

Book tells of 19th century body-snatching and skull collecting

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An extraordinary true story: Alexandra Roginski's is studying the history of phrenology. Photo: Jay Cronan

The skull of an Aboriginal man that was stolen from his grave in the early 1860s and later stored on Museum Victoria shelves for 126 years will be returned to his people later this month, thanks to an academic's detective work.

A new book tells the extraordinary true story of the execution of Jim Crow for rape, illegal exhumation of his skull for a crackpot science show, and the later donation of the skull to the museum.

Now Crow's skull is among thousands of Indigenous remains the museum is repatriating.

Crow (whose name was common among Aboriginal men in the period, echoing the pejorative term for African Americans in the United States) was hanged in 1860 for raping a white woman near Dungog in NSW. His head was dug up for display by Archibald Hamilton, a fanatical exponent of the 19th century craze of phrenology.

From the 1850s to the 1880s, Hamilton travelled Australia giving lectures on this crackpot pseudo-science, which claimed character and intellect could be read from the shape of the person's head.

The book, *The Hanged Man and the Body Thief* by Alexandra Roginski, tells how, four months after Crow's execution, Scotland-born Hamilton was tried for trying to pay staff at St Peter's cemetery in East Maitland to exhume Crow's skull.

Hamilton was acquitted, but within two years, he had the skull dug up anyway, with no further sanction.

He displayed it unashamedly in lectures for decades afterwards.

Five years after Hamilton's 1884 death, his widow, Agnes, shipped his collection of 55 human skulls and skull fragments from Sydney to the National Museum of Victoria, today's Museum Victoria, where they remained for 126 years.

Until the 1960s, Aboriginal remains were sometimes put on public display, but it's not known whether Crow's was.

Two years ago, when Ms Roginski was at the museum, researching her Monash University honours thesis on the repatriation of Aboriginal remains, she was asked to try and trace the identity of the skull.

Its paper label had deteriorated to show only his name, and the partial place name "...tland".

By typing 'Hamilton', 'phrenologist' and 'Jim Crow' in to National Library of Australia's online newspaper archive, Trove, Ms Roginski discovered an 1862 *Brisbane Courier* report on one of Hamilton's lectures, in which he displayed Jim Crow's head and told the story of the 1860 execution at Maitland Gaol.

Further research found that Jim Crow was born in Clarence Town, south of Maitland, and it is believed he was a member of the Wonnarua people of the Hunter Valley. Ms Roginski could find very little about his life, such as his Aboriginal name, but gaol records showed that Crow was a small man, at five feet one inch tall.

Ms Roginski, now doing a PhD on the history of phrenology in Australia, says Hamilton was "an incredibly dark character" who promoted racist views in his phrenology shows, referring to Tasmanian Aboriginal women as semi-imbeciles.

But he campaigned against capital punishment, even chairing a public meeting in Melbourne against Ned Kelly's execution.

"I have very complex feelings about him. Certainly what he's done in this case, in separating this person from the rest of his remains and turning him into an object is a very awful thing."

James Wilson-Miller, and his uncle Tom Miller, elders of the Maitland-based Wonnarua Nation Aboriginal Corporation will accept Jim Crow's remains in a solemn ceremony closed to the public later this month in the Indigenous garden of the museum's Bunjilaka Aboriginal Centre.

An apology expressing "sincere regret for the indignity suffered by your ancestor" will be read by a museum executive.

Mr Wilson-Miller said the traditional owners would decide at a later date how Jim Crow would be laid to rest. "Even though we did not know Jim, we look up on him as one of our ancestors coming home."

He said there were still Aboriginal remains in museums and universities around the world. "There are so many lost souls of our people, in these places here and overseas, but they need to come back so they can rest."

Lindy Allen, manager of Museum Victoria's repatriation program, said that between 1984 and 2014, Museum Victoria approved the deaccession of the remains of more than 1400 people, for repatriation to Indigenous communities around the country.

But as of June 2015 the museum still holds 1527 Aboriginal remains. The origins of almost half of those (730) have yet to be traced.

Ms Allen said repatriation "is probably one of the most important things this museum does".

The museum had committed "past injustices", but had "a commitment to doing the right thing now and dealing with the remains in a way the community want".