medical men and their activities in Britain’s settler-colonies at this time, he would have few doubts. Brian Plomley’s exhaustive list of the donations of Tasmanian Aboriginal skeletal material to European collections includes a large number from medical men, who were pre-eminent bone collectors (Plomley, ‘A List’).
built. They used the imperial connections available to them as British men to obtain Tasmanian Aboriginal bones.

In this context, when William Crowther received that hesitant request in Flower’s 1864 letter for a pair of Tasmanian skeletons, he replied enthusiastically, saying that although he was ‘removed by great distance from your splendid Museum’, he felt ‘great interest in every thing [sic] tending to the advancement of Science’ (Crowther 22 Dec. 1863). He informed Flower that it would give him much pleasure to fill the deficiency in the Hunterian Museum where the osteological remains of whales were concerned, but that obtaining Aboriginal skeletal material would prove more difficult. Speaking only of those people of full Aboriginal descent (for it was only their skeletons that were of interest to European scientists), Crowther informed Flower that just five Tasmanians remained alive, and they lived at Oyster Cove which was some thirty miles from Hobart Town. Crowther promised Flower that he would try to get an order sent to the Aboriginal establishment there ‘that in the event of serious illness [the person] should be forwarded to the Hospital, where if they depart this life attention shall be paid to [obtaining] their osteological remains.’ He also advised Flower that he would ‘make enquiries’, for he felt that ‘with no very great trouble a couple [of bodies] could be exhumed from their burial ground’. Then, in what would become a pattern in Crowther’s correspondence with Flower, he moved on to other matters that concerned him more deeply, asking Flower to take care of one of his sons, Edward, who would soon arrive in London to further his own medical education (Crowther 23 May 1864).

This kind of quid pro quo – the promise that a gift would be made, and the request for something in return – was to become a feature of Crowther’s correspondence with Flower. Over the following decade, the colonial man made many donations of cetacean skeletal material, including the skeleton of a sperm whale measuring fifty-one feet in length. In return, he was awarded the Royal College of Surgeons’ prestigious Gold Medal, [Page 48] and Flower made all of Crowther’s sons’ lengthy stays in London both ‘agreeable and profitable’ (Flower 3 Mar. 1864).
However for five years following Flower’s request for a pair of Aboriginal skeletons, there was no further talk in the letters about human remains. Not until 1869 when William Lanney, who was understood to be the ‘last’ Tasmanian Aboriginal man, died in Hobart Town. Then Crowther moved quickly on Flower’s behalf. He arranged for the body to be taken to the General Hospital, in which he was an Honorary Medical Officer, and simultaneously sent a formal request to the Colonial Secretary, Sir Richard Dry, for possession of this body on behalf of the Royal College of Surgeons.

At the same time, he reminded Dry that two years earlier, when an Aboriginal Tasmanian woman had died in the hospital, the Colonial Secretary had broken a promise that her body would become his (Crowther 4 Mar. 1869). Instead, she was given to the local Royal Society.

This letter put Dry in a difficult position, for he had also received a request for Lanney’s body from the Society’s Fellows. These local men argued strongly that Lanney’s skeleton was an ‘essential element’ of their own scientific collection, which they had begun to call a national museum (Agnew 5 Mar. 1869). Like Flower in London, the Fellows longed to possess the body of the last man, which would take pride of place in their museum.

When Crowther learned that Dry again favoured the local institution, he took matters into his own hands. On the evening of 5 March, he and his youngest son (and pupil at the hospital) Bingham, entered the institution’s dead house and stole Lanney’s skull from beneath his skin in exactly the way that Davis had spelled out in 1856.

From this point, it should have been a simple matter for Crowther to prepare the skull and ship it to Flower, as he had all those whale bones. Instead, this night’s work had unexpected ramifications, for the Fellows of the Royal Society soon learned of Crowther’s work in the hospital’s dead house. Despite Joseph Barnard Davis’s insistence that substituting skulls could be accomplished with nobody being the wiser, this was not the case. George Stokell, the hospital’s resident surgeon (and member of the Royal Society) discovered the theft (List of members’ names). He reported it to the Society’s Honorary Secretary, Dr James Agnew, and its Vice-President,
solicitor Morton Allport. These men acted swiftly to prevent Crowther from returning to obtain the rest of Lanney’s bones, and so a perfect specimen. They instructed Stokell to cut off Lanney’s hands and feet (Mercury 13 Mar. 1869). Then on the [Page 49] following night, after Lanney’s public funeral, Stokell resurrected the body from its grave on the Society’s behalf (Tasmanian Times 13 Mar. 1869). He spent the next day in a back room at the hospital harvesting Lanney’s bones. And meanwhile, as we shall see, Morton Allport set about the business of tracking down Lanney’s skull, without which his skeleton was not worth very much, scientifically speaking.

