# Extinction Threatens Australian Anthropology

## *Moves by Aborigines to impound and rebury skeletal remains in universities and museums could end physical anthropology in Australia*

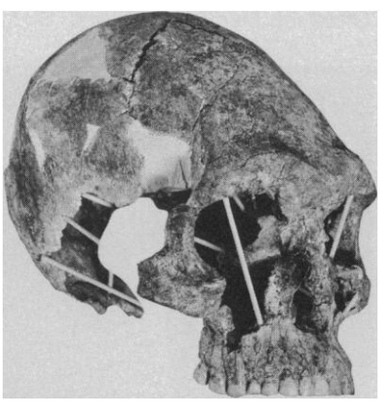
A recent amendment to a state law of Victoria, southern Australia, threatens to end physical anthropology as a serious science in that country. By 25 August the University of Melbourne must hand over its substantial and important collection of more than 800 Aboriginal skeletal remains to the Victoria Museum, where they will rest until a state-appointed committee of Aboriginal people decides upon their fate. The museum has a collection of some 600 skeletal remains, which are also under consideration. "We start from the position that everything must return home, to be reburied," Jim Berg, executive officer of the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service told *Science*.

The university and museum material includes skeletons and crania ranging from less than 100 to more than 15,000 years old, and represents the bulk of Australia's most significant physical anthropological collections. "This is a very critical situation," comments Alan Thorne, an anthropologist at the Australian National University, Canberra. Thorne has for some time been consulting with representatives of the Aboriginal community on ways to establish a compromise between scientific and cultural interests, which have been in uneasy balance for the past several years. "The speed of recent developments has taken the scientific community by surprise, and there is a great deal of uncertainty about what will happen now."

Thorne visited the neighboring state of New South Wales in early July and discovered that the national park service was sketching out plans for "permanent storage" of the Lake Mungo remains, which include two complete crania dated at about 30,000 years old and another that might be almost twice that age. Some Aboriginal groups in that state are urging the reburial of all this material, whereas others would be satisfied with a shift to the Aborigines of control of access to the remains. New South Wales does not yet have a law on the preservation of relics identical to the one in Victoria, but, says Thorne, existing legislation could be used to allow the Aboriginal community to achieve its aims.

These latest developments regarding skeletal remains are taking place in the context of a surge of federal and state initiatives to compensate the Aboriginal community for the appalling treatment it received from the European settlers, both last century and this. Aborigines were either slaughtered or driven from their lands, and were often featured in anthropology texts in less than flattering comparisons with nonhuman primates. Burial sites were excavated and the skeletal and cultural material curated without regard to Aborigines' beliefs or feelings, much as once happened at American Indian sites.

Most federal and state attention is currently being focused on the restitution of land rights and the provision of proper medical and educational facilities. But the return of cemetery material to the Aboriginal community and the reburial of skeletal remains has become an issue of great symbolic significance and passion, and many groups appear to want to move quickly while they still have the initiative. By comparison with American Indians, who for the most part are cooperating with archeological and anthropological researchers, the Australian Aborigines have more voter power and therefore more political muscle.



Milford Wolpoff

***Back to earth?***

*A 10,000-year-old skull from Kow Swamp, being considered for reburial.*

The recent developments switched into high gear in April when Berg threatened legal action against the Victoria Museum 3 days before Thorne was due to take two skulls—Kow Swamp 1 and Keilor—to the American Museum of Natural History in New York, for its Ancestors exhibit (*Science*, 4 May, p. 477). Under existing legislation the Victoria Museum was required to obtain permission from the minister of planning before loaning Aboriginal material to other institutions. Museum authorities realized that under the prevailing climate of opinion they were unlikely to receive permission, and so decided not to challenge Berg's injunction. Thorne arrived in New York empty-handed.

With that victory under his belt, and with the amendment the same month of the Archeological and Aboriginal Relics Preservation Act, which made it an offense to possess or display skeletal material without ministerial permission, Berg decided to go for bigger stakes. "I discovered that the University of Melbourne had a very large collection of skeletons, and I decided I would have them taken to the museum, as provided for under the act." As executive officer of the Aboriginal Legal Service, Berg is a warden under the act.

The vice-chancellor asked Berg to leave the university premises when he attempted to inspect the collection on 21 May. Berg then filed an injunction on 24 May, preventing the university from removing the remains to anywhere other than the Victoria Museum. A week later the university appealed the injunction and sought permission to retain the collection, but learned it had lost its case on 18 June. The entire collection must now be transferred to the custody of the museum by 25 August.

"The desecration of burial sites and the locking away in museums of our ancestral remains has shown a complete lack of respect for the Aboriginal community," says Berg. "It causes us great anxiety and distress. So you can imagine that arguments by anthropologists that these represent important scientific collections don't go down well with the Aboriginal community." There is therefore a strong feeling that all the most recent skeletal remains should be returned to the appropriate burial sites. "Whether it will all be reburied is still a matter for discussion in the committee. Personally, I would prefer to see everything returned."

Thorne concedes that the Aborigines' moral case is unassailable. He also acknowledges that any scientific argument would be more likely to succeed if he could cooperate with Aboriginal physical anthropologists, but there are none. He and others will, nevertheless, argue the case for keeping some kind of reference collection of relatively recent skeletons, "because modern material is important

for making comparisons and for measuring changes through time."

