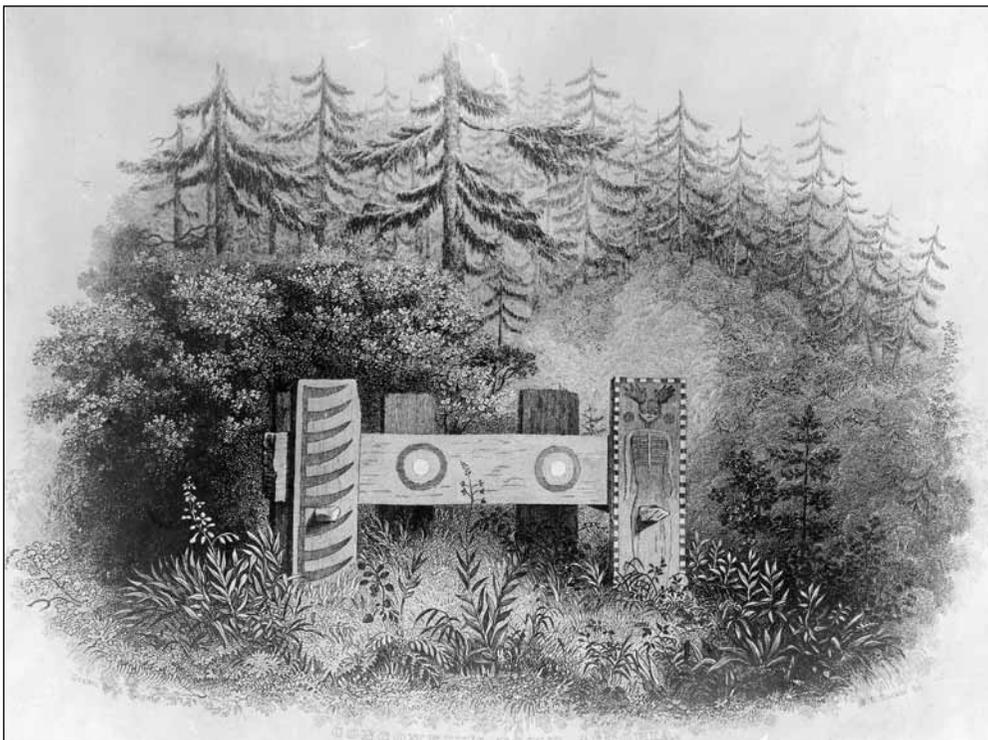


# Stealing from the Dead

## *Scientists, Settlers, and Indian Burial Sites in Early-Nineteenth-Century Oregon*

MEREDITH GAIRDNER accepted employment as the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) physician for Fort Vancouver with the understanding that he would be given time to study the natural history of the region. The demands of an intermittent fever epidemic coupled with his work as a fur trader, however, left the physician with little time for his own interests and further degraded his health, long weakened by consumption. In the fall of 1835, two and a half years after his arrival, Gairdner decided to embark for the Sandwich Islands, hoping that the warmer climate would improve his health. Before leaving the Oregon Country, he made a stop near the mouth of the Columbia River to collect material for scientific study. On his arrival in Oahu, Gairdner sent his prize specimen to fellow physician and naturalist John Richardson in Britain. Four months later, Gairdner died of consumption, long before his colleague received the box containing Chief Comcomly's skull.<sup>1</sup>

An accomplished trader, Comcomly increased his community standing and wealth during the first decades of the nineteenth century through his interactions with both newcomers and Natives. The Chinook leader took advantage of his village's position, near the mouth of the Columbia, a longtime hub of indigenous commerce, to trade with groups ranging from maritime explorers and the Corps of Discovery to the Native inhabitants of Vancouver Island. Comcomly began trading with maritime fur traders from Britain and the United States in the late eighteenth century, offering furs and food in exchange for European and American goods. By the early nineteenth century, land-based fur traders had established permanent trading posts throughout the Oregon Country — a term used by Britain and the United States to identify their jointly held territory in the Pacific Northwest — creating more opportunities for Indians such as Comcomly to engage in trade. Accounts of Comcomly's exploits and “cunning” graced



*Comcomly, a Chinook Indian leader, died in 1830 during an intermittent fever epidemic. Physician Meredith Gairdner stole his skull in 1835 and sent it for study in England. This sketch by Alfred T. Agate, engraved for the fourth volume of Charles Wilkes's Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition, shows what Comcomly's tomb looked like a few years after the skull had been removed.*

the pages of many published descriptions of the region, increasing his fame beyond the Columbia.<sup>2</sup> In his letter to Richardson, accompanying the stolen skull, Gairdner suggested: "You may have heard of this character for he is mentioned in most of the narratives relating to the Columbia. By his ability? cunning? or what you please to call it, he raised himself & family to a power & influence which no Indian has since possessed in the districts of the Columbia."<sup>3</sup> Drawn by the Indian's fame and impressed by his character, Gairdner believed that by examining his body, particularly the skull, researchers could better understand not only Comcomly specifically but also other Northwest Indians more generally.

