

Taking Aim at Hunter Gatherer Engalnd



Dja Dja Wurrung spokesman Gary Murray with one of the disputed bark etchings.

"You go to Britain to see the Crown jewels; why would you want to go to Britain to see bark etchings out of Boort?"

Gary Murray, tribal spokesman

To get away from the heat, anger and indignation stirred up by Victorian Aborigines' demand that bark etchings on loan to Melbourne from British collections not be returned to England, you need to go to a very quiet, still and climate-controlled place. In that room, deep within the most secure area of Melbourne Museum, are the fragile, fire-blackened bark etchings themselves. They are now in crates - packed and ready to go back to the British Museum and Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, at the drop of a judge's gavel, or at the failure of political nerve.

The elders of the Dja Dja Wurrung of central Victoria have launched a remarkable take-back bid for the works, claiming the pieces - originally gathered and exhibited by Loddon River landowner John Hunter Kerr in the 1850s - as part of their cultural and spiritual heritage.

They have petitioned state Aboriginal Affairs Minister Gavin Jennings to compulsorily acquire the works under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act. The British Museum is furious, claiming no institution in Australia will be lent works again by Britain if they don't go back.

Now the lawyers are lining up to assist those in the ring, with the top-flight firms of Holding Redlich on one side and Arnold Bloch Leibler on the other. But can the participants keep the lawyers out of this? "We really hope so," says Patrick Greene,

Museum Victoria's chief executive, "but we have a contract, and that contract has to be honoured: we are legally obliged to return the work."

It has been Dja Dja Wurrung spokesman Gary Murray who has headed the campaign, with a devastating line in rhetoric ("You go to Britain to see the Crown jewels; why would you want to go to Britain to see bark etchings out of Boort?") and a steely resolve, but he is fraught with suspicions.

Murray suspects the Commonwealth and the state are ducking for cover, even as he admits that Jennings is stuck between a rock and a hard place - "he's either with us or against us". He seems to be right about the Federal Government. Nothing federal Heritage Minister Ian Campbell has to say contradicts Murray's fear, and that's because when contacted by this column the minister had nothing to say about the matter at all. No one involved in this process says the Commonwealth has been of any help.

Gavin Jennings insists he's trying to pull the antagonists apart. "I don't want either side to lose - and if it goes to court, one of them will." Jennings is understood to have his eye on longer-term loans of even more significant artefacts, such as indigenous remains, and doesn't want this fight to get in the way.

In the past 72 hours, the most crucial local meetings have been held with the Dja Dja Wurrung people's pro bono lawyers and with Museum Victoria, while British Museum bosses seethe in London. They sent a representative several weeks ago to mollify the clan's outrage, but it has had little effect.

"These works connect us to the country; they are evidence of our existence, of our existence as a clan," says Murray, who can trace his ancestry back to the Lower Loddon tribe census of 1863. The Aborigines' move has set off the sort of panic that you can imagine warring natives once stirred in white folk a long way from home: "Aborigines grab art on loan from Britain," screamed the London Times (conveniently ignoring that the works were still sedately on display within the museum). Others saw parallels with military history - "Aborigines to battle Britain over artefacts," declared The Scotsman.

It's verging on the hysterical, yes, but the Boort people's claim has slapped the behemoth that was once the rapacious collector called Britannia in its most sensitive place. After years of international outcry over Britain's refusal to return the so-called Elgin Marbles to Greece, and after the sacred remains of indigenous Australians were finally prised from the hands of the British Museum, the keepers of the great 19th-century collections of hunter-gatherer England are feeling besieged.

Try to see it from their point of view: if it were not for the bright-eyed persistence and boundless curiosity of the great English explorers and travellers of the late 18th and 19th centuries, a great deal of their now criticised collections might not exist at all. Even the Dja Dja Wurrung Native Title Group's own history acknowledges that John Hunter Kerr's collection was dispersed to places unknown after being shown at a Paris exhibition. It is doubtful the bark etchings would exist now were it not for their collection by Kerr and subsequent sale to the British Museum.

But, just as the English fascination with ethnography has had to mercifully wake up to the reality of first-people's histories, so have museums around the world. This issue wades deep into that debate: what is legitimately yours as the institutional collector, and what should be sent back, repatriated, to the peoples the works were originally taken from?

Museum Victoria claims a high moral ground on this one, and it does seem entitled to it. Human remains and sacred objects have been repatriated around Australia by the museum (most notably in the case of the Jaara baby, whose corpse was found in the trunk of a hollow tree by a woodcutter, near Charlton in north-west Victoria in 1904, and then kept in museum drawers for almost 100 years). It is fearful that its relationships with indigenous Australians, as well as sister institutions abroad, are to be imperilled by the Dja Dja Wurrung people's snooker move.

It is almost certain that the works will be sent back to London. On my Drive program last week, Museums Board president Harold Mitchell refused to be pinned down on which outcome he preferred, but he is apparently about to head to London for a meeting with the chairman of the British Museum with this plan in mind: the barks are returned to London in fulfilment of the contract, and are then sent back again to Melbourne on permanent loan to the Dja Dja Wurrung people in care of the museum. This would be a face-saving - and history-saving - solution for all involved. Virginia Trioli presents Drive on 774 ABC Melbourne from 4pm weekdays.

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