

## Chapter Eight: Phrenology and Grave Robbing

### Phrenology

Will and James Sutton were keen phrenologists. Phrenology was developed in the late 1700's by a German physician named Franz Joseph Gall. He noticed the cerebral cortex in humans was much bigger than in animals and concluded this accounted for humans being more intelligent. He believed the physical features of the cortex could also be seen in the shape and size of the skull from which he developed his theory that characteristics, such as aggression, benevolence, wit, etc., are related to certain parts of the brain and are recognisable by bumps on the head. Phrenology was discredited as a science in the mid 1850's and defined as pseudoscientific,<sup>i</sup> but its influence continued into the late 19th and early 20th centuries when racial anthropologists used the size and shape of the cranial to 'prove' that Europeans were superior to other humans.

Both Will and James had previously given talks<sup>ii</sup> on phrenology but Will began a series of lectures in January 1887:

*The phrenology exhibition and lecture on man in the Victoria Theatre last night by W.J. Sutton, was well attended. A large collection of busts and casts of remarkable men from all parts of the world were on exhibition; also a murderers' gallery, with numerous illustrations. The lecturer discoursed most pleasantly on this popular subject and it is needless to say delighted his audience. The announcement that he would probably follow up this inexhaustible subject on a future occasion was received with marked demonstrations of applause. Mr. Sutton has evidently given much attention to the subject and is apparently familiar with all its phases.<sup>iii</sup>*

It was through phrenology that Will briefly became involved in the Temperance Movement. Two days after his successful lecture and exhibition he spoke about the causes of intemperance from a phrenological point of view at a meeting of the Blue Ribbon Temperance Group; more talks followed.<sup>iv</sup> Will's involvement with the movement continued for several months and in May 1888 he chaired a meeting which agreed to form the new Victoria Temperance Alliance; he was elected vice-president and chosen to represent the Alliance at a meeting in Vancouver the same year.

The last public appearance Will made in connection with phrenology came in October 1891 when he assisted an eminent phrenologist and author Dr. S.M. Matthews with a lecture. Given Will was to marry the following year it seems unlikely his new wife would be keen to have a collection of head casts in the drawing room. Will donated his collection to the new Provincial Museum. It included,

*famous men in every grade of life ... The casts are taken from the heads of Napoleon 1, J.Q. Adams, Haydn, several negro murderers, and men who have distinguished themselves in the arts and sciences, – a truly miscellaneous collection...*<sup>v</sup>

Phrenologists also collected skulls and it was in this connection that Will and James began to rob the graves of First Nation people: to sell to the American phrenology market.

### **Grave Robbing**

The heyday of anthropological collecting on the North West Coast of Canada took place during the half century or so after 1875. This was spurred on by the development of museums across Europe and North America. A huge amount of

material, both secular and sacred, left the area for the private and public collections of the European world. An expert on the subject, Douglas Cole, said, "*The scramble for skulls and skeletons, for poles and paddles, for baskets and bowls, for masks and mummies, was pursued sometimes with respect, occasionally with rapacity, often with avarice.*"<sup>vi</sup>

Franz Boas, sometimes referred to as the 'father of American anthropology' was, in May 1888, conducting a general survey of British Columbia tribes. He spent a lot of time collecting skulls and skeletons, with, according to Cole, speculative intent. Cole tells us Boas thought grave robbing was "*repugnant work*" and brought on nightmares but "*someone had to do it,*" adding skeletons were "*worth money.*"

Boas dug near Victoria and Saanich on Vancouver Island, and in Lytton and an island near Port Essington near the mouth of the Skeena River on mainland B.C. He often used his photographer to distract the locals whilst he dug. Boas collected about a dozen skulls and about the same number of skeletons himself then heard about a collection of 75 skulls Will and James Sutton had in Cowichan.

Cole tells us Boas was excited about the collection and spent the day measuring it, "*finding to his surprise considerable variation in a single linguistic group.*" Once it was confirmed there was a market for such material Boas bought the entire Sutton Collection,

*bringing his British Columbia total to some 85 skulls and 14 complete skeletons. The Sutton brothers were willing to gather more and Boas, telling them of some sites he knew of, left an order for whatever they could find...*

Having bought the Sutton collection Boas looked for buyers; he contacted the New York museum, Virchow's Museum in Berlin and Dawson in Ottawa, but none were interested. He kept the collection together until he had finished his work on it. Meanwhile, Cole tells us,

*...it was stored, first at the American museum and then, with his appointment as docent at Clerk University, at the universities laboratories...He finally disposed of the collection, partly to Virchow's Berlin museum and the remainder, with some difficulty, to Chicago's Field Columbian Museum in 1894.<sup>vii</sup>*

We know about the link between the Sutton brothers and Franz Boas because there are six original letters held by the American Philosophical Society. Five are from Will and one from James.<sup>viii</sup> The first, dated 15<sup>th</sup> November 1888, says,

