
Repatriation: The search for Yagan

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The National Museum of Australia website

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This page briefly describes research undertaken to locate Yagan's remains in a Liverpool cemetery and secure his exhumation and repatriation to Australia in 1997. As a doctoral student, the author worked closely with Noongar elder Ken Colbung and archaeologist Peter Ucko in the 1990s to identify the location of Yagan's remains in the United Kingdom and to achieve their return to Australia. Cressida now works as a heritage consultant.

Yagan's preserved head was sent to the United Kingdom shortly after his death in 1833, an experience similar to that of Pemulwuy (c.1750-1802) over 30 years earlier. These remains were amongst thousands of Australian Indigenous remains sent to Europe from the first days of contact until at least the 1920s.

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth century human remains were obtained from around the world in order to create 'collections' in museums and anatomy departments that represented all of humanity. These remains, taken without permission and frequently with the knowledge that their removal was opposed by local people, were studied under a racist paradigm which sought to investigate pre-conceived notions of racial hierarchy and worth. Such notions, now long since abandoned, were upheld by what was then thought to be scientific 'truth'. They helped to support, develop and justify the ways in which Australia's Indigenous population was treated by the colonising state.

Although the tenets of race-based physical anthropology were disproved many years ago, the legacy of its practice – the skeletal (and sometimes soft tissue) remains of Indigenous people from throughout Australia – are still kept in storage areas in museums and other collecting institutions around the world today. Since the 1980s, pressure applied by Indigenous Australians to have their ancestral remains returned has at times been successful, and has seen the repatriation of some of these remains from museums both within and outside Australia.



Ken Colbung talking with John Howard at an Anzac Day service in Battersea Park, London, 1997. Courtesy Cressida Fforde.

Yagan's death

The bullet wound that killed Yagan was inflicted at almost point-blank range on Thursday 11 July 1833 by William Keates (18 years), as he and his younger brother James (13 years) sat down to eat with Yagan at a bend in the upper Swan River, near Perth, Western Australia. They were resting near the farmstead of Mr Bull, an influential settler and magistrate who advocated peaceful relations with the Aborigines. An escalation of violence between settlers and the Aboriginal population had led to a ransom of £30 for Yagan's capture, dead or alive. Anxious to avoid another Aboriginal death, Mr Bull had given his employees strict orders not to shoot Yagan.

The Perth Gazette reported on 13 July 1833 that, despite his employer's orders, William Keates had frequently expressed a determination to kill Yagan. Perhaps this was because he wanted the ransom in order to pay his passage back to England. According to the testimony of James Keates at an inquiry on 12 July 1833, the two brothers, both of whom were friends of Yagan, had persuaded him to turn back from Bull's farmstead and accompanied him for almost the remainder of the morning. [1] The brothers then went on to the place where the other natives were making dampers, where they remained a short time; when the natives accompanied them over to the river, Yagan then refused to go any further with us and became vexed, - threw his fire brand and digging stick down, and put himself in a threatening attitude. I then said to my brother if you wish to shoot him, now is the time, but he refused and allowed him to join the rest of his party. On reaching them my brother cocked his gun, and laid it over his arm, pointing the muzzle towards Yagan's head, and almost immediately pulled the trigger – the man directly fell. [2]

Yagan must have died at once, but in the ensuing fight, another Aboriginal man, Heegan, was shot in the head, and William Keates was fatally speared. James escaped unharmed and fled down the river. According to a local settler, George

Fletcher Moore, two soldiers passed by the area shortly afterwards and 'frightened the natives (I supposed) or they would have carried off the bodies'. [3] Men from Bull's estate then arrived and shot the 'groaning' Heegan. [4] One of the men cut off Yagan's head 'for the purposes of preserving it', and 'flayed' the distinctive cicatrice from his back. Yagan's head was then taken to Bull's house where it was seen by Moore, who noted that, 'possibly it may yet figure in some museum at home' [italics in original], and sketched the head a number of times in his unpublished diary. [5] Moore had met Yagan many times and admired him, calling him, for example, the 'Wallace of his Age', after the Scottish resistance leader Sir William Wallace (c.1272-76 to 1305). The circumstances of Yagan's death appear to have been regretted by many of the settlers. The Perth Gazette, published a long article on the 'treacherous act' and its possible negative effect upon future relations with the local Indigenous population. [6]

Yagan's head was then preserved by a smoking process, in which it was 'suspended ... for three months in a hollow tree, over a fire made with the wood of the Eucalyptus'. [7] Lieutenant Robert Dale then took the head to England in September 1833.