News that the dead were being mutilated in the colony’s premier hospital, and that a body had been stolen from its grave after a Christian burial, quickly became public knowledge in Hobart Town. The scandal that ensued brought the colony’s scientists into disrepute. People began to refer to the hospital’s resident surgeon, George Stokell, as ‘the resurrection man of the worshipful society of body-snatchers’, which reminded everyone of a dark aspect of British medicine’s recent past (Tasmanian Times 13 Mar. 1869). Until 1832, most of the ‘subjects for dissection’ upon which medical men learned and practised their craft were obtained by robbing graves and dealing with disreputable others who did so on their behalf (Richardson 52-99).²

Much of the public commentary in Tasmania in 1869 took the form of critical reflections about what it meant to be a Tasmanian of British descent in the face of all these activities with Lanney’s body, which challenged any understanding of British colonialism as being a civilising mission. Those commenting in the colony’s newspapers expressed fears about how they, as settler-colonists, would be viewed at ‘home’, that is in Britain, for they were conscious that they lived in what had until recently been a penal colony, and one in which a race of human beings had now become extinct. Some placed the blame for the Tasmanians’ disappearance

² Grave-robbing ceased in Britain when increased legal supplies of bodies were granted to medical men by Britain’s An Act for regulating Schools of Anatomy, 1832.
on certain depraved individuals, ‘fiends in human shape’ (Mercury 5 Mar. 1869). Others were less sure. They worried that the British colonisation of Van Diemen’s Land had been a process that degraded both coloniser and colonised. A man styling himself ‘Job Muggs’ argued that in Tasmania, people of British origin had become ‘murderers, and something worse’ (Cornwell Chronicle 12 Mar. 1869). This concern resonated with European scientific beliefs about degeneration, which was a fate that could affect any race. Settler-colonists in Tasmania understood how easily they might become exemplars of degeneration in European eyes.

As Stefan Petrow has pointed out, the scandal surrounding the theft of William Lanney’s skull was also accentuated by the fact that it took place during an election campaign which was preoccupying the government, [Page 50] Crowther, the Fellows of the Royal Society and the colony’s press (Petrow). Newspaper correspondent ‘An Old Colonist Also’ was concerned that the ‘stigma for which we are already too notorious’ were multiplied by the mutilation of Lanney’s body, and he worried that Crowther’s subsequent victory at the election for Hobart’s seat in the Legislative Council revealed that Tasmanians were a people immune to shame (Cornwell Chronicle 10 Apr. 1869).

The Chronicle’s editor was also anxious about the degree to which the government had connived at the mutilation, and the effect this would have on Tasmanians’ ‘national character’. He believed that when a community or government acted ‘on indecent or immoral principles’, this would induce a ‘proportional degradation in the virtue and dignity of the individuals who form the mass of the people’ (reprinted in the Tasmanian Times 13 Mar. 1869). A correspondent calling himself ‘Justice’ argued in the press that unless the government instituted a full enquiry into the Lanney affair, ‘the moral sense of [the] community must become callous to the fears of wrong and indecency’ (Cornwell Chronicle 21 Apr. 1869). ‘An Old Colonist’ called for public meetings to condemn the scientists’ activities ‘and show to the world that the colonists, as a body, are indignant that so foul a deed should have been perpetrated’. This, he believed, would ‘wipe
out the stain that has been inflicted upon the colony by a few individuals’ (Cornwell Chronicle 31 Mar. 1869).

