

## Alexander Berry: holes in the story of a NSW pioneer conceal a dark past of Indigenous exploitation

*A pretty Shoalhaven town now bears Berry's name, but the Yuin people say he sent body parts of their ancestors to British museums*



*Statues at a rest area on the Princes Highway honour Alexander Berry and his brother David, early pioneers of the area now known as the Shoalhaven.*

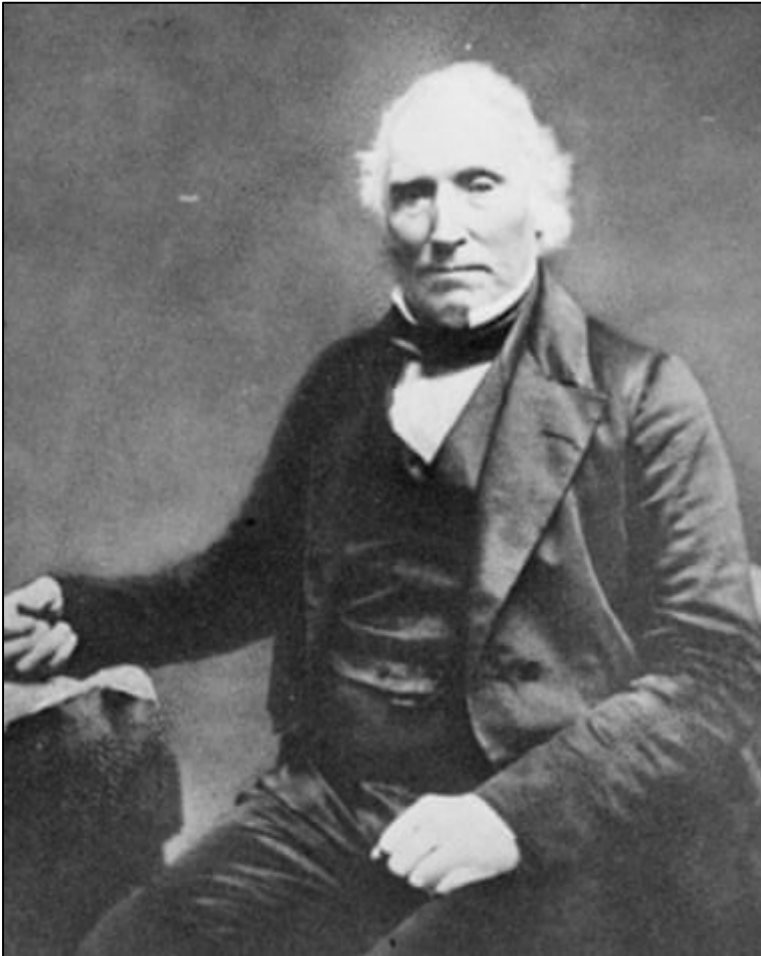
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**T**his year marks the bicentenary of European invasion for the Yuin people of the New South Wales south coast. In 1822, the Scottish surgeon and trader Alexander Berry was granted 10,000 acres of Yuin land around Cullunghutti, or what the Europeans came to call Coolangatta mountain. Between the foothills of the mountain and the Shoalhaven River is some of the most fertile and lush farmland in the country.

Berry grew very wealthy from his occupation. He sat in NSW parliament for 14 years and is considered a founding father of the area; they named the town after him in 1888. Today, the pretty and historic township of Berry, two hours south of Sydney, is a popular tourist spot, especially among the short-stay and weekender crowd.

But Alexander Berry had a gruesome sideline that has been left out of popular history – dealing in human remains looted from Aboriginal graves.

Yuin woman Marlene Longbottom is from Jerrinja and her family are custodians of Cullunghutti. Longbottom, an associate professor at the University of Wollongong, has been collaborating with Michael Organ, a former Greens MP and former archivist at the university who has published material on the Aboriginal peoples of the Illawarra and south coast, to piece together a fuller picture of Berry's life, using his correspondence, diaries and other colonial records.



*Alexander Berry, considered a founding father of the Shoalhaven area, sent skulls of Aboriginal people to Britain.*

Some of those letters are between Berry and Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein* – Berry married Shelley's cousin, Elizabeth Wollstonecraft, and corresponded regularly with Shelley.

Longbottom says she heard a different version of Berry from the one in the history books when she was growing up.

“From family and those who come from Cullunghutti, the conversations that I would hear my uncles and aunties having, it was very different to how he was portrayed in white society,” Longbottom says.

“Berry used Aboriginal people as slave labour to clear the land – whether you consider payment by way of rations as slave labour – but there definitely wasn’t a monetary exchange.