Removing items, particularly human remains, from Indian burial grounds was not easy. Northwest coast Natives ranked stealing from the dead as one of the worst crimes a person could commit.<sup>4</sup> The intermittent fever epidemic that had claimed Comcomly's life in 1830, however, had also killed

off much of his village. With fewer Natives in the area, Gairdner would have found it easier to enter the burial site unobserved.<sup>5</sup> Once there, it would not have been difficult for the naturalist to find the Indian's remains. In deference to the dead man's high rank, the Chinook had initially interred Comcomly near his family in an elaborate canoe elevated by posts six or seven feet off the ground, his body wrapped in blankets and mats.<sup>6</sup> When only bones and dried flesh remained, his people removed the skeleton from the canoe, cleaned

it and rewrapped it for secondary burial near or under the canoe. Removing the Chinook Indian's remains would have been easier had they still been in the canoe, but Gairdner came prepared with tools. Given the taboo nature of the work, the naturalist dug alone, a task that soon left him coughing up blood. Too ill to remove the whole skeleton, the naturalist took only the head, which he considered the most valuable, but promised Richardson that the rest of the body would follow if he ever returned to the Columbia.<sup>7</sup> Gairdner sent the remains to Britain to be studied by phrenologists whose work focused on interpreting the correlation between the shape of a skull and an individual's character and intelligence.<sup>8</sup> Comcomly's skull would have been considered a prize specimen not only because his personality and intelligence were well documented but also because his head had been shaped or "flattened" when he was an infant, a practice that denoted class within Northwest coast Indian communities. Gairdner also hoped the skull would help answer questions about whether environmental factors, including

Courtesy of The National Library of Medicine



*Meredith Gairdner sent Comcomly's skull to friend and fellow physician John Richardson in England. In 1838, when Richardson took over as senior physician at the Royal Naval Hospital in Haslar, he was tasked with building up the affiliated museum with plant, animal, and even human specimens. He donated Comcomly's skull to the museum, where it remained for more than a century.*

head shaping, affected personality or intelligence. While the naturalist seems to have had no qualms about taking the skull, he was certainly aware that others, especially Indians, would view his actions as theft. He even saw similarities between his own work and that of “resurrectionists” such as the infamous William Burke and William Hare, two Irishmen who exhumed fresh bodies from cemeteries in Edinburgh, Scotland, and even murdered poor people in the name of medicine.<sup>9</sup> Gairdner ultimately tried to justify the theft in the name of science, suggesting that studies of Comcomly’s skull could offer valuable insights about the Chinook leader and perhaps even humans in general.<sup>10</sup>

The skull traveled with Richardson when he accepted employment at the Royal Naval Hospital in Haslar, England. Richardson then donated it to the hospital’s museum, which housed medical and ethnographical specimens including other human remains. After removing the brain and treating the skull with chemicals, the museum placed it on display in 1838 and it remained a British object of study until 1940, when German bombers destroyed the museum and much of its collection. The skull, minus the jaw, was recovered and eventually displayed at the Clatsop County Historical Museum in Oregon before being sent for study at the Smithsonian. In 1972, at the request of the Chinook community, the skull was finally returned to the tribe and reinterred with the rest of Comcomly’s remains.<sup>11</sup>

Comcomly’s skull was not the first to make its way from a Northwest Native burial ground into a European collection, but the theft was part of growing trend. Prior to the early nineteenth century, newcomers who visited Native burial sites to learn about Indian culture and traditions had been careful not to remove grave goods or human remains for fear of violent reprisals or threats to trade. In the wake of several epidemics in the 1820s and 1830s, however, Native populations around the Columbia and Willamette rivers began to drastically decline.<sup>12</sup> This left many non-Natives to imagine that Indians were on the verge of extinction. Not only were there more Indian dead, including the famous Comcomly, but there were fewer individuals left to monitor and maintain traditional burial sites. At the same time, physicians and scientists in the United States and Europe were becoming increasingly interested in the study and measurement of human remains, particularly skulls, as they undertook research in the areas of phrenology and craniology. Developed by Franz Joseph Gall in 1796, the field of phrenology reached peak popularity in the late 1830s, while craniology grew in prominence during the 1830s and 1840s.<sup>13</sup> Whereas phrenology focused on revealing an individual’s character, craniology used skull measurements to

understand the evolution and hierarchy of mankind.<sup>14</sup> Although the two fields differed in their questions and methods, they each required human skulls, preferably those that could be definitively tied to an individual or community. Such scientific purposes were only part of the reasons newcomers interacted with Indian dead.



*Samuel G. Morton was a physician based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and a leading skull collector. After learning that Northwest coast Natives shaped their skulls, Morton paid fellow scientist John Kirk Townsend to collect specimens on his behalf. After taking measurements of the skulls, Morton concluded that head shaping did not affect Indians' intelligence. This image of Morton was published in *Types of Mankind* (1854).*

The ways whites in the Pacific Northwest interpreted, interacted with, and stole from native burial grounds changed over the course of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>15</sup> Newcomers were initially drawn to Indian burial practices as a way to understand Natives and their place in the world. After the turn of the nineteenth century, however, their attention shifted from merely observing Indian dead to taking items, specifically human remains, from burial sites. Scientists remained interested in documenting Native burial practices, but they also increasingly sought answers to specific questions about Native bodies and culture. Influenced by the work of men such as Gall and Samuel G. Morton, an American physician and leading skull collector, scientists hoped to prove, through careful measurements, that Indians belonged to a separate and inferior race that was incapable of reaching the same “civilized” level as Caucasians. Craniology, an outgrowth of phrenology, developed out of a desire to understand what distinguished different groups from one another. Specifically, men



FIG. 339. — Apollo Belvidere.<sup>533</sup>



FIG. 340.<sup>556</sup>



Greek.

FIG. 341. — Negro.<sup>554</sup>



FIG. 342.<sup>357</sup>



Creole Negro.

FIG. 343. — Young Chimpanzee.<sup>555</sup>



FIG. 344.<sup>558</sup>



Young Chimpanzee.

