
The use of human remains for scientific research in the United States, and across the broader Western academic world, has received considerable attention in the past several decades, particularly in response to concerns over the differential treatment of remains of Native Americans. Protests and negotiations between Native representatives and the US government in the 1980s brought these issues to a head and eventually resulted in the passage of the Native American Graves Preservation and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) on November 16, 1990 (Public Law 101–601). NAGPRA’s function is to return control over ancestral remains of Native Americans, Alaskans, and Hawaiians to those groups. The need for this critical legislation and the associated sea change in thinking about the control and use of Native remains is the result of a long history of nearly indiscriminant collection of them to fill the “bone rooms” of museums and universities over the past century and a half.

In Bone Rooms, Samuel J. Redman recounts the dark and storied history of physical anthropology in the United States and the foundation of scientific research into race, past peoples, and human evolution. In a series of six chapters, Redman provides a roughly chronological account of the beginning of collections of human remains and their use in display and scientific research. Redman begins with the Civil War and the creation of the Army Medical Museum, traces the eventual shift to academic museums, and then leads to the creation of the largest bone collection at the Smithsonian Institution. Redman’s neutral but detailed account of the themes and personalities that shaped the discipline and its institutions in the early years provides the appropriate circumstantial, intellectual, and larger social context for the motivation behind developing bone rooms. Initially, scientists used these remains to classify racial categories but then broadened their focus to draw conclusions about human prehistory and evolution. Bone Rooms also connects this history to recognizable personalities, institutions, and events of the late nineteenth century, such as the World Fairs.

Racial science, a major force behind the formation of nineteenth-century bone rooms, was largely discredited by Stephen Jay Gould’s scathing criticisms in the The Mismeasure of Man (1981). The field of physical anthropology invested the next several decades with trying to escape from beneath the burden of such a misguided past. However, race in physical anthropology has experienced a rebirth in the recent past. An attempt to educate the public (and in some cases our own professionals) about the realities of race as a social concept and the truly remarkable diversity of our species on a global scale has resulted in an embrace of a deeply flawed methodology.

Redman uses the epilogue to summarize his vision of the modern ethical dichotomy often drawn between practices in the Western scientific tradition and efforts to
show cultural sensitivity to the remains of the deceased. He explains that “There is nothing natural about systematically collecting and studying the dead. Through a complex cultural process and evolving assemblage of ideas, however, such a practice became reality” (277). I view both approaches as not “natural” but as culturally specific ways of interpreting and interacting with our surrounding world. This is far from an endorsement or justification for the development of bone rooms, but instead a recognition of the importance for contextualization of their development, which speaks to the significance of Redman’s book.

*Bone Rooms* is an accessible piece of public history that can be appreciated by a general audience as well as scholars of the history of science. Redman encapsulates many of the important links between institutional and academic policies and the broader tide of public and scientific sentiment that contributed to the creation of these collections. What began as “scientific inquiry” grew, fed by the curiosity of the public, and yet again fed back into the justification for continued scientific collecting of human remains. Redman provides some specific examples tying the growth of several skeletal collections (even and museums) to the fervor for the anatomically exotic at the World’s Fairs surrounding the turn of the previous century. This book provides a contextualized history of the creation of a particularly unique phenomenon in the Western history of scientific tradition. *Bone Rooms* is well situated within a broader body of scholarship that examines the history of physical anthropology and racial science, the history of the evolution of science in general, the ethical relationship the living have with the deceased, and an emerging scholarship on Indigenous rights, activism, and relationships within a power differential. Redman’s use of both public and private primary sources, the depth of research, and the interweaving of personal stories should be emulated by public historians and science writers alike.

James T. Watson, Arizona State Museum

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*Ancestors of Worthy Life: Plantation Slavery and Black Heritage at Mount Clare*  

Near the end of *Ancestors of Worthy Life: Plantation Slavery and Black Heritage at Mount Clare*, author and archaeologist Teresa S. Moyer describes how “colonial revivalists created a usable past with which to address their concerns without challenging the system” (159). More than a century later, Moyer, too, is creating a usable past to address concerns, but this time with the explicit intent of challenging the racialized systems that have defined a vast number of historic preservation and interpretation efforts in the United States. In addition to being a well-defined case study, this volume has wide implications for the field of public history. Moyer does a fine job situating the history of Mount Clare within larger historical contexts, and, most importantly, shining a light on the social justice imperative of sharing more inclusive historical narratives.