“He accumulated all of this wealth by land. And it was an illegal occupation, an illegal process of colonisation. My family are very harsh when it comes to Berry.”

Berry wrote in his recollections in 1838: “For many years I have reaped my harvest on the principle of free Labour. When I made a settlement at Coolangatta, in 1822, [Aboriginal people] were comparatively numerous, and were said to be very ferocious. I was informed that they had recently driven away a number of sawyers or woodcutters, and my old friend, the late James Norton, told me that they would eat me. I had, however, served a kind of apprenticeship to the management of savages in New Zealand, and I was always on good terms with those of the settlement. Indeed, I found them very useful.”

Longbottom says Berry was an “immoral hero” – publicly admired but privately trading in Aboriginal human remains throughout his time at Coolangatta.

“We call it clandestine dismemberment, simply because it was very hidden, in this underground world that he lived in. Whether that was for science or money, I don’t know. But we are uncovering things about Berry that might seem unethical to others, particularly when it comes to the exhumation of remains. We call it grave robbing.”

Longbottom and Organ’s research has confirmed Berry sent skulls of an Aboriginal man and a woman and the head of a Māori person to the Edinburgh Museum in 1820, when he was living in Tasmania.

“There was this industry, and I call it an industry because people made money from it. We’ve seen that all over the country, in this period of time, it was a commodity. People were making money and feeding their families off the skulls and bones of our people,” Longbottom says.

In the 19th century Edinburgh was a renowned centre for medical research and teaching. Edinburgh University counted Charles Darwin as one of its anatomy students in the early 1800s.

The city’s National Museum of Scotland is now hosting an exhibition called *Anatomy: A Matter of Death and Life*, which explores the era when the demand for bodies to study far outstripped supply. It catalogues the deeds of William Burke and William Hare, who killed 16 poor people to supply corpses to anatomy teachers in the city.

The museum is aware of its colonial legacy, having published a list of all remains it holds from “outside Europe”, which makes gruesome reading.

“Since 2018 we have been conducting a review of the human remains in our collections. Many of these come from outside Europe and have come into the collection through imperial and colonial collecting,” the museum’s website says.



*Researcher and Yuin woman Dr Marlene Longbottom says her 'life project' is to bring the remains of her people home.*

“We have been researching these remains to improve our understanding of their origins and collecting histories. Our human remains in collections policy includes information about how to make requests for transfer of human remains.”

The Australian researchers say they have uncovered evidence from Berry’s correspondence and his later reminiscences that he sent the skull of the Yuin leader Arrawarra to Britain in 1827, two years after he died.

They say a letter of 20 August 1827 indicates Berry dispatched the skull, probably to the Edinburgh Museum, although it has not yet been found.

It appears Berry was well aware of Arrawarra’s seniority and had met him shortly before he died.

Berry wrote in 1838: “Shortly before I settled at Coolangatta, the Natives drove away some woodcutters. On that occasion they were commanded by a noted warrior – named, I think, Arrawarra. Some years later the son of Arrawarra, who was then very old, and unable to walk, brought his poor father to Coolangatta, carrying him on his shoulders for several miles. His motive was ... that the old man should behold the sea once more before he died, as he did a few days after.”

Longbottom says the remains of the Yuin man are still in the UK, “somewhere”.

“Arrawarra still hasn’t come home, he’s over there still, so if I can find him and bring him home, that’ll be my life’s work,” she says. “Justice would be to bring all of our old people home, so they can rest.”

Longbottom says her work with Organ is a model for historical truth-telling – sharing academic and cultural knowledge in equal partnership for mutual benefit. They know this version of Berry’s story will be challenging to people who have been taught a different one.

“The truth can be a hard pill to swallow,” she says. “Who wants to have their name associated with grave robbing? ... But at the end of the day, truth-telling is about understanding where we’ve come from, the silencing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices.”

Truth-telling takes its toll and being immersed in the history of ancestors can be very distressing.

“It makes you wild,” Longbottom says. “And, believe me, I’ve spent many days and nights wild and in the horrors and crying, but I have to at some point use that emotion, to make sure that this is provided in a way that the community can actually be strong about. It’s truth-telling at its rawest. It hurts, it’s painful. But at the same time, the ancestors guide our footsteps.

“We’re just trying to gather what evidence we can right now, in terms of the letters between Berry and Shelley. And then once we’ve got all that, and we’ve done that analysis, we’ll take that back to the community and get their views on it. So, this isn’t a one-off thing; this is probably going to be a life project for me.

“And my life project will be to bring Arrawarra and the others home.”