Background to the search

Prominent Noongar elder, Ken Colbung, had for many years been searching for information about what had happened to Yagan's head after it was taken to England in the 1830s. In the 1950s, shortly before leaving for overseas service with the Australian military, Colbung was asked by his elders to try to find Yagan and, if possible, to bring him home. Colbung later became Deputy Chair and then Chair of Council at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra at a time when Peter Ucko was Principal. In 1980, Ucko left the Institute to return to the United Kingdom (UK) and undertook to try to trace Yagan's remains on Colbung's behalf. In 1991, the author began documenting the history of the collecting of Indigenous human remains by European institutions, both for the World Archaeological Congress (WAC) and for a doctoral thesis at Southampton University. Little was known about UK holdings at that time and Indigenous participants at the first WAC in 1986 had requested the organisation to make such information available. Both pieces of work were supervised by Peter Ucko and, during this time, research also began to try to locate information about Yagan.



Left to right: Peter Ucko, Jane Hubert, Ken Colbung at an Anzac Day service in Battersea Park, London, 1997.

Ken Colbung provided the information on Yagan that he had gathered over the years. As a result, in 1991 it was known that Yagan's head had been cut off after his murder in 1833 and preserved by a smoking process. It had then been taken to the UK by a Lieutenant Robert Dale who knew Yagan in life and who had published a small booklet in 1834 about the Swan River settlement. The booklet's frontispiece was a colour aquatint of Yagan's head drawn by George Cruickshank and etched by R Havell. Its last chapter was a phrenological report written by Thomas Pettigrew, a prominent surgeon and antiquarian in London at that time. The 'science' of phrenology was popular during the early 19th century and held that the character of an individual could be deduced from the shape of the skull, which itself reflected the morphology of the brain. The final piece of available information about Yagan was a short piece in the London Morning Herald on 4 April 1834, which described a scientific evening held at Pettigrew's house at which the head of Yagan and a panorama of King George's Sound was on display. Pettigrew's phrenological report on Yagan's head was to be of great importance many years later as it recorded the presence of a fracture across Yagan's skull which extended from a bullet wound behind his left ear.

Research in the UK

In 1991, initial research concentrated on learning as much as possible about the circumstances of Yagan's death and about all of the individuals involved. By understanding the characters and their connections it was hoped that it would not only be possible to find out how Yagan's head had come to the UK and the circumstances of its transfer to Pettigrew, but also to tease out the more valid lines of research from the myriad possibilities that presented themselves. Many potential leads came to nothing. George Fletcher Moore's unpublished diaries in the Battye library in Perth shed more light on the events of Yagan's death, as did analysis of various contemporary Perth Gazette articles, but none of these provided any detail about what had happened to Yagan's head after it had been seen at Pettigrew's house in London in April 1834.

In late 1992, one of the regular searches at the UK's National Register of Archives found an archive of Pettigrew correspondence that had recently been registered by the Bienecke Library at Yale University. Within this archive were three letters of potential relevance – two authored by Robert Dale and one by Captain Irwin who had served with Dale in Australia. Copies of the letters arrived in due course and each one referred to the head of Yagan.

The first letter revealed that, initially, Dale had tried to sell Yagan's head, asking £20, although he considered it to be worth 'double that sum' (Dale to Mangles, 15 March 1834). Dale had already sent the head to London where it was to be examined by 'physiognomists', including Dr Pettigrew, who presumably then placed the head on display at his house. In the second letter (2 June 1834), Dale wrote to Pettigrew: 'my brother, who is the bearer of this will communicate to you what I am desirous to have done with the head of Yagan', but provided no details. In the third letter (13 August no year), Captain Irwin wrote to Pettigrew stating that Dale wished him 'to ascertain whether Mr Pettigrew had forwarded the box with Yagan's head', but supplied no information about the destination of Yagan's remains. Consulting the original archive

in Yale in early 1993 provided no further clues.



Ken Colbung being interviewed in a UK radio station

Ken Colbung came to the UK in the summer of 1997 and successfully campaigned for the exhumation of the remains of Yagan. This required overturning a British Home Office decision. The team supporting Ken included Professor Peter Ucko, Cressida Fforde, Lyndon Ormond Parker and Jane Hubert, as well as a London law firm. In this photo Ken is giving a radio interview. Courtesy Cressida Fforde. At this time, research was also focusing on the history of the Dale family in Britain, to try to determine where Robert Dale had eventually settled after his return from Australia. A diary of Dale's uncle, General Dyott, was located in Stafford Public Record Office along with an 1834 panorama of King George's Sound – perhaps the very one that had been exhibited with Yagan at Pettigrew's house in 1834. The diary described how Robert Dale had returned from Australia and, after visiting his uncle at the family home in Staffordshire, had then moved to Liverpool to work for his brother-in-law. The Liverpool connection concurred with the address given by Dale on his June 1834 letter to Pettigrew.