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Plate 22 in Josiah Nott and George Glidden's 1854 *Types of Mankind* illustrates craniologists' belief in inferior races — that some humans were more closely linked with animals. Written as a memorial to Samuel Morton, the book was heavily influenced by and illustrated with his collection of personal and published papers.

like Morton questioned whether the populations native to Africa, Asia, and the Americas were “inferior” to European groups because of their biology or whether environment and culture were major factors in the differences they perceived. Starting with the premise that Indians, among other groups, were inferior to white Americans and Europeans, craniologists used skull measurements to “prove” that Caucasians were not only more intelligent, but also that Indians’ small skulls made it impossible for them to become civilized. These studies, which were part of the proto-anthropological movement, were instrumental in shaping how nineteenth-century Americans and Europeans viewed race, and were frequently used to justify state actions ranging from slavery to slaughter.<sup>16</sup> As interest in phrenology and craniology waned during the 1840s, and as numbers of Euro-American emigrants to the region drastically increased, settlers and missionaries came to view removing items from burial sites as a nostalgic way to preserve dying cultures. Rather than collecting bones for scientific study, these new arrivals were interested in grave goods as objects of curiosity that could be displayed as symbols of conquest and progress.<sup>17</sup> While the driving forces that encouraged newcomers to observe and take from the dead shifted, the underlying motivation remained much the same — to generate knowledge about Natives that could be used as a tool of empire to lay claim to the region and its resources.

FROM THE BEGINNING, newcomers to the Northwest were interested in learning about Native death practices. The earliest arrivals to the region often carried instructions from home governments and employers to document Native life, particularly customs surrounding birth, marriage, and death.<sup>18</sup> In order to observe the rituals and customs pertaining to funerals, mourning, and the afterlife, non-Natives had to arrive in a village shortly after a death, which was not an everyday occurrence. Burial sites, however, could be visited any time with or without the presence of Natives. Newcomers believed that much could be learned about Native bodies and culture from their burial sites.<sup>19</sup> They looked specifically for similarities between their own burial practices and Native ones, information they believed would help define and locate Northwest Indians within a hierarchy of civilizations.<sup>20</sup> From those observations, newcomers also hoped to infer details about Native life — including social hierarchies, community values, and the significance of particular objects — that could be useful in future interactions.

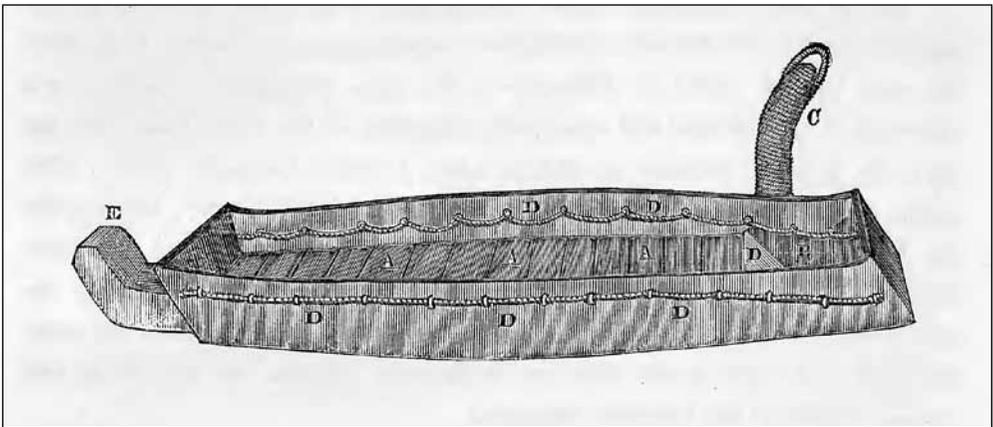
Northwest Natives relied on several different methods for interring the dead. Some Indians, including the Chinook, placed their dead in canoes. After preparing the body and wrapping it in mats or blankets, they would

lay it out in a canoe and surround it with personal effects. The bottom of the canoe contained two holes to let water drain, a practice Indians believed “killed” the vessel and allowed it to be transported to the afterlife, where it would be made whole again.<sup>21</sup> Canoes, as well as burial boxes, were interred on posts several feet off the ground, on island cliffs, and even tied in the high branches of trees.<sup>22</sup> The Kalapuya of the Willamette Valley employed a different method, burying their dead several feet underground with boards and grave goods to mark the site.<sup>23</sup> Regardless of how or where Indians buried their dead, most believed that they could be dangerous to the living and were therefore wary of letting outsiders near burial sites.<sup>24</sup> Many Northwest Natives thought that the dead could return days or even years after death in the form of spirits or ghosts who could steal a person’s soul. If a soul was not immediately returned, typically with the aid of shaman, the individual would sicken and die. Likewise, some Indians believed that sickness and disease lingered around the body after death, posing a further threat to the living.<sup>25</sup> Although indigenous fear of and respect for the dead resulted in limited access to Native burial sites, those attitudes were not enough to discourage non-Natives from disturbing the dead.

During the first decades of the nineteenth century, scientists in the field of phrenology theorized that the physical characteristics of the skull influenced a person’s mental abilities and behaviors.<sup>26</sup> Although phrenologists were able to collect some information from living subjects, they needed skulls to measure and chart the cranium’s interior. In 1812, Ross Cox, a clerk for the Pacific Fur Company who was working at Fort Astoria, was among the first in the region to express an interest in phrenology. As a fur trader, Cox worked most extensively with the Chinook Indians, who practiced a form of head shaping by first placing infants into cradles, their head cushioned by a soft pad in front and back. They then placed a board on the child’s forehead and tied it firmly in place. The practice continued for the first couple years of life and resulted in a sloped forehead and a visibly altered skull that served to distinguish the upper classes from slaves, whose heads remained unshaped.<sup>27</sup> Cox mused “the perfect uniformity in the shape of their heads would, I fancy, puzzle the phrenological skill of the most learned disciples of Gall.” Inspired by Gall’s research, Cox snuck out at midnight to collect skulls from nearby burial sites for personal study. While Cox imagined taking the specimens with him when he returned east to be studied by more qualified scholars, he knew that the difficult overland journey precluded carrying the heavy skulls.<sup>28</sup> He found this greatly disappointing and supposed that, without physical evidence, no one would believe that the Chinook shaped their heads. Even

though Cox was unable to transport the skulls east, the growing number of reports about the region's flathead Natives piqued the interest of naturalists and phrenologists in Europe and eastern North America.

