'Cranial connections': Queensland's 'Talgai Skull' debate of 1918 and custodianship of the past

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As the Great War steadily ground towards its bloody conclusion in 1918, leaving in its wake an incalculable mass of decayed human remains, a single Aboriginal skull unearthed in Queensland generated a different form of conflict. Although devoid of martial combat, the war of words which developed nevertheless gave vent to considerable angst. Named after the site of its discovery, the 'Talgai Skull' provided valuable ammunition for the scientific fraternity, who stressed the great antiquity of the Aboriginal presence in Australia. Yet, as the public debate revealed, their assertions were not easily accepted. While shifting battle lines were thus drawn, opposing camps made brief forays into the intellectual realm of 'No Man's Land'. Ultimately prevailing against the salvos of diatribes fired against them, Australia's pioneer archaeologists firmly placed the Pleistocene epoch as a crucial point from which the Aboriginal occupation of the continent could be pushed further back into the swirling mists of time. On the other hand, it is the physical evidence emanating from that past, including the Talgai Skull, which has also raised the important ethical question of custodianship. It was definitely not an issue in 1918, but perhaps the Talgai Skull symbolises that an understanding of the human record is essential for both Europeans and Aborigines. It may yet lead to an Armistice.

The Talgai Skull itself has travelled a tortuous path. In 1886 a fencing contractor, William Naish, and his two sons, Alfred and Charles, were temporarily forced to abandon their work on Queensland's Darling Downs due to inclement weather. After six days spent in the nearby township of Allora they returned to their camp on Dalrymple Creek, which ran through the pastoral holding then known as East Talgai Station. When Naish inspected an old billabong near his fence line, which had been scoured afresh by floodwaters, his attention was drawn to an unusual object protruding three feet from the bottom. On closer investigation it proved to be a human cranium heavily encrusted with calcium carbonate.¹ Naish gave his find to the owner of East Talgai, GJE Clark, from whom it was later acquired by EHK Crawford, Clark's nephew-in-law. By his own admission an avid collector of 'curios', Crawford owned Waterloo Station, near Walcha in New South Wales. In 1896 a report concerning 'a petrified skull' appeared in the local

¹ Macintosh 1967a: 95; see also Gill 1970: 178.

newspaper, attracting the attention of Robert Etheridge, Curator of the Australian Museum.²

The correspondence which followed has been documented by NWG Macintosh. Put succinctly, Etheridge suggested that Crawford might either lend the supposed skull to the museum or offer it as a gift. Crawford had other intentions, forwarding it to Sydney where it was displayed at the stationery firm of Turner and Henderson. Obviously aware of its pecuniary value, Crawford continued negotiations with the Australian Museum and possibly contacted the British Museum of Natural History.³ There appears to have been no response from the latter, but Etheridge and the Trustees of the Australian Museum continued to make further offers until it was disclosed that the cranium had no 'geological history'; that is, its chance finding precluded any attempt at dating. The Talgai Skull was to languish in Crawford's possession until 1914, but it is relevant that two of the Trustees of the Australian Museum during these negotiations were Professors Edgeworth David and James Wilson.⁴ These two were to figure prominently when the fossil cranium re-emerged from its slumber at Walcha, possibly triggered by the controversy surrounding palaeoanthropological finds in the gravels of Sussex. England's 'Piltdown Man' and Queensland's Talgai Skull were inextricably linked, but while 1912 was to become infamous as the year of 'Piltdown Man's' fraudulent discovery, the exact year of Naish's genuine find in Queensland soon faded from memory.

Based on Naish's statement in 1914 that he had found the Talgai Skull some thirty years earlier, public disclosures of this important archaeological evidence posited the year as 1884. However, Macintosh contended in 1967 that 1886 was far more likely. After examining meteorological and pastoral records, Macintosh was able to demonstrate that severe drought had gripped much of Australia, including the Darling Downs, between 1880 and 1885. Relief finally came in 1886. So meticulous was this research that Macintosh tentatively suggested that the ancient cranium may have been exposed in the month of June, as lowering temperatures also concurred with Naish's account.⁵ Noting that it was the length of deposition which became literally a bone of contention in the 1918 debate, the actual year of discovery is not particularly significant. On the other hand, and for two distinct reasons, 1914 certainly was.

In that year, Crawford forwarded the cranium to Edgeworth David at the University of Sydney for valuation. Again making it clear that the skull was available for purchase, either in Australia or overseas, Crawford remained adamant that it was not to be tampered with in any way until a sale had been effected. Events now took a curious turn. Edgeworth David is recorded as having been present during discussions over the Talgai Skull in 1896,⁶ yet in 1914 he appeared to have exhibited no sign of recognition. Even more surprising, it is only at this point that he realised the potential archaeological value of the cranium.⁷

2. Macintosh 1969: 193.

3. *Ibid.*; Blinderman 1986: 227.