The possibility presented itself that having failed to sell Yagan's head in London, Dale had requested Pettigrew to send it to him in Liverpool and that this was the destination of the box referred to by Captain Irwin. If this chain of events had occurred, it was important to establish whether or not Dale had given (or sold) Yagan's head to a collecting institution in Liverpool. A research visit to Liverpool Museum in late 1993 found no reference to Yagan's remains in the archives. However, a staff member recalled an administrative file that detailed the burial of Maori remains in a local Liverpool cemetery in the mid 1960s. On retrieval of the file it quickly became evident that the heads were Aboriginal, and that one had belonged to 'Yagan, Chief of Swan River'.

The file contained a paper trail describing the deaccessioning of two Aboriginal heads and a Peruvian mummy from the Liverpool Museum collections in 1964, and their transfer to Everton Cemetery for burial. The heads had been part of a collection at Liverpool's Royal Institution which had been lent to the Liverpool Museum in 1894.

Further research showed that the Royal Institution, an establishment founded in 1817 'for the promotion of literature, science and the arts', [8] had been given Yagan's head by Robert Dale on 12 October 1835 together with a panoramic view of King George's Sound.

The next step was to identify where in Everton Cemetery the museum box had been buried, but the official cemetery records contained no mention of it. Nonetheless, there was proof that the transfer had been made, as an ex-staff member of Liverpool Museum remembered delivering the box. If no official documentation existed to record the burial, the only remaining possibility was that personnel at the cemetery might remember receiving the unusual delivery almost thirty years previously. In the end, although the chief grave digger did not remember the actual burial, he was nonetheless aware of where it had been recorded – as an annotation on a grave plan in the grave diggers' office. The annotation recorded that on 10 April 1964, two Aboriginal heads, dried viscera and a Peruvian mummy had been buried in General Section 16, grave number 296.

We contacted Ken Colbung as soon as possible to tell him the good news.

Exhumation and repatriation

In the event, discovering the location of Yagan's remains was only the first part of the story, and he was not to be exhumed for another four years. The delay was due to the subsequent 1968 burial in the same grave of 22 stillborn children above the museum box. After long campaigning by Ken Colbung and others to seek a solution and have Yagan's remains returned home, in August 1997 the United Kingdom Home Office issued an exhumation licence. Permission was given for the museum box to be removed from grave 296 via an adjacent plot so that the remains of the stillborn children above were not disturbed. The day after the exhumation, a forensic pathologist positively identified Yagan's skull by the fracture that extended across his skull which had been documented in Pettigrew's phrenological report of 1835, and the presence of cut marks on his vertebrae which were evidence of decapitation.

Handover

On 27 August 1997, a Noongar delegation arrived in the UK to collect Yagan's remains. Despite community politics and the unsuccessful attempts by one elder in Perth to bring an injunction to halt the proceedings, those on the delegation united to bring Yagan home. On Sunday 31 August, the delegation received Yagan's remains at an official handover ceremony at the Liverpool Town Hall. It was a poignant and emotional day, not only because of the weight of history that had brought the delegation and Yagan's remains to this point, but also because of the effect in the UK of the news of the death of Princess Diana in Paris that morning. On 1 September, the delegation travelled back to Australia with Yagan's remains, and were met by a large crowd of people at Perth Airport who had gathered to welcome him home.

Burial

Eleven years have passed since Yagan's skull was returned to Perth, and over 15 years since his discovery in Everton Cemetery. During this time, the committee responsible

for Yagan's burial has had to face difficult decisions about where and how to bury him. It was initially hoped that the original burial place of his body could be discovered so that his remains could be re-united, but after many years of research, and an extensive archaeological survey, no trace of his remains could be found. It was then decided to honour Yagan with a small memorial park near the site of his murder on the Upper Swan and to provide a burial site at this location. Designing the park and securing the necessary land and permissions has taken some time, but significant advances have now been made and a burial is planned for the near future.

Dedication

This piece is dedicated to Ken Colbung and Peter Ucko (1938-2007).

[1] Perth Gazette, 13 July 1833

[2] Perth Gazette, 13 July 1833

[3] Moore Diary, Batty Library Perth, mf 263a

[4] Perth Gazette, 13 July 1833

[5] Moore Diary, Batty Library, Perth, mf 206

[6] Perth Gazette, 20 July 1833

[7] Dale 1834:17

[8] Hunt 1973: 15