After an 1821 merger with the North West Company gave the HBC the right to trade in the region, the company immediately began expanding its fur-trade operations. A growing imperial force in the Northwest, the HBC brought resources and manpower that had been lacking during Cox's tenure at Fort Astoria, which helped make possible the collection and study of Native skulls.<sup>29</sup> This scholarship was made possible in large part because these forts drew men of science, particularly physicians and naturalists interested



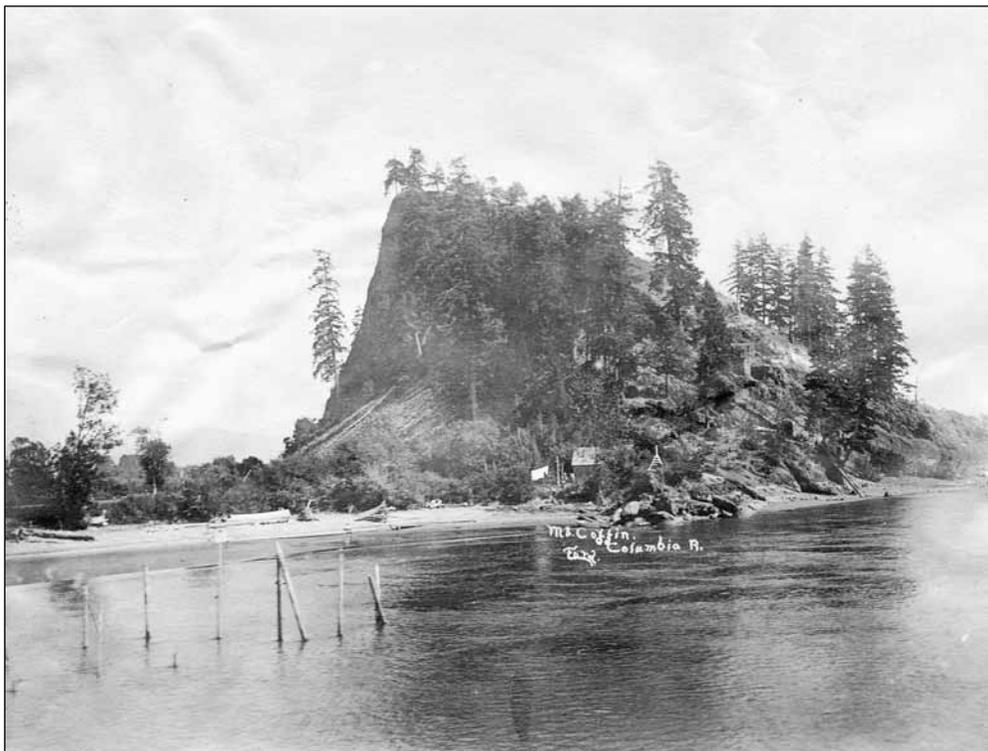
*This sketch, published in Samuel G. Morton's 1839 *Crania Americana*, is an example of a cradle used by Chinook Indians for shaping infants' heads. Reports of the region's head-shaping practices reached Europe in the early nineteenth century and led to increased interest of naturalists and phrenologists.*

in observing the region's Native peoples and natural environments. Most arrived as company employees hired to work as clerks or, like Gairdner, as physicians. During the scientists' tenures in the Northwest, the HBC assisted them in travel, provided them with guides and interpreters, and offered opportunities for them to learn about, collect, and transport various specimens back home. In return, the HBC gained educated employees in its most remote trading territory. Like most early-nineteenth-century natural-

ists, these men had broad scientific interests and were engaged in learning what they could about Native traditions, including burial practices. Most, however, became fascinated with how Natives shaped their skulls and were only too willing to acquire the unique specimens when the opportunity presented itself.<sup>30</sup>

The British physician and naturalist John Scouler was among the first scholars to collect Northwest Native skulls for study. In 1825, Scouler visited a well-documented Chinookan burial site in order to examine “the mode of interment, & to procure a specimen of their compressed skulls.”<sup>31</sup> Travelers on the lower Columbia River were intrigued by the unusual features of many of the river’s islands, especially a steep rock towering several hundred feet above the water and dotted with burial canoes in the most difficult-to-reach places. Not surprisingly, Mount Coffin, as it was known by newcomers, became a favorite destination for individuals interested in native burial practices, especially those who wanted to find skulls.<sup>32</sup> Scouler was particularly interested in viewing the contents of the burial canoes, but he was “Unwilling to do any injury” to the vessels out of fear that Indians would discover the tampering and demand retribution.<sup>33</sup> A damaged canoe provided the naturalist with the opportunity to document Chinookan grave goods, including weapons, mats, beads, and European trade items — all objects denoting the wealth and status of an individual and meant for use in the afterlife.<sup>34</sup> When Scouler departed the island, he left the grave goods behind, taking several skulls instead. Although the naturalist intended to keep the skulls for his personal collection, the thefts offered a pragmatic solution to one of the challenges of scientific field work: while Scouler could scribble down notes about the layout of the burial site and the contents of the canoe, it would have been impossible, given the illicit nature of the work, to take accurate measurements and provide a thorough analysis of skulls in the field. Those skulls, along with several others he collected while in Oregon Country, provided Scouler with the phrenological data he needed to publish the first scientific article on Northwest Indian skulls.<sup>35</sup>

Nearly a decade later, John Kirk Townsend, an American ornithologist and paid skull collector for Morton, was also drawn to Mount Coffin in search of remains. After arriving on the island, Townsend and his companions made close observation of several burial canoes and their contents. Out of concern for his colleagues, Townsend chose to wait until a later time to collect skulls from the site. When they were ready to depart, the men discovered that their actions had been carefully monitored by twenty Indians in a canoe just offshore. After the visitors returned to their vessel, an older Native woman walked across the island speaking and waving a stick as she went. Townsend assumed that the woman was performing a ritual purifica-