4. Macintosh 1969: 193-5.

5. Macintosh 1967a: 95.

6. Macintosh 1969: 193.

7. Macintosh 1965: 46.

He could, however, only guess at what lay beneath the encrustation. To allay any doubts, Edgeworth David invited a host of eminent colleagues, including Grafton Elliott Smith, von Luschan, William Sollas, James Wilson (who, like Edgeworth David, made no reference to the discussions of 1896), Berry, and Baldwin Spencer, to carry out cursory examinations. While their special fields were diverse, the conclusions were unanimous; the Talgai Skull should be purchased.⁸ Finding the necessary funds was another matter. However, before an overseas buyer was found Alderman Joynton Smith, Lord Mayor of Sydney, came to the rescue. Smith reputedly paid 150 pounds for the cranium and graciously presented it the University of Sydney, minus an upper incisor tooth which Crawford had extracted from both the skull and the sale.⁹

There can be little doubt that the sudden interest in the Talgai Skull emanated from the publicity surrounding Piltdown Man, which temporarily provided British archaeologists with 'evidence' of prehistoric hominids to rival discoveries on the Continent. The unearthing of Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon remains across the Channel had certainly bred considerable resentment among British scientists.¹⁰ Moreover, the postulation soon to be made that the Talgai Skull was a relic of the Pleistocene epoch reinforced the British claims of great antiquity for Piltdown Man.¹¹ The connection was to strengthen even further.

Preliminary examination of the Talgai Skull was carried out by the two Australian Museum Trustees of 1896 – Edgeworth David and James Wilson, the latter Challis Professor of Anatomy at Sydney University. In August 1914 they presented their findings to the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Sydney.¹² The Queensland cranium was greeted with considerable acclaim by those present, but Edgeworth David lamented that as the skull had not been recovered in situ, its antiquity was largely dependent on geological deposits in the vicinity and the archaic 'anatomical characteristics'.¹³ Grafton Elliot Smith referred to the Talgai Skull in his own lecture, in which he expounded the view that human evolution began with the shrews 'which threw off the domination of the sense of smell, and developed that of vision', thus creating the precedent to effect change.¹⁴ Smith was also an advocate of the theory that the development of the brain preceded both speech and erect posture.¹⁵ Of those who had recommended the purchase of the Talgai Skull, only Baldwin Spencer was absent from the Sydney meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. He had nevertheless been a major organiser for the Melbourne leg of the tour,¹⁶ and despite their diverse interests, all were closely involved with Grafton Elliot Smith.

It was not until 1953 that Piltdown Man was conclusively shown to be fraudulent, consisting of human skull fragments and an ape mandible of comparatively recent origin. At first, accusations fell heavily upon the 'discoverer', Charles Dawson, who con-

8. *Ibid.*: 47.

9. *Ibid.*: 47–8; Blinderman 1986: 230.

10. Millar 1972: 96–7.

11. *Ibid.*: 151–2.

12. Macintosh 1965: 46.

13. *SMH* 22 August 1914: 9.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Blinderman 1986: 225.

16. Mulvaney 1988: 204.

veniently died in 1916. Later studies of the hoax, however, have directed attention towards the Australian, Grafton Elliot Smith.¹⁷ The motive for the Piltdown Man episode has not been adequately explained and is quite outside the scope of this paper, but it can be suggested that the 'amnesia' of Edgeworth David and Wilson in 1914 is quite inexplicable. Furthermore, the re-emergence of the Talgai Skull was most opportune in relation to Piltdown, and the close association between Grafton Elliot Smith and the other Australian scientists surely requires further investigation.

Acclaim for the Talgai Skull certainly inspired Edgeworth David, who visited East Talgai Station and met William Naish shortly after the Association meeting. Aged and crippled with rheumatism, Naish was carried to his old campsite, where he pointed out the location of his remarkable find. Perhaps not surprisingly, no other skeletal fragments were uncovered and Edgeworth David contented himself with collecting geological samples. He remained at East Talgai for three days.¹⁸ As a geologist, he took little further interest in the Talgai Skull and Wilson's expertise was soon required by the military.¹⁹ Less than two years later, Edgeworth David was himself in France, using his geological knowledge to solve military problems, particularly trench damage and the construction of tunnels.²⁰ It was thus left to Dr Stewart Smith, another anatomist at the University of Sydney – and brother of Grafton Elliot Smith – to analyse the cranium in detail. His comprehensive report was published in 1918 and although many of the findings were later shown to be inaccurate, Smith rightly contended that the skull was, indeed, of great antiquity.²¹ While Smith was thus unable to prove conclusively that the Talgai Skull dated from the Pleistocene, he had no qualms in stating publicly that the human occupation of Australia may well have taken place at least 50 000 years BP.²² It was an assertion which required qualification.