Critical eyes were especially focussed on colonial science and its practitioners. Members of the public wondered about the scientific competence of the Tasmanian Royal Society, for it now seemed strange that the Fellows had taken ‘no steps … in the interests of science to secure a perfect skeleton of a male Tasmanian aboriginal’ for the local museum, though it had been known for years that the race was becoming extinct (Mercury 8 Mar. 1869). In a letter to Flower, William Crowther built on this criticism. He charged that the Society comprised ‘a mere clique of would-be savants’, who had not even considered obtaining a Tasmanian skeleton until he put the thought in their minds (Crowther 22 Apr. 1869). Crowther asserted his own scientific credentials vis-à-vis the Fellows when he said that he had examined Lanney’s skull, and thought Flower would find it a very valuable specimen, ‘exhibiting as it does in a most striking degree the improvement that takes place in the lower race when subjected to the effects of education and civilization.’ (Crowther 27 Mar. 1869) He argued that the skeleton of the last man properly belonged in a British museum, rather than a local Tasmanian collection. In a private conversation with George Stokell – which took place before the two men’s serial work on Lanney’s body began – Crowther referred to Tasmania as a ‘paltry little place’ (later reported in the Mercury 13 Mar. 1869). In the subsequent furore, Stokell would use these words to his advantage.

Due to this episode of bone collecting, William Crowther has gone down in history as little more than a scavenger of bones. He is a sinister presence in most twentieth-century histories of Tasmania. Everything else about this man—his successful medical practice, entrepreneurial activities, and progressive representation of Hobart in the colony’s Legislative Council—has paled into insignificance in comparison.

In contrast, Crowther’s main rival for Lanney’s bones, Morton Allport, has managed to keep his historical reputation intact. This is something of a wonder, for he is the man who had instructed the further
mutilation of Lanney’s body in the hospital (Agnew, *Mercury* 19 Mar. 1869); and two years later, in 1871, he began to disinter complete Tasmanian skeletons from their graves and ship them off to Europe—all while arguing that such rare and precious objects properly belonged in a local museum.

In December, 1871, Allport shipped ‘a case containing the Skeleton of a Tasmanian Aborigine’ to the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland in London (Allport 30 Dec. 1871). This was a very special gift, for until now no European institution possessed a complete Tasmanian skeleton. In return, Allport received an acknowledgement of his donation in the Institute’s Council Minute Book, in which his name appears with those of such well-known scientists as Sir John Lubbock and Colonel Lane Fox, as well as other colonial collectors (Council Minutes 97-8).

In the same month, Allport forwarded two skeletons to William Crowther’s colleague, William Flower, at the Hunterian Museum. It is difficult to imagine a more insulting gesture towards Crowther. Allport’s gift to Flower was a pair of skeletons which Crowther had been unable or unwilling to find and send to Britain. One of these skeletons was that of Bessy Clark, who had been buried at Oyster Cove in 1867. The other comprised the bones of a man whom Allport had had disinterred from the graveyard on Flinders Island, where the Tasmanians had lived and died between 1833 and 1847.

These two skeletons were sent to Flower for a specific reason. Allport believed that Crowther had shipped Lanney’s skull to the Hunterian, and he longed to retrieve it. He promised Flower that, if the British scientist would [Page 52] return Lanney’s skull to Tasmania, Allport would send to the Hunterian in addition yet another ‘perfect’ skeleton (Allport 29 Dec. 1871). However Flower denied ever receiving Lanney’s skull.\(^3\) So that makes three skeletons sent or promised, in the hope of receiving in exchange just one skull. It reveals how desperate Allport was to best

\(^3\) Allport mentions hearing from Flower in a letter dated 11 July 1872, ALMFA, Letter Book November 1871 to December 1874, 59
Crowther in this matter, for all this effort to obtain Lanney’s skull was made as much with an eye to Allport’s local status as anything else, and in particular his social rivalry with William Crowther.

This was another context in which these two men fought to possess William Lanney’s bones. Allport and Crowther moved in different social circles in a small community. The Allports thought of themselves as forming part of its upper crust. In a letter written in 1867, Allport wrote disparagingly of ‘the class of colonists who [now] fill the old places’, saying they were ‘not to my liking’ (Allport 25 Sept. 1867). In his letters over the years he made several snide references to William Crowther and his children. Allport seems to have despised the surgeon as much for his involvement in trade, as anything else.

In 1865, he wrote to an English friend to relate a story about Crowther’s daughter, Caroline, whom Allport believed lacked the proper social graces. He wrote that he had attended an ‘at home’ only to overhear Caroline Crowther (‘the Elegant and accomplished daughter of the proprietor of “Bird Island”’) say to an old colonist “Dear me Mr Terry your moustache doesn’t seem to get on very well, never mind I’ll bring you a pocketful of pa’s Guano”!!’ (Allport 22 Apr. 1865). This was a reference to the fact that Crowther leased islands from which he harvested that fertiliser.