*Chinookan Indians had long used Mount Coffin, an island located in the Columbia River near present day Longview, Washington, as a burial site. When American Charles Wilkes visited in the island in 1841, he found an estimated 3,000 burial canoes. The canoes were destroyed when Wilkes's crew accidentally let a campfire spread across the island. This photograph shows Mount Coffin in about 1900. It was quarried in the early twentieth century and no longer exists.*

tion to appease any spirits they might have disturbed during their visit.<sup>36</sup> On this occasion, Townsend decided against taking skulls, not because he was afraid for himself, but because he realized that his actions could have ramifications for his companions as well as for the HBC in general. Even as he worried about getting caught, Townsend noted that Native methods of interment made it fairly easy to remove skulls. While he had to be careful not to disturb the mats and blankets that typically surrounded bodies, open canoes and simply constructed burial boxes made the task straightforward. Still, Townsend wondered what he would say or do if an Indian caught him in the act of taking remains. While he suspected most Natives would shoot first, Townsend hoped he would have time to bargain for his life.<sup>37</sup> Despite

his concerns, Townsend credited recent epidemics with filling burial sites and removing “watchers,” which made his job easier.<sup>38</sup> Even so, after his encounter on Coffin Island, Townsend took greater precautions to ensure he was not discovered.

Townsend, like other non-Natives, believed Indians posed a real threat to collectors, but there were only a handful of instances in which Natives caught newcomers stealing from or disturbing their dead. One of those few exceptions took place after the U.S. Exploring Expedition, led by Charles Wilkes, camped on Mount Coffin in 1841. When the men accidentally let a campfire spread, it destroyed an estimated 3,000 burial canoes.<sup>39</sup> The Chinookan Indians were distressed to discover that their burial site had been destroyed by the negligence of whites and, according to visiting artist Paul Kane, “would no doubt have sought revenge had they felt themselves strong enough to do so.”<sup>40</sup> With their numbers diminished by disease, Indians with ties to the island felt unable to offer a real threat to the offenders and were forced to let the matter drop.<sup>41</sup>

Although Townsend was unwilling to risk the lives of others for scientific gain, he pushed the boundaries in his search for skull specimens. In order to secure funding for his research from the American Philosophical Society and the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, Townsend promised to conduct fieldwork on behalf of other naturalists. Morton, then president of the Academy of Natural Sciences, asked Townsend to provide him with “flathead” skulls for his collection.<sup>42</sup> Because he was willing to pay as much as one-hundred dollars per skull, Morton’s offer would have been a lucrative opportunity for Townsend to further fund his own research. Townsend became one of Morton’s most valued collectors, contributing eight of the sixty-nine skulls he used in his ground-breaking work *Crania Americana*, which argued that Indians belonged to a species separate from Caucasians. Drawing heavily on evidence from Townsend’s specimens, Morton helped reshape the way nineteenth-century Americans thought about race. Among other things, the craniologist argued that his research demonstrated that Natives lacked the innate ability to assimilate into American society, providing many nineteenth-century whites with the justification they needed to mistreat Indians.<sup>43</sup>

Phrenologists and craniologists like Morton wanted detailed information about their specimens. While the specific identity of the person to whom a skull had belonged was not critical for study, any information about age, gender, status, personality, and particularly tribal origin gave it greater scientific, as well as commercial, value.<sup>44</sup> Gairdner’s theft of Comcomly’s skull proved to be the exception rather than the rule, as few other Northwest remains carried detailed provenance. Shaped or “flathead” skulls were particularly

desirable, but not that unusual, because, with the exception of slaves, most Northwest Natives altered their heads to some degree.<sup>45</sup> Those shaped skulls were important to craniologists, who had many questions about the malleability of the head and what impact such changes had on an individual's intelligence. Anecdotal evidence suggesting that the process of head flattening had no effect on the brain only piqued their interest in examining the skulls.<sup>46</sup> Using Townsend's specimens, Morton measured the volume of several flat-head skulls, determining that the internal capacity remained unchanged. This suggested to the craniologist that intelligence was unaffected by head shaping, although scholars still had questions about whether the practice caused other changes to character or behavior.<sup>47</sup>

Between the mid 1820s and the 1840s, naturalists sent their findings to many institutions and individuals for study. In addition to the skulls sent by Gairdner and Scouler, William Frasier Tolmie, the physician and chief trader at Fort Nisqually, personally transported four skulls to the London Phrenological Society.

While in London, Tolmie spoke to the society's membership, telling them, "I have particularly endeavoured, by personal observation and inquiry, to ascertain the effect of compression on the mental manifestations, and have come to the conclusion that mere displacement of the organs is the sole effect."<sup>48</sup> The society's members hoped that when Tolmie returned to the Oregon Country he would have the opportunity to take his studies one step



*Paul Kane's Caw-Wacham painting from about 1848 depicts a woman from the Cowlitz tribe with her child in a head-shaping cradle. The Cowlitz were a small tribe during that time whose members spoke a language similar to the Chinooks' and who also flattened their heads.*

The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Purchase, William Gilman Cheney Bequest, photographer Christine Guest

further by dissecting the brain of a flathead Indian. If any such dissection took place, it was never widely published.

The U.S. Exploring Expedition sought to collect ethnographical specimens—including human remains—on behalf of the American government for the future Smithsonian Institution.<sup>49</sup> Although the museum planned to allow scholars access to the objects, the skulls would serve primarily as symbols of the strange and “savage” people encountered throughout the voyage, including in Oregon Country.