Smith's hypothesis was dependent on an amplification of the 'primitive' morphological traits disclosed by the Queensland cranium. As will later be shown, this approach was continued by Macintosh, albeit, with far more sensitivity. Put succinctly, Smith's analysis concluded that the skull was of a male youth, between fourteen and sixteen years of age, whose teeth were 'of human form' with the exception of the large canines, which were 'similar in some respects to anthropoid canine teeth'. Their size and articulation with the first premolar led Smith to compare the dentition of the Talgai Skull with that of Orangutans. Thus:

In the fossil from Talgai, one may discern a form of skull in which the cranium has long since become of the definitely human type, but in which the face still preserves the last definite trace of the lower, more brute-like characters.²³

It went further. Smith estimated the cranial capacity as being approximately 1300cc, 'well within the range of modern [Aboriginal] Australians', the implication being, of course, that Aborigines were far less intelligent than Europeans. This contention

17. Millar 1972: 233–7; Blinderman 1986: 227–30.

18. Macintosh 1967b: 120, 122.

19. Macintosh 1965: 46.

20. Carey 1990: 33.

21. Smith 1918: 383.

22. *DM* 30 August 1918: 5.

23. Smith 1918: 32.

accorded well with the pseudo-scientific beliefs prevalent within the dominant culture, but it was not to go unchallenged. It was Smith's emphasis on the antiquity of the Aboriginal presence, however, which drew the heaviest flak.

Proof was certainly elusive. With only rudimentary technology available, dating of the skull was — as Edgeworth David earlier pointed out — premised on the estimated age of geological formations in the vicinity of Dalrymple Creek. While the Darling Downs had already yielded the bones of many megafaunal species, no fossil remains had been found within ten miles of Naish's campsite.²⁴ As well, Smith was unaware that the Talgai Skull had probably been carried some distance along a water-course before the final deposition.²⁵ With more than a little touch of humour, 'The Globe Trotter' reasoned in July 1918 that even a direct association with Pleistocene megafaunal remains was by no means conclusive:

The Talgai Skull was found near the bones of long extinct animals, but that is nothing to go by. If a cataclysm destroyed Brisbane now, and covered it up for a few thousand years, then the archaeologists of that day might find the skeleton of the present Director of the Queensland Museum beside the bones of the long extinct Diprotodon. But that would not prove that Mr. [Heber] Longman was contemporaneous with Diprotodon Australis!²⁶

Nevertheless, by drawing on the work of Robert Etheridge, who established that the megafauna were extant when the dingo was introduced into Australia, Smith rightly contended that the discovery of the Talgai Skull also pushed back the history of navigation.²⁷ This 'Proto-Australian' thus possessed considerable technological skills, attributes which were usually overlooked among the Aborigines of Smith's own day. His were violent times, particularly in Europe, but it was known in 1896 that the cranium exhibited 'a hollow, indicating that its owner had received a blow, which probably killed him.'²⁸ The base of the skull had also been removed shortly after death, a practice that had parallels elsewhere in the world.²⁹ This was merely the preliminary step in the anatomical dismantling of the Talgai Skull. In his 'careful preparation' Smith had sawn the cranium in half, 'in order that the inside as well as the outside could be studied in detail.'³⁰

While there was no apparent personal animosity directed towards Smith, his academic paper and public appearance in Brisbane certainly triggered off a fiery debate in 1918. Yet it began in a benign fashion, with the unknown journalist writing under the pseudonym of 'The Globe Trotter' maintaining that the age of fossil hominids was irrelevant. The important question, continued this self-professed worldly being with a rhetorical flourish, was whether the human brain preceded 'the upright position, or did the upright position precede the brain?'³¹ As noted previously, Smith's brother presumed the former, but such reflections were overtly influenced by the social application of

²⁴. *Queenslander* 17 May 1919: 41.

²⁵. Flood 1989: 56.

²⁶. *DM* 20 July 1918: 7.

²⁷. Smith 1918: 383.

²⁸. Macintosh 1969: 194; see also Flood 1989: 56.

²⁹. Phenice and Sauer 1972: 149.

³⁰. *TC* 9 September 1918: 6.