Included in the Melbourne collection is a series of 50 crania from Coobool Creek, all of which date to around 10,000 years. Milford Wolpoff, of the University of Michigan, had planned to study this series later this month in an attempt to address one of the most interesting questions of Australian prehistory: did the indigenous population derive from two separate migrations of Indonesian and South Asian people some 40,000 years or so ago? Migrations are frequently hypothesized in prehistory but are often difficult to investigate. The Australian material, particularly Coobool with its age intermediate between the supposed event and the present, offers an unparalleled opportunity to test a specific case. According to Thorne, the Coobool material is likely to be reburied.

Although there is a good deal of uncertainty about the pace of future events, discussions on the fate of various parts of the university and museum collections are expected to spread over months rather than weeks. "We will start from the position that everything should be put back in the ground, but we are prepared to discuss individual cases," a lawyer for the Aboriginal Legal Service told *Science*. "People who want to do research will have to justify its importance."

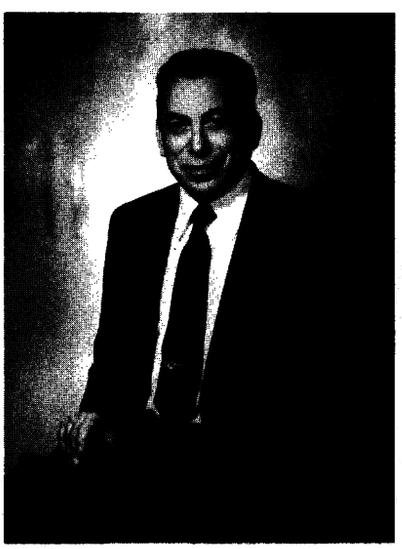
Meanwhile, Australian archeologists, who have been very active in raising the consciousness of the Aboriginal community to their heritage, are beginning to face potential problems themselves. According to several anthropologists in Victoria, reburial may eventually include cultural material in addition to skeletons, which, for archeologists, would be a cruel twist of irony. And the strength of feeling that is gathering can be further judged by the demands, now beginning to be voiced, that books containing sacred Aboriginal pictures should be removed from libraries.

There is a clear parallel between American Indians and Australian Aborigines in terms of the iniquities dealt them throughout history, but the contemporary combination of others' guilt and their own political clout appears to be handing the Aborigines an opportunity to grasp much more quickly and more completely what they now want: to wrest their heritage from the hands of their colonizers. But whether burying the whole of their heritage is the best way to preserve it, rather than entering into a collaborative scholarly appreciation of it as the American Indians have, is a matter that requires some dispassionate discussion.—**ROGER LEWIN**

## New NSF Chief Asks Hard Look at Budget

National Science Foundation director-designee Erich Bloch has not yet moved into the foundation's front office, but he has already made his presence felt by asking NSF managers to scrutinize their operations and identify where significant cuts in the budget might be made.

The purpose of the exercise, according to NSF officials, is to provide leeway to fund new programs. Bloch's request was made as a result of his involvement in the preparation of next year's budget which is now in the final stages at NSF. Foundation sources say that several worthwhile initiatives were being proposed for inclusion in the budget, but it was thought that the Office of Management and Budget would not provide the substantial additional funds needed to pay for them. Bloch then requested that the whole NSF budget be examined to provide a basis for making informed choices on the budget. Foundation officials say that Bloch also sees the exercise as helping him to understand what priorities the NSF staff puts on its programs.



***Erich Bloch***

Trying to elicit NSF staff's priorities.

One insider noted that government budget-makers ordinarily focus on the "margin," that is the programs affected by funding changes from one year to the next. Bloch, with his IBM background, seemed to be following the more usual practice in industry of looking at both the margin and the "base," or total previous budget, to establish priorities.

Some observers are interpreting Bloch's request as a sign that NSF is bracing for big cuts in the next budget. These members of the Washington science bureaucracy read the signs as indicating that, whoever may win the November elections, the pressures generated by the huge federal deficit will result in sharp reductions in controllable expenditures, among which R&D is vulnerably included. NSF officials reject this suggestion, insisting that there is "no hidden agenda" behind the Bloch exercise and claiming that NSF anticipates another favorable budget whatever the outcome of the election.

Bloch, an IBM vice president, was nominated on 6 June (*Science*, 22 June, p. 1318) to replace Edward A. Knapp who is returning to Los Alamos National Laboratory. Bloch was named to a recess appointment on 2 July, which would give him legal standing as director for the rest of this Congress pending Senate confirmation. Bloch, however, is winding up his duties at IBM and has not yet been sworn in. Knapp is expected to remain as operating head of NSF until September when Bloch is scheduled to take over formally.—**JOHN WALSH**

## Science Panel Plans Bush Report Update

The House Science and Technology Committee will embark in January on a 2-year study of U.S. science policy. In announcing the project, science committee chairman Don Fuqua (D–Fla.) noted that the committee is concerned that prevailing policies which were strongly influenced by Vannevar Bush's famous 1945 report, "The Endless Frontier," may not be adequate to the demands facing U.S. science in the future.

Committee sources say that initiative for the study came from Fuqua and other committee members who feel that it is time to look at the principles and assumptions underlying science policy in a way that it is not possible during the piecemeal process of legislative authorization.