While naturalists had few qualms about stealing from the dead in the name of science, later newcomers offered up different reasons for exploring and exploiting Native burial sites. Beginning in the late 1830s, new arrivals found a dwindling Native population in Oregon, where populations had long been devastated by disease. Like their predecessors, these missionaries and settlers were fascinated by canoe burials and other forms of interment. When they saw decaying vessels and overgrown burial boxes, however, newcomers concluded that the sites had been abandoned by Natives and therefore could be freely claimed.<sup>50</sup> After visiting a burial site near where Comcomly had been interred, for example, Methodist minister George Gary recorded in his diary that “the bones of some are visible” in their decaying canoes, while Maj. Osborne Cross in 1849 encountered a series of burial boxes and found that, owing to “their dilapidated state[,] heaps of bones of all sizes and ages were lying about.”<sup>51</sup> Although Indians had abandoned some burial sites after the epidemics, many continued to actively use sites even if they were not maintained the way non-Natives imagined they should be.<sup>52</sup> Confronted with burial practices they did not fully understand, settlers sought to justify their visits to burial sites and their removal of grave goods, by suggesting that the Indians had abandoned or treated their dead carelessly.

Settlers often had difficulty viewing Indians as belonging anywhere but in the past. This perspective was frequently reflected in how they talked about Native burial sites. Jesse Quinn Thornton, like many settlers, mistakenly referred to contemporary Native burial grounds as very old. He described Mount Coffin as “an ancient burial place,” suggesting the Indian communities who interred their dead on the island were all long gone.<sup>53</sup> By arguing that Native burial sites such as Mount Coffin were no longer used or preserved, newcomers relegated Indians to the past and justified their intrusion into Native spaces.<sup>54</sup> Newcomers also looked to Native burial sites for evidence of the Indians’ cultural demise. Unlike previous visitors to the island, who viewed the burial site as either a curiosity or a place for scientific inquiry, Thornton focused on the monetary value of the grave goods. During his visit to Mount Coffin, Thornton counted the number and estimated the value of the items in a canoe belonging to the wife of a chief. The entire cost for the

finery he estimated at forty-seven beaver skins, or \$329.<sup>55</sup> Although Thornton was impressed by the value of the goods, he viewed them as wasteful, an indicator of the Indians' backward and antiquated ways that placed wealth in the arms of the dead rather than in the hands of the living. Despite the obvious temptation the goods presented, Thornton claimed that he left the riches behind. Other newcomers were not so courteous.

During a visit to The Dalles Mission, Serefitia White, accompanied by David Leslie and a few other missionaries, visited a Chinookan burial site where she found a "singular and beautifully carved war club half buried in the leaves." Although White sought to keep the grave good for herself as a souvenir of her work with the tribe, Leslie pointed out that the villagers might come after the mission party if the theft was noticed. Reluctantly, she left her prize.<sup>56</sup> Even if the Indians lacked the resources necessary to confront the thief, Leslie knew that the missionaries relied on the goodwill of Natives to keep their mission going. Stealing from a burial site was hardly the way to encourage Natives to convert to Christianity. Likewise, in a letter to her brother, the missionary Margaret Bailey described a visit to an Indian burial ground near Fort George at the mouth of the Columbia River. Bailey was entranced by the differences between Euro-American and Native burial sites; rather than "stately monuments" found in American cemeteries, she encountered burial canoes that were strange to her. Examining two bodies she found at the site, Bailey told her brother that she "had the audacity to take away some ornaments" and promised to send him the items when she had the opportunity.<sup>57</sup> For Bailey, the "ornaments" were both symbols of a dying race that she wanted to preserve and souvenirs of Oregon's past that she could share with her family in the East.

In general, Euro-Americans came to see burial sites as places where they could go to experience Natives as a dying race. In 1846, Tolbert Carter and a small group of settlers were drawn to explore Coffin Island just upriver from Mount Coffin. The captain, whom Carter labeled a "curio hunter," pointed out the largest canoe containing the remains of a chief or leader. The captain opened the canoe and discovered inside a perfectly preserved skeleton, complete with hair that was so lifelike that Carter claimed it looked freshly shampooed. For Carter, the remains seemed like a metaphor for Indians — perfectly preserved in a specific moment in time. While Carter was waxing poetic about the stately nature of the dead Indian, the captain removed all the items from the skeleton, including brass rings, coins, and buttons, which he planned to trade back to the Indians. Carter "stood amazed at the mortal remains of this once knightly chieftain, and disgusted at the sacrilege being made of his ornaments, the only history that remains of his life and former greatness," yet he did nothing to prevent the thefts.<sup>58</sup>

Carter and the captain represented two of the approaches settlers took to the treatment of Natives and their burial sites. Carter idealized the Indian, but saw him as a relic from another time to be admired and preserved. The captain saw the potential for profit by claiming the Indians' burial site for his own. Even though newcomers such as Carter and Leslie offered practical as well as moral reasons for not disturbing Native grave sites, others such as White, Bailey, and the curio hunter treated the burial sites as if they were abandoned, salvaging for their own use and profit what they believed the Indians no longer needed.

After Oregon gained territorial status in 1848, settlers quickly claimed much of the desirable land along the Columbia and Willamette rivers. Some established homesteads on the remains of burial sites, often uncovering bones, beads, and other grave goods in the process.<sup>59</sup> In the 1850s, treaties pushed many of the remaining Indians onto reservations far from their homes and burial grounds. While Indians were forced to abandon their dead, Euro-Americans largely lost interest in Native remains and burial sites. Observing one burial ground along the Columbia, Osborne Cross reflected in 1849: "Many of these skulls had been removed and scattered through the woods by persons, whose curiosity being satisfied, had dropped them where the wagon wheels had pounded them into dust."<sup>60</sup> By the mid nineteenth century, whites no longer regarded Native burial grounds as important places for scientific inquiry or as sites of curiosity. Instead, they looked to museums and institutions across the United States and Britain, relying on collections of Northwest Native remains and grave goods to inspire future research and study.