³¹. *DM* 20 July 1918: 7.

Charles Darwin's evolutionary concepts, Australian Aborigines being among the early victims. In times of stress it was easily expanded to fulfil a dichotomous purpose. During the Great War, for example, Germans were frequently portrayed as brutal, and therefore primitive, 'ape-men' intent on wanton slaughter.³² By distancing themselves from those characteristics the righteousness of Australia's involvement in war was reinforced and, at the same time, the inspiration of fear was aimed at strengthening the homogeneity of Australia's dominant culture. Thus, mutual support based on race and ethnicity was a necessary prerequisite for vanquishing the anthropomorphic beast. Those false beliefs appeared to be on the verge of justification in August 1918, when Dr Stewart Smith addressed the Royal Geographical Society in Brisbane.³³

Smith began his lecture by merely reiterating 'The Globe Trotter's' remarks that 'a knowledge of the development of the brain ... was the fundamental factor in the evolution of man.' Nonetheless, after demonstrating that the dentition of the Talgai Skull differed from contemporary Aborigines, Smith continued:

[W]e had the remains of an individual whose skull-cap, brain case and brain were indistinguishable from the Australian aborigine of the present day, yet whose face still bore definite traces of the common ancestral or ape-like character. We had here an instance of the traces of the brute having not completely disappeared, but being within one step of disappearance.³⁴

In this way, contemporary Aborigines seemed confirmed as veritable 'living fossils', little more than a rung above the bottom on the evolutionary ladder. It was the direct implication of those comments which aroused the ire of Archibald Meston, formerly the Protector of Aborigines for South Queensland (1897-1906). Although the official title was an obvious misnomer, as Aborigines continued to be treated appallingly in Queensland, Meston's entry into the public discussion on the Talgai Skull was nevertheless the crucible for scientific theory.

The charge was led, however, by a correspondent to Brisbane's Daily Mail newspaper, writing under the pseudonym 'Still Waiting'. This was a general castigation of so-called experts, whose reports differed so widely 'that science did not gain anything by them.' Yet, carried away by intellectual pondering, 'Still Waiting' drifted away from the Talgai Skull to seek answers to the meaning of life itself.³⁵ Whether those questions were answered is unclear, but there is little doubt that the writer is waiting no longer. Meston's approach was far more pragmatic and, while much of his argument could not be supported, important points nonetheless arose.

Rather than attacking Dr Stewart Smith, Meston initially focused his criticism on Edgeworth David who, he believed, should have examined the Talgai Skull 'through the telescope of fact'. According to Meston, bones buried in the red basaltic soils found throughout the Darling Downs fossilised 'in a surprisingly short time, even in fifteen or twenty years'. Those who read Meston's comments were thus informed that the Talgai Skull was definitely not deposited during the Pleistocene epoch; on the contrary, it belonged to an Aborigine killed by Europeans during a punitive raid in 1848. Meston's

³² Fullerton 1983: 178-9.

³³ QGJ 1918: 133.

³⁴ DM, 30 August 1918:5.

³⁵ DM 2 September 1918: 6.

grasp of geology may have been wanting, but his explanation is worth recording at some length since it reveals significant aspects of the frontier war on Queensland's Darling Downs:

The first white man killed by blacks on the Downs in 1842 was John Manuel who, with a spear sticking in his back, came galloping in to Eaton Vale, then the property of Crawford and Hodgson. The bodies of the blacks shot on that occasion were burned, so there was no chance for them to fossilise. But in 1848 the first native police came over from the Murray River by way of the M'Intyre [River], in charge of Commandant Walker and Lieutenant Marshall. The blacks had been for some time giving considerable trouble, doubtless not without good and sufficient reason, and the native police caught a lot of men and youths out in the open plain on Talgai Station, and shot about thirty or forty. They put the bodies in one of those billabong holes so common on the Downs, and filled it in with the red basaltic clay.³⁶

The Talgai Skull, asserted Meston, was from the body of one of those slain youths. While Meston was perhaps more proficient as a 'Protector' than a palaeoanthropologist, it should be noted that he did not doubt the antiquity of Aboriginal occupation. Rather, his criticism was only directed at the alleged authenticity of the cranium from East Talgai Station. Solid evidence supporting that occupation, continued Meston, would remain elusive owing to indigenous burial practices. This tendentious claim did not dissuade Heber Longman of the Queensland Museum, who finally managed to extricate himself from 'The Globe Trotter's' Diprotodon bones to come out in support of Smith and Edgeworth David. Longman's opening round against Meston lacked conviction, but he sought to place the Talgai Skull and contemporary Aborigines within a broader theoretical framework:

Even admitting, for the sake of argument, that Mr. Meston's story is true, and that the Talgai Skull reached its very remarkable state of mineralisation in 36 years (1848-1884), the fossil still stands ... as one of the most abnormal human skulls ever described ... The estimated cranial [capacity] shows the brain to have been not inferior in size to those of present day aborigines, who are small-brained, when compared with Europeans.³⁷

This overt racial arrogance was too much for Archibald Meston, who struck back with vehemence just two days later:

The Australian aborigines represent one of the oldest races of mankind and among them are all shapes of skulls, and physiognomical expression. Some skulls are of a low type, low as any skulls of the white race, and others had heads like Plato and Socrates. If Mr. Longman wants to see skulls of low animal types he can find them any day in the main streets of our capital cities. He will find nothing worse among any tribes of Australian aborigines. It is time that scientific men dropped this mischievous illusion about the low mental calibre of Australia's native races.³⁸

³⁶. BC 4 September 1918: 6.

³⁷. BC 5 September 1918: 6.

³⁸. BC 7 September 1918: 6.

As 'Caithleach' rightly commented, the Talgai Skull was indeed 'causing quite a flutter'.³⁹ Meston, however, did not stand alone. Although his ammunition was fully charged with paternalism, 'Old Bushman' entered the fray with a supporting fusillade:

Is the Australian aboriginal less intelligent than the ordinary white man? I think not. He is smart, quick at observing things; a good, faithful worker, and a splendid horseman. In my 47 years of bush life I employed many blacks, and generally found them honest and trustworthy. As to morality, they are far above most of the mean whites.⁴⁰

'Old Bushman' was nevertheless deluded in his belief that the Aborigines, or 'all that remains of them — are now well cared for'. The reality was quite different. Charles Bourne, on the other hand, was not concerned with either intellectual capabilities or the exploitation of Aboriginal labour. With the interest now being aroused by the Talgai Skull, and perhaps to record his name for posterity, Bourne associated himself with Naish's original discovery. Claiming to have been the overseer of 'Talgai' in 1884, Bourne argued that Naish actually found the cranium at the base of a sand ridge 'more than a mile from the bank of Dalrymple Creek.' This revelation emerged from his having marked the line of fencing erected by the contractor. With Naish having died in 1917, and Edgeworth David on active service in France, Bourne's contention was aided by the *Toowoomba Chronicle*. Apart from recording Heber Longman's statement on the subject, the local newspaper ignored the Talgai Skull controversy.⁴¹ Whether through disinterest, or because they remained unaware of Bourne's presumed knowledge, there was no response from local inhabitants.

Not satisfied with having linked his name to this unique discovery, however, Bourne agreed with Meston that a massacre of Aborigines had occurred in 1848 — but he disputed the location. The actual site of the bloody encounter, concluded Bourne, was on Goomburra Station, 'about 30 miles distant' from East Talgai.⁴² Although Meston had no way of knowing that the cranium was probably unearthed in 1886, not 1884, the manner of his response revealed that he had strong doubts as to the reliability of Bourne's testimony.

Moreover, by providing a historical synopsis of East Talgai and Goomburra Stations, Meston expressed open contempt for Bourne's presumed local knowledge. The former Protector of Aborigines also seized the opportunity to briefly mention further atrocities committed against Aborigines on Jondaryan and Jimbour Stations in 1851 before terminating his broadside with the stinging rebuke:

I would advise Mr. Bourne to leave history alone, and go back to his sheep. They are more easily understood, and they won't contradict him.⁴³

To give the debate a political flavour, Donald Gunn, Independent MLA for Carnarvon, claimed that he was also unaware of any punitive action against Aborigines on East Talgai Station — despite having 'spent my life not far from that district.'⁴⁴ Like many poli-

39. *DM* 9 September 1918: 7.

40. *BC* 10 September 1918: 6; *Queenslander* 21 September 1918: 41.

41. *TC* 9 September 1918: 6.

42. *BC* 10 September 1918: 6.

43. *BC* 11 September 1918: 6.

44. *Ibid.*

ticians, Gunn found his interjection ignored. However, the Queensland Labor Party had only recently politicised the Talgai Skull in a different context, with their public mouth-piece, Brisbane's *Daily Standard*, portraying the conservative and therefore archaic Legislative Council as the Talgai Skull.⁴⁵ The metaphorical representation may have been on the verge of being pounded to oblivion, but Charles Bourne was unwilling to accept a similar fate from his own adversary.

