

Crusade for a queen

From MICHAEL
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in Canberra

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QUEEN TRUGANINI died on May 8, 1876. She was Tasmania's last full-blood Aborigine.

In Hobart this week, a wreath was laid on the steps of the Tasmanian Museum as a mark of respect to Truganini and her race, and as part of a nation-wide bicentenary protest at the treatment of Australia's Aborigines since the coming of the white man.

A handful of part-Aborigines who claim to be the descendants of the Tasmanian tribes took part in the Hobart demonstration. So did Harry Penrith, a 35-year-old ex-Victorian Aborigine, now a first-year law student at the University of Tasmania.

Mr. Penrith is crusading for the return of Truganini's bones from a case in the museum to what he claims is their proper resting place — the waters of d'Entrecasteaux Channel near Bruni Island, Truganini's birthplace.

He recently wrote to the Director of the Tasmanian Museum (Dr. W. Bryden) and the trustees requesting on behalf of the Aboriginal people of Australia that Truganini's remains be given a "dignified re-interment."

This is part of what Mr. Penrith said. It could be an open letter to white Australia. He points out that Truganini's skeleton was exhumed some time after her death, and continues:

"For this act your trustees are of course entirely blameless, but for the second — retaining Truganini's bones against her wishes — they must take full and direct responsibility.

"I would like to assure you that my attitude in this matter does not rest on any anti-scientific frame of mind. I am well aware of the great benefits scientific research has bestowed on at least some parts of the human race.

"However, I would claim that given the great length of time the remains have been in the hands of the museum and available for scientific inspection and research, it must surely be a fact that all scientific data possible has been gathered from these poor, irreverently handled bones.

"If this is not the case then I think it can only point to negli-



QUEEN TRUGANINI

gence and lack of interest on the part of the researchers concerned and is yet one more good reason for advancing the request that was made at the beginning of this letter.

"I am sure you are aware of the fact that my people have a great respect both for our traditions and our ancestors. The fact that these remains have in the past been on display to the generally curious, and are at this point of time available to the scientifically curious, flies in the face of both of these racial traits.

"I would claim that a case can be made for 'special circumstances' to be a factor in any decision in this matter. As you are well aware, sir, the interaction of your race and mine has been less than fortunate for most of its 200 years of history.

"Of course, it is a fact that my people may nowadays be confident that no strychnine will be placed in their flour handouts — and for this at least we are grateful.

"However, we have a continuing sense of grievance both for past injustices and for those we feel continue into the present day.

Under these circumstances the continued holding of the remains may will be seen as part of this general pattern.

"I am well aware of the fact that many skeletons are held in various parts of the world for reasons superficially similar to those which encouraged the continued holding of the ones in question.

"However, I would claim that there is a qualitative difference in the instance under discussion. European skeletons are not held as European skeletons per se, but rather as skeletons qua skeletons.

"This is not the case here. I would submit that it is in fact nearer to the way in which the bones of a rare species of monkey might be treasured, and as such a continuing insult to the dignity of my race.

"I would like to point out that these are the remains of Queen Truganini.

"Might I submit for your consideration a hypothetical case? Let us suppose that the present Queen of England were to die and some keen scientific researchers were to discover that there was good reason to believe that the Windsor family had unique skeletal structure.

"Can we suppose that her remains would, in the wildest flights of imagination, be allowed to lie in a room of the British Museum marked 'For the genuinely scientifically curious only'.

"The question is of course rhetorical and you and I, sir, well know the answer. Yet — I must repeat — these remains in question are the remains of the last Tasmanian Aboriginal Queen.

"I anticipate that your answer might well be that as a body you are bound by the terms of the original bequest and are therefore powerless to act in this matter.

"I would answer that whilst breaking any such terms is a serious matter it is not of the same order of seriousness or irreverence as is implied by the continued holding of this illegally gained skeleton.

"We are not quite at the point of the 'post-Nuremberg' era in Australian history in regard to Aboriginal affairs, but the time is fast approaching, and it would be a wise thing to heed the writing on the wall, even though as yet this is writ small."