## NOTES

1. On the intermittent fever epidemic, see Robert T. Boyd, "Another Look at the 'Fever and Ague' of Western Oregon," *Ethnohistory* 22:2 (1975): 135–54. Gairdner was buried in the Kawaiahoa Church in Honolulu in the same cemetery as David Douglas. His remains have been undisturbed. A.G. Harvey, "Chief Concomly's Skull," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 40:2 (June 1939): 163–65.

2. See, for example: Gary E. Moulton, ed., *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); Ross Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: California State Library, 1941).

3. Harvey, "Chief Concomly's Skull," 166.

4. See, for example, Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 50–51; John Scouler, "Dr. John Scouler's Journal of a Voyage to N.W. America, Part III," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 6:3 (September 1905): 278; John Ball, *Autobiography of John Ball* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: The Dean-Hicks Co., 1925), 91; Charles Wilkes, *Life in Oregon Country Before the Emigration* (Ashland: Oregon Book Society, 1974), 133.

5. Lois Halliday McDonald, ed., *Fur Trade Letters of Francis Ermatinger: Written to His Brother Edward During His Service with the Hudson's Bay Company, 1818–1853* (Glendale, Calif.: A. H. Clark Co., 1980), 140.

6. Joseph Drayton, a member of the U.S. Exploring Expedition, made a wood engraving of the “tomb” in 1841. Charles Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, vol. 4 (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1845), 321; Scouler, “Dr. John Scouler’s Journal,” 276–77; John Dunn, *The Oregon Territory, and the British North American Fur Trade* (Philadelphia: G.B. Zieber & Co., 1845), 94.

7. Dunn, *Oregon Territory*, 94; Harvey, “Chief Concomly’s Skull,” 166.

8. See John Davies, *Phrenology: Fad and Science; a 19th-Century American Crusade* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955).

9. Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

10. Harvey, “Chief Concomly’s Skull,” 166.

11. T. D. Stewart, “The Chinook Sign of Freedom: A Study of the Skull of the Famous Chief Comcomly,” *Smithsonian Report for 1959* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1960), 565–66; and Robert H. Ruby and John Arthur Brown, *The Chinook Indians: Traders of the Lower Columbia River* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 196.

12. Between 1825 and 1845, Northwest coast Natives faced a series of epidemics, including malaria, smallpox, influenza, and dysentery, that reduced the population by as much as 90 percent in some places. See Robert T. Boyd, *The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence: Introduced Infectious Diseases and Population Decline among Northwest Coast Indians, 1774–1874* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999).

13. Davies, *Phrenology*, 20.

14. Colin Dickey, *Cranioklepty: Grave Robbing and the Search for Genius* (Denver: Unbridled Books, 2009), 195.

15. The passage of the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) brought to light questions about the collection and display of Indian remains, inspiring some scholars to examine where the collections came from in the first place. Most of the essays in Devon A. Mihesuah’s edited volume *Repatriation Reader* address what should be done with

the remains in institutional collections, but a few provide historical context for where skulls and skeletons originated. Robert E. Bieder, whose work focuses on representations of Indian bodies in early anthropology, offers general observations about collecting human remains, while Ann Fabian provides a detailed study of Samuel G. Morton and the field of craniology. Robert E. Bieder, “The Representations of Indian Bodies in Nineteenth-Century American Anthropology,” in Devon A. Mihesuah, ed., *Repatriation Reader: Who Owns American Indian Remains?* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 19–36; Ann Fabian, *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America’s Unburied Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

16. On Indians and the science of race, particularly as it pertains to craniology and phrenology, see William Ragan Stanton, *The Leopard’s Spots: Scientific Attitudes Toward Race in America, 1815–59* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1981); Robert E. Bieder, *Science Encounters the Indian, 1820–1880: The Early Years of American Ethnology* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), 55–103; and Fabian, *The Skull Collectors*, 47–76.

17. See, for example, Douglas Cole, *Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995).

18. Many published accounts used a standard format for reporting indigenous customs. After providing a chronological account of interactions with the Indians of a particular locale, the author would describe, in whatever detail he could, Native culture. This typically included their appearance, weapons, methods of warfare, tools, shelter, modes of transportation, religion, and rituals surrounding major life events such as birth, menstruation, marriage, and death. See, for example, Frederic William Howay, ed., *Voyages of The “Columbia” To the Northwest Coast, 1787–1790 and 1790–1793* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press in cooperation with the Massachusetts Historical Society, 1990); Robert Galois, ed., *A Voyage to*

*the North West Side of America: The Journals of James Colnett, 1786–89* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004).

19. On the types of information that can be gleaned from sites of interment, see Michael Parker Pearson, *The Archaeology of Death and Burial* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 3–20.

20. Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 1994), 3.

21. Paul Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist Among the Indians of North America: From Canada to Vancouver's Island and Oregon, Through the Hudson's Bay Company's Territory and Back Again* (Toronto: Radison Society of Canada, 1925), 139–40; Verne F. Ray, *Lower Chinook Ethnographic Notes* (University of Washington Publications in Anthropology, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1938), 75.

22. See, for example, Peter Puget, "The Vancouver Expedition: Peter Puget's Journal of the Exploration of Puget Sound May 7–June 11, 1792," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 30:2 (April 1939): 215; Samuel Parker, *Journal of an Exploring Tour Beyond the Rocky Mountains Under the Direction of the A.B.C.F.M.* (Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1967), 155; and Ray, *Lower Chinook*, 75–77.

23. Melville Jacobs, *Kalapuya Texts* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1945), 197; Ball, *Autobiography of John Ball*, 96.

24. Philip Drucker, *Northern and Central Nootkan Tribes* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology), 147.