The former 'overseer' remained adamant that he knew 'within a few yards where the skull was found'. Elaborating, Bourne contended that the billabong where Naish recovered the cranium was itself more than a mile from Dalrymple Creek.⁴⁶ It was only when NWG Macintosh rediscovered the location — nearly five decades later — that Bourne's claim was finally shown to be false.⁴⁷ His true colours were undoubtedly revealed in 1918, however, when he challenged Meston's use of oral testimony:

According to Mr. Meston, my history is shaky. I got mine from white men, Mr. Meston his from blacks, which, I suppose, is looked upon by him as more reliable ... I consider the story told by men less than 20 years afterwards quite as reliable as Mr. Meston's blacks' yarn.⁴⁸

It was not quite the last word from Charles Bourne, but at this point in the debate 'Yorick' offered both a practical, and tasteless, means of determining whether there really was a connection between the Talgai Skull and the punitive action of 1848:

If, as Mr. Meston states, the bodies of the blacks were buried all together, there should be little difficulty in recovering the remaining 30 odd skulls. We should then have sufficient Talgai skulls to go round all our own museums, and a reserve to provide exchanges or presentation specimens for European museums.⁴⁹

Inadvertently, 'Yorick' also brought to the surface the exclusivity of custodianship, although the contemporary European concept was unequivocally ownership. Nor was it confined to archaic skeletal remains. Throughout the nineteenth century Australian Aborigines had been subjected to intensive anatomical and morphological inquiry. This was, of course, a pragmatic adjunct to prevailing pseudo-scientific theories which was further reinforced by geographical isolation.⁵⁰ Ultimately, this presumed primitivity and rapid decline in numbers led to Aborigines being relegated the same level as antipodean fauna and, as E.H.K. Crawford was aware when he possessed the Talgai Skull, they also acquired pecuniary values. Expected to become extinct, contemporary Aboriginal remains were thus 'collected' with remarkable avidity:

[A] Bower-Bird skin in good condition was worth five shillings; a 'racially pure' Aboriginal skull complete with jaw was worth seven shillings and sixpence. A collector could write regretting that he had no bodies to offer, while adding that he was nonetheless forwarding some rare Trap-Door Spiders' nests to the [Australian] Museum.⁵¹

45. DS 7 September 1918: 6.

46. BC 14 September 1918: 12.

47. Macintosh 1967b: 112.

48. BC 14 September 1918: 12.

49. Ibid.

50. Turnbull 1991: 110.

51. Ibid.: 116.

To their credit and resilience the Aborigines did not fulfil those expectations of extinction but, despite this, a number of European museums continue to equivocate when demands are made for the repatriation of recent Aboriginal remains. While a strong case can certainly be posited for the retention of archaic skeletal material, there is no justification – morally, ethically or scientifically – for retaining modern Aboriginal remains in any institution.⁵² Presumably, many were gathered as the ‘spoils’ of frontier conflict and, as the public debate on the Talgai Skull revealed, there was no dispute that Aborigines on Queensland’s Darling Downs had been subjected to intense punitive action. ‘Romany’ was among those who concurred, stating that the correspondent’s parents had first-hand knowledge of one particular incident. The location was unspecified, but whether this was because ‘Romany’ wished to avoid clashing with either Archibald Meston or Charles Bourne, or that there were simply too many similar engagements, is not clear.⁵³

Even Bourne, in his final reply, expressed the view that reprisals against the indigenous people may have also taken place on Dalrymple Creek. His only objection was that they did not occur within the boundaries of ‘Talgai’ Station.⁵⁴ The daily journals of Talgai Homestead were destroyed in 1934, so it is difficult to verify whether Bourne was actually overseer in the mid-1880s.⁵⁵ His determination to distance the property from surrounding atrocities does, however, lead one to suspect that information was also being withheld. Although Bourne’s motivations must necessarily remain in the realm of supposition, this particular aspect of the debate had been important for jogging almost forgotten memories of the frontier war on the Darling Downs as pastoralism consolidated. It was undernably bloody and bitter.

With Bourne’s exit from the public arena, Heber Longman returned to place the debate on a higher philosophical level. In September 1918 he addressed the Socialist League in Brisbane’s Trades Hall, the subject of his lecture being the Talgai Skull and evolution, the theory of which was Longman’s special area of interest.⁵⁶ On this occasion, he expanded on intellectual capacity to encompass the female gender:

Man stood at the head of animal creation because of his bigger brain. In white races the man’s brain weighs about 3lb, though the brains of Byron weighed 70oz., and Oliver Cromwell, Bismarck, and Kant, all had brains which weighed more than 3lb. The female brain weighed about 5oz less than that of the male. Aboriginal Australians and the black races generally had brains of lesser weight than the white races possessed.⁵⁷

Despite these assertions, the press reported the lecture as being ‘entirely free from ‘scientific’ dogmatism, or intellectual snobbery.’ Overwhelmed by it all, even Meston’s reply was meek; earlier criticisms were merely repeated.⁵⁸ Against such heavy artillery which reinforced the masculine domain of the dominant culture, opposition forces stood little chance. There were also more important matters in the offing. As hostilities

52. Mulvaney 1985: 93.

53. *BC* 19 September 1918: 5.