In another letter, Allport talked of amusing himself at a ‘cocked-hat dinner’ in 1867, where he found himself amongst ‘all the roughs I ever had the bad luck to dine with’, and so passed the time by setting one of Crowther’s friends against one of his enemies, and sitting back to enjoy the ‘glorious shindig’ that followed (Allport 25 Sept. 1867).

It must have grated on Morton Allport that William Crowther had bested him in the matter of Lanney’s skull. In January 1873, he shipped his next skeletal gift to Britain, this time to that insatiable private collector, Joseph Barnard Davis (Allport 23 Jan 1873). With this gift, William Lanney was still uppermost in Allport’s mind. He later informed the British skull collector that he had heard a rumour that Lanney’s skull had finally arrived in London, in the company of Crowther’s son Bingham who was now studying at Guy’s Hospital. Allport tried to entice Davis to travel [Page 53]
to London to see the skull for himself. In this letter, written after all of Allport’s attempts to obtain Lanney’s skull had failed, he began to call Lanney ‘the (so called) last male Aborigine’. ‘So called’ he said, because he now had photographic evidence that ‘the form of [Lanney’s] head … is utterly unlike [that of] the true Tasmanian’ (Allport 8 Aug. 1873).

Allport was planting the idea in English scientific minds that the skull William Crowther had taken so much trouble to procure was, scientifically speaking, quite worthless. Yet the photographs to which he referred had been taken by Charles Woolley in 1866 for Melbourne’s Intercolonial Exhibition, and they had been widely available from that time. It is inconceivable that Morton Allport had not seen them before now. He had acted as one of the Tasmanian Commissioners for this Exhibition (Winter 59); at which both he and Woolley had exhibited, and won medals for, their photographs (Argus 14 Feb. 1866). And he was also, still, intensely interested in locating Lanney’s skull, no matter that the reason he now gave was a different one.

When Crowther heard that Allport had disparaged his scientific assessment of Lanney’s skull as that of a true Tasmanian, he wrote to Flower and planted a doubt of his own, questioning the authenticity of one of the skeletons Allport had sent to Flower. ‘Between ourselves’, he wrote, there was some doubt as to its ‘character’, for when he had had the Oyster Cove graves examined, ‘with the exception of the “half castes” all were headless, and no burials have taken place since’ (Crowther 19 Apr. 1873).

Had Davis visited Bingham at Guy’s in London, he would, in any event, have been wasting his time, for Lanney’s skull still lay in Crowther’s home in Hobart Town. I think, despite his bombast, William Crowther regretted his actions that night in the hospital’s dead house. He was an impetuous man who had not foreseen the trouble the incident would cause him. The attacks on him were, he reported to Flower, ‘the most violent political attacks that have ever been made on any private individual within the Australian Colonies’, and he added that, although he was ‘not one of a class devoid of British Pluck’, he felt their effects. Referring to the Gold Medal he was about to receive from the Royal College of Surgeons for his donations of cetaceous material, he said ‘if
the College give me any such and as many Fellowships I should not be compensated for the annoyance I have had from the Skull of the last Aboriginal’ (Crowther 22 Apr. 1869).

Both Davis and Flower went on to use the Tasmanian skeletal material that had been shipped to Britain, when they subsequently wrote the Tasmanians into their respective assessments of human diversity. As for their colonial correspondents, neither William Crowther nor Morton Allport was really much interested in where the Tasmanians lay in the human scheme of things. Their relationships with the British scientists had been weighed down with the significance of an expectation—sometimes crudely stated—that for their efforts they would receive something important in return. Amongst other things, the scientific connections they forged over Tasmanian bones offered them the sense that they were something more than forgotten men who had settled in an outlandish place. However untangling the threads of these relationships also illuminates important local aspects of these activities, exposing something of the muddy actuality in which such contributions to the science of humankind were made. Bone collecting was undertaken with as much an eye to local forms of cultural authority as anything else.
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List of members’ names attached to Membership Appeal, agreed at Council Meeting 12 April 1870, RSA/B/23.


*Mercury* 5 Mar. 1869.

*Mercury* 8 Mar. 1869.

*Mercury* 13 Mar. 1869.

*Mercury* 19 Mar. 1869.


*Tasmanian Times* 13 Mar. 1869.


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