25. See, for example, Erna Gunther, *Klallam Ethnography* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1927), 296; and John Rodgers Jewitt, *The Adventures of John Jewitt, Only Survivor of the Crew of the Ship, Boston, During a Captivity of Nearly Three Years Among the Indians of Nootka Sound, in Vancouver Island*, Robert Brown, ed. (London: C. Wilson, 1896), 175.

26. Davies, *Phrenology*, 3.

27. Jerome S. Cybulski, "Human Biology,"

in *Handbook of North American Indians: Northwest Coast*, Wayne Suttles, ed., vol. 7 (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1990), 52–53; Frederick Merk, ed., *Fur Trade and Empire: George Simpson's Journal Entitled Remarks Connected with the Fur Trade in the Course of a Voyage from York Factory to Fort George and Back to York Factory 1824–25, with Related Documents*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), 96; Scouler, "Dr. John Scouler's Journal," 306.

28. Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 47.

29. On the development of the northwest fur trade, see Richard Mackie, *Trading Beyond the Mountains: The British Fur Trade on the Pacific, 1793–1843* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997).

30. John Kirk Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey Across the Rocky Mountains to the Columbia River, and a Visit to the Sandwich Islands, Chili, &c., with a Scientific Appendix* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1999), 127–28.

31. Scouler, "Dr. John Scouler's Journal," 279–80.

32. Coffin Island, which was quarried in the early twentieth century, was located near present day Longview, Washington. Vancouver, *Voyage of Discovery*, 754, 763; and Gabriel Franchère, *Journal of a Voyage on the North West Coast of North America During the Years 1811, 1812, 1813 and 1814*, Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed. (Cleveland: A.H. Clark Co., 1904), 244.

33. Scouler, "Dr. John Scouler's Journal," 279–80; John Scouler, "Remarks on the Form of the Skull of the North American Indians," *The Zoological Journal* 4 (1828–29), 306–307.

34. Scouler, "Dr. John Scouler's Journal," 280; Pearson, *Archaeology of Death*, 11; and Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist*, 139.

35. The article included two plate drawings, one of an adult skull, the other of a child. Scouler, "Remarks on the Form of the Skull," 276–287.

36. Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey*, 131.

37. *Ibid.*, 189.

38. Quotation in Joyce, *Shaping of American Ethnography*, 21.
39. H.C. Yarrow, *Introduction to the Study of Mortuary Customs Among the North American Indians* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880), 82.
40. Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist*, 137.
41. See Boyd, *The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence*.
42. Joyce, *American Ethnography*, 17–18.
43. For a discussion of *Crania Americana*, see Fabian, *Skull Collectors*, 63–69, 79–119; and Samuel G. Morton, *Crania Americana, or, a Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America to Which Is Prefixed an Essay on the Varieties of the Human Species* (Philadelphia: J. Dobson, 1839).
44. Bieder, *Science Encounters the Indian*, 67.
45. On Northwest head shaping, see Wayne Suttles, “Introduction,” in *Handbook of North American Indians: Northwest Coast* Wayne Suttles, ed., vol. 7 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1990), 13.
46. Fabian, *Skull Collectors*, 50; and Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey*, 127.
47. Morton, *Crania Americana*, 205.
48. Author unknown, “Skulls of the Extinct Race of Peruvians: Artificial Distortion of the Head,” *Phrenological Journal and Magazine of Moral Science* 15:72 (1842): 232–36.
49. Congress received money to establish the Smithsonian Institution in the mid 1830s, but it took until 1846 for it to officially open. Cole, *Captured Heritage*, 10–11; Megan Highet, “Body Snatching & Grave Robbing: Bodies for Science,” *History and Anthropology* 16:4 (December 2005): 431.
50. See, for example, Washington Irving, *Astoria or, Anecdotes of an Enterprise Beyond the Rocky Mountains*, rev. ed. (New York: Putnam, 1851), 98–99; and Thomas Jefferson Farnham, *Travels in the Great Western Prairies: The Anahuac and Rocky Mountains and in the Oregon Territory* (London: R. Bentley, 1843), 182.
51. Charles Henry Carey, ed., “Diary of Rev. George Gary,” *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society* 24:1 (March 1923): 75; Raymond W. Settle, ed., *The March of the Mounted Riflemen: First United States Military Expedition to Travel the Full Length of the Oregon Trail from Fort Leavenworth to Fort Vancouver, May to October, 1849: As Recorded in the Journals of Major Osborne Cross and George Gibbs and the Official Report of Colonel Loring* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 264.
52. Randall H. McGuire, “The Sanctity of the Grave: White Concepts and American Indian Burial,” in Robert Layton, ed., *Conflict in the Archaeology of Living Traditions* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 175.
53. J. Quinn Thornton, *Oregon and California in 1848: With an Appendix, Including Recent and Authentic Information on the Subject of the Gold Mines of California and Other Valuable Matter of Interest to the Emigrant, Etc.*, vol. 1, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1849), 281–82.
54. On the myth of the dying or vanishing Indian, see Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); and Robert F. Berkhofer, *The White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian, from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
55. Thornton, *Oregon and California in 1848*, 281–82.
56. A.J. Allen, *Ten Years in Oregon* (Ithaca, NY: Mack, Andrus & Co. Printers, 1848), 96–97.
57. Margaret Jewett Smith Bailey, *The Grains, or, Passages in the Life of Ruth Rover, with Occasional Pictures of Oregon, Natural and Moral*, Evelyn M. Leasher and Robert J. Frank, eds. (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1986), 74.
58. Tolbert Carter, “Pioneer Days,” in *Transaction of the Thirty-Fourth Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association*, (Portland, Ore: Peaslee Bros. & Chausse Printers, 1907), 65.
59. “John Marsh Smith Letters,” MSS 325, Oregon Historical