54. *Ibid.*

55. Macintosh 1967a: 95.

56. Mather 1987: 138.

57. *DS* 21 September 1918: 7.

58. *Queenslander* 21 September 1918: 41.

raced towards a conclusion on the Western Front, the public debate over the Talgai Skull dissipated with similar rapidity. The Armistice, however, did not bring peace to the archaic Queensland cranium.

Over successive decades the Talgai Skull was subjected to more rigorous, and increasingly sophisticated, analysis.⁵⁹ Many of Smith's conclusions were, of course, found wanting, but his dating was remarkably accurate even though it was unqualified. As James Urry has argued: 'Until 1961 the oldest reliable date for an archaeological deposit in Australia was that from Cape Martin in South Australia (dated at 8700 BP)'.⁶⁰ Yet, it is now accepted that the Talgai Skull was indeed deposited during the Pleistocene. Although a precise date has still proved elusive, the general consensus among archaeologists is that the youth whose skull was uncovered at East Talgai lived around 11,000 years ago. The possibility also exists that it may be even older, perhaps up to 18 000 years BP.⁶¹

The Queensland cranium has since been joined by other archaic skeletal remains. In 1925, for instance, the 'Cohuna Cranium' was unearthed by a plough in northern Victoria. In 1940, yet another early skull was uncovered by a quarry worker at Keilor, also in Victoria.⁶² Archaeological excavations at Lake Mungo, in south-western New South Wales, further increased the accumulative knowledge of Australia's early inhabitants from 1969.⁶³ Concomitantly, however, a conundrum emerged.

It was readily apparent that there were two morphologically distinct 'types' of skeletal remains — one having a gracile build, the other robust. Similar distinctions have been found among early hominids in many parts of the world, but Australia appears to be an anomaly. Elsewhere, the robust form preceded the development of a gracile build. Not in Australia, where the reverse has apparently occurred.⁶⁴ The Talgai Skull is representative of the later robust form, but it has also been suggested that the larger dentition could possibly be indicative of environmental adaptation. Large molars would undoubtedly have been an important asset if grass seeds had been a major component of the diet.⁶⁵

Nonetheless, the identification of two contrasting morphological types has resulted in a number of theories relative to the peopling of Australia. This is clearly a separate issue, but it does need to be said that in the global context archaeological discoveries within Australia have become increasingly significant. The long-held view that *Homo sapiens* emerged only from the African continent is being rapidly superseded by a 'multi-regional hypothesis which argues that modern man evolved in several places at once while sharing the same genetic blueprint'.⁶⁶ For their part, Aborigines have remained adamant that they have always belonged to the land called Australia, and it is perhaps significant that in 1920 Eugene Dubois, who first unearthed the remains of

59. Macintosh 1952-53: 106-9.

60. Urry 1978: 150.

61. Mulvaney 1975: 202.

62. Flood 1989: 56-7.

63. Jones 1977: 356-7.

64. Flood 1989: 55, 66.

65. Urry 1978: 156.

66. Leech 1996: 27.

Homo erectus in Java, suggested that their occupancy may have even been wider in extent. After studying Stewart Smith's report on the Talgai Skull, Dubois re-examined two fossil skulls from the Wadjak district in Java and concluded that they were 'very like the skulls of Australian blacks, though more massive, and with more massive jaws.'⁶⁷ It was the later work of NWG Macintosh, however, which attempted to draw a connection between *Homo erectus* and the cranium from Queensland.

