

I have recently returned from a lengthy stint away to find your letter of 24 May 2002 asking me about placing my submission to the Working Group on Human Remains to be placed on your web page. By all means, please feel free to take what you need.

I have re-read my letter, which I must add was written in some haste, but do with it what you will. Please note that I have ended my stint as President of the Australian Archaeological Association and my comments were not made as President of that organization, although they were mild enough not to cause undue concern to anyone.

Further to the first comment on allowing de-accessioning of problematic collections, I have just been involved in a piece of work for the Repatriation Unit of the National Museum of Australia. They received remains from Edinburgh and now need to return them to relevant Aboriginal groups. I was asked to examine them in order to verify that they were indeed what they were meant to be and to get further information relevant to the receiving communities. I gathered measurement data in order to examine their provenance and also information like age and sex, as this might be useful in particular reburials where men and women or old and young are treated differently. I am in the midst of writing a report for these Aboriginal groups, but the thing that made me write this lengthy paragraph to you was that the Repatriation Unit explicitly views the return of these remains as a way of making contact, and cementing good relations, with various groups. I was taken with this statement. I was talking with two of their junior staff over the matter and could only come up with the word 'immoral'. Returning remains in order to create a good relationship with a group of people seems all very worthy, but there is this taste of what politicians do – giving away that which is not yours. I would be more positive about this viewpoint if it were biological anthropologists giving away the bones. I can't imagine archaeologists deciding to return artefacts that may have come from a burial.

I realize I'm having a grizzle, so will stop.

I would like to end with a request that when these deliberations are made, that people who work on skeletal remains should be well represented. I never see our world as one of science versus religion, although that is often how it is cast, but it is important to be clear that the great adventure of learning about human history in the longer term has been made possible from studying skeletons. It is also the case (and here I am truly influenced by my experience with indigeneity in Australia) that as someone who studies these remains, I do so as an indigenous person (even though I was raised in Canada and reside in Australia. I would love to return to England to live, but that won't be possible in my lifetime). In another context I wrote the following about having a right based on descent or profession. I consider that in relation to human skeletons in England I have rights in both.

One of the roles of archaeologists as professionals is to speak for conservation of the archaeological record. Our right in this matter is based on knowledge and expertise rather than descent or ownership. We work for the conservation of the archaeological record knowing that the current rate of development may lead to destruction of the total 'history in the ground', the material evidence of life in the past.

I realize that this email probably sounds like a bit of a rave, but it gets worse. Have you considered dog burials? How do you plan to treat these situations? I have worked on dog burials in Australia and have just had some media mileage from a recently published paper on dogs. If one considers that dogs are incorporated into the social scene and that this may be demonstrated by an act of burial, then should dogs not be considered in the same light as human skeletons? I note, however, that Christians may not have any rights in this discussion, since CofE rules prohibit the burial of dogs in cemeteries. If you are going to deal with human remains in this way, then we should be prepared to give the same credence to a dog burial that the people who buried the dog did.

Just so you don't think this last is a completely lunatic idea, consider that in England dogs were traditionally buried along prehistoric trackways, near bridges and fords. In Australia they were buried near settlements and in one case that I have observed, a row of five dogs were buried between the graves of people and the living area. When the Aboriginal Site Officer saw the dog burials, he switched his attention to the dogs and more or less disregarded the human skeletons.

With best Wishes,

Colin Pardoe