*...My brother and Party who started out on sloop just after you left Victoria have only lately returned – I was getting anxious that something had happened to them. They had quite an adventurous trip and met with a great deal of difficulty in procuring native remains.*

*They were buried in caves and such out of the way places that he had to buy some of the Indians to show him burial places – paying them a dollar a piece. Some half breeds at Fort Rupert started quite a disturbance and tried to incite the Indians to shoot them.*

*Mr Spenser of Alert Bay laid complaint before Mr Roycroft superintendent of Provincial Police, and I have had quite a lively time to prevent an investigation. There was very few in many of the places you pointed out, and most of those in trees have been taken down and buried. I*

*had another party besides my two brothers out collecting and we have managed to get together (49) skeletons including crania (excepting one) – and seventy four crania including a number of pelvic bones; making in all one hundred and twenty three individuals.*

*Every skeleton is in a box by itself, having made boxes expressly for them. We have been at a great deal more trouble and expense than I anticipated but the collection is no doubt well worth the trouble as there are some most extraordinary heads. I would like to get them off my hands as soon as possible as I am afraid of the authorities confiscating them, there has been such a disturbance over them they may be compelled to take action.*

*Forty nine skeletons with heads @ 20\$ would amount to \$980 and seventy heads including some pelvic bones @ \$5 would amount to \$370 making in all \$1350. I consider the collection well worth at least one thousand dollars. I have spent about half that amount in cash, not including our labor.*

*There is possibly a few more than you might want, but it would hardly do to divide it up, as it makes along with what you already have a complete collection from one end of the island to the other....*

The letter is self-explanatory but it is worth noting that Will's youngest brother, Richard Keyworth, aged 20 years at the time, must have been visiting and was also involved. Will's second letter, dated 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1889, states,

*...The Indians of Cowichan lately discovered that some of their graves have been molested and have been raising*

*quite a rumpus. Information was laid and a search warrant obtained to search the mill premises for the bodies, but nothing was found.*

*Action has been taken against my brother, and I expect to have a good deal of trouble, as the Indians have employed a lawyer to work up the case....*

The remaining letters repeatedly ask Boas, politely, when he is going to pay. It was agreed payment could be done in instalments, and the skeletons and crania were shipped to the American museum, *“invoiced with a falsified origin and labelled as natural history specimens – ‘an incognito that answered well.’”*<sup>ix</sup> The collection was a few pieces less than originally identified as some were lost after being hidden away. According to Cole, most came from Discovery Island, from the environs of Victoria, and from among the Cowichan in the Koksilah river area.

The last letter, from James dated January 8<sup>th</sup> 1891, acknowledges the final payment and adds:

*If at any time we could be of any service to you in connection with such ... we would be most willing to do so.*

*As we are now moving out to the West Coast of Vancouver Island it is very likely that we may make a large collection from that neighbourhood. If we should do so we will notify you to that effect.*

There does not appear to be any further correspondence between the Sutton brothers and Franz Boas so we do not know if they continued to collect for him. James and Will moved to Ucluelet in 1891. Chapter Thirteen: First Nation

Villages, Skeena River, includes a photograph of Will and James entitled *Ready for a journey on horseback, Hazelton*; it is estimated this was taken in 1906. The photograph shows Will and James with a First Nation man and boy and boxes on the horses looking suspiciously like the ones described above: it is possible, therefore, that they continued to rob graves on mainland B.C. even after James had moved to California.

Emily Carr, the Canadian artist, visited her sister who was working with missionaries in Ucluelet in 1898. In her book, *Klee Wyck*, she describes the burial grounds of the local Natives:

*No-one disturbed the Indian dead. Their place was a small, half-cleared spot, a little off from the village and at the edge of the forest....The people never went to the dead's place except to carry another dead body there and then they would hurry back to make dreadful mourning howls in the village.*

*One day I went to the place of the dead to sketch. It was creepy. At first I did not know whether I could bear it or not. Bones lay about – human bones – skulls, staring from their eye hollows stuck out from under the bracken, ribs and thigh bones lay among the roots of the trees where coffin boxes had split. Many “dead-boxes” were bound to the high branches of the pines. The lower limbs of the trees were chopped away. Sometimes a Hudson’s Bay blanket would be bound around the box, and flapped in the wind as the tree rocked the box. Up there in the keen air the body disintegrated quickly. The sun and the rain rotted the ropes that bound the box to the tree. They broke and the bones were flung to earth where greenery soon hid them...*

Perhaps the Suttons did not disturb the burial grounds in Ucluelet? Given James Sutton married in March 1891, made Ucluelet his home for many years and traded with the Nuu-chah-nulth, robbing their graves would not have led to good relations with them nor, presumably, with his wife.

From the evidence we have it looks like James, Will, and to a lesser degree younger brother, Richard Keyworth, and their associates, were responsible for stealing the remains of over 200 First Nation people across Vancouver Island. They clearly did not think they were doing anything morally wrong; they no doubt believed First Nation people were inferior to white Europeans, a belief fostered by phrenology.

Using his analysis of the skulls collected on the Northwest Coast, Franz Boas repeatedly criticised the scientific idea of a ‘pure race’ and distanced himself from the supposedly scientific insights of phrenology.<sup>x</sup> With regard to the Sutton brothers, Boas said, *“Of course I refrained from saying anything about the nonsense of phrenology.”*<sup>xi</sup>

### **‘Museum Age’**

Grave robbing happened because there was a market for the remains. Competition between museums and their collectors, in particular Franz Boas, George Dorsey and Charles F. Newcombe, was rife. We are talking about a time in history, 1880-1920, which has been dubbed the ‘Museum Age.’

Discretion was needed when grave robbing, Cole tells us, *“though the rule seems to have been that all was permitted so long as one did not fall afoul of the Indians or the law,”* he says Indian Superintendent Vowel gave one collector, George Hunt, *“permission to raid cave burials that were beyond the memory of living Indians.”*

Cole is disparaging about George Dorsey, telling us his “...*rip-and-run plunder at Skungo's Cave and other sites earned him public and private rebuke. Boas' collectors, the Sutton brothers, ran into trouble but avoided prosecution....*”

Cole further relates the story of how Charles F. Newcombe came across an associate of Boas called Sutton who told him when collecting skulls he always “*squared the chiefs of villages who told off men to accompany him & to point out those they had no objection to losing.*” It seems likely Newcombe is talking about James. Newcombe knew Will Sutton quite well, both were members of the Natural History Society: Newcombe was a founding member in 1889 and later president; Will joined in 1900 and was president in 1912; he had also accompanied Newcombe on one of his trips to the Queen Charlotte Islands early in 1901, more of which later.

### **Concluding Remarks**

What Will and James did was wrong; it is important not to brush this under the carpet. Grave robbing happened and Will and James were part of it. Whilst we have clear evidence that Will and James were robbing graves on Vancouver Island it is possible they also robbed graves on mainland British Columbia.

The racism shown in their actions reflects the principles of colonialism and is little different to the way Will's grandfather's generation treated Africans during the period of the slave trade; racist beliefs and actions created, and perpetuated, by the institutions of religion, law, medicine, media, education and the family.

It is worth noting in 2003 the remains of 150 First Nation people from Haida were repatriated from the Field

Museum in Chicago. The museum still has more than 4,000 human remains.<sup>xii</sup>

The author has been in contact with the Field Museum in Chicago and the Prussian Foundation of Cultural Heritage in Berlin. The latter are looking for a grant to fund a research project for provenience analysing which would hopefully identify where the remains came from. According to the Field Museum, repatriation is a lengthy process and begins with a request from the relevant First Nation group. They hope to be working with groups in British Columbia in the next five years.

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<sup>i</sup> Phrenology did help in the field of neurology and whilst bumps on the head were rejected, phrenologists were right in their belief that different areas of the brain were associated with different mental abilities: Modern research methods such as MRI and PET scans help us to learn more about localised functions of the brain.

<sup>ii</sup> Will had given a talk on the subject as early as 1878 (*The Colonist*, 29<sup>th</sup> January 1878); James gave one in 1886 (*The Colonist*, 1<sup>st</sup> July 1886).

<sup>iii</sup> *The Colonist*, 28<sup>th</sup> January, 1887.

<sup>iv</sup> O.S. and L.N. Fowler popularised phrenology. They had a publishing house and published widely on popular health. One of O.S. Fowler's pamphlets was entitled *Temperance Founded on Phrenology and Physiology*, 1841; it included ten propositions on the relationship between various states of mind and body and drinking alcohol - by 1854 there had been twenty-four editions published.

<sup>v</sup> *The Colonist*, 8<sup>th</sup> November 1891.

<sup>vi</sup> Douglas Cole, *Captured Heritage, The Scramble for North West Artifacts*, 1985.

<sup>vii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>viii</sup> I thank the Boas Digitization Project, American Philosophical Society for sending me copies of the letters.

<sup>ix</sup> Cole, *op cit*

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<sup>x</sup> Friedrich Pöhl, *Assessing Franz Boas' ethics in his Arctic and later anthropological fieldwork*, Volume 32, numéro 2, 2008, p. 35-52,

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<sup>xi</sup> Rohner, Ronald P. *The Ethnography of Franz Boas. Letters and Diaries of Franz Boas Written on the Northwest Coast from 1886-1931*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1969

<sup>xii</sup> 17<sup>th</sup> October 2003, Chicago Tribune.