Macintosh began his quest for all relevant information to the Talgai Skull in 1948. It was to be an odyssey spanning more than two decades. Before it was over Macintosh not only identified the location of Naish's discovery, but had also found and interviewed Charles Fraser, who accompanied Edgeworth David and Naish to the site in 1914.⁶⁸ Like his predecessors, Stewart Smith and Heber Longman, Macintosh was primarily concerned with highlighting the 'primitive' traits disclosed by the cranium. Unlike those earlier workers, however, he was sensitive to the risk of racial derogation. In 1972 Macintosh certainly did argue that *Homo erectus* characteristics showed a greater tendency to persist 'in Australian Aborigines than in any other modern racial groups', but that statement had already been carefully qualified.⁶⁹

The stimulus in this contemplation lies not in any attempt to visualize the aboriginal Australian as surviving *Homo erectus* or Solo Man, but rather in the suggestion that *Homo erectus* is brought nearer to reclassification as *Homo sapiens*.⁷⁰

Given the significance of the Talgai Skull in Macintosh's investigations, the connection with *Homo erectus* certainly does offer support for the multi-regional origin of *Homo sapiens*. Yet, Macintosh later abandoned this line of thought after further research.⁷¹ In the broader context, increased knowledge of the past has also raised another important issue. The question of custodianship of physical remains has been echoed in many quarters — and has generated considerable hostility. Although mistakenly perceiving it as a question of 'ownership', Nicolas Rothwell succinctly outlined the dispute thus:

As critical as the struggle to find the depth of the Australian past has been the struggle for ownership of it. Aboriginal communities today exert significant control over their archaeological heritage, and this has led to repeated conflicts with prehistorians eager to investigate ancient traces of humanity.⁷²

As an angry Rosalind Langford decried in 1983: '[I]f we Aborigines cannot control our own heritage, *what the hell can we control?*'⁷³ What cannot be overlooked, however, is that archaeologists have played a pivotal role in bringing about the changes necessary for the Aboriginal people to rightly become custodians of their physical culture. Mulvaney and Kamminga have lamented that:

It is therefore paradoxical and disappointing that archaeologists are seen as the 'enemy'. At present both sides are losers. We can only hope that archaeological

⁶⁷. BC 31 December 1920: 5; *Queenslander* 8 January 1921: 38.

⁶⁸. Macintosh 1967a: 113, 120.

⁶⁹. Macintosh and Larnach 1972: 4.

⁷⁰. Macintosh 1967b: 98.

⁷¹. Mulvaney and Kamminga 1999: 156.

⁷². Rothwell 1999: 11.

⁷³. Allen 1983: 8.

fieldwork and analysis can recommence in co-operative partnership, devoid of mutual acrimony and confrontation.⁷⁴

Clearly, a solution is fraught with difficulties. There can be no denying, however, that knowledge of the past benefits *all* humanity. This is the point made by the archaeologist Colin Pardoe, who has worked closely with Aboriginal communities:

I am opposed to reburial of any skeletal remains. The value of these to archaeology and understanding the past is inestimable. However ... it is not my decision. By accepting Aboriginal ownership and control of their ancestors' bones, I accept their decisions on the dispositions of those remains. My optimism stems from the hope that by demonstrating the value of skeletal studies the day may come when Aboriginal people might wish to preserve those remains 'in the name of science'! Bones and burials may represent death and all the attendant qualms of our culture, but through the information held in their structure they contain evolutionary history. And evolution is about nothing if not life.⁷⁵

This represents a far different outlook on evolutionary history than that promulgated during the 1918 Talgai Skull debate. As Pardoe nevertheless infers, it is imperative that a resolution should be achieved as soon as possible. While archaeological excavations can be considered as acts of preservation, DJ Mulvaney has also argued that the repatriation of archaic skeletal remains may well have serious long-term consequences for indigenous Australians:

Because ancient bones may need to be re-examined as the passage of time brings new investigative techniques, the custodians to whom such remains are entrusted should be made aware, before final disposal, of their own potential responsibilities to future generations of their own people. Total destruction of human remains now, for example by cremation, may come to be regarded as vandalism by future generations of the custodians.⁷⁶

Mulvaney has suggested the construction of secure 'keeping-places' and their control by the 'relevant Aboriginal communities' as a solution. It is also relevant that a number of Aboriginal communities have already lodged physical remains within existing institutions as a temporary measure - but along the same lines advocated by Mulvaney.⁷⁷ So perhaps an armistice can be reached after all. The Talgai Skull might also become an important factor in the outcome, for it is certainly indicative of current sensitivity. A recent request to the Anatomy Department of the University of Sydney for information on its whereabouts still remains unanswered, although it was apparently sent to Britain some time before February 1922⁷⁸. The ancient cranium from Queensland's Darling Downs has already weathered one fiery debate; at the very least, it is to be hoped that it can yet survive another. Without doubt, those cranial connections are well deserving of careful considerations.

74. Mulvaney and Kamminga 1999: 356.

75. Pardoe 1990: 222.

76. Mulvaney 1985: 93.

77. Mulvaney and Kamminga 1999: 9-10.

78. *Week* [Brisbane] 3 Feb 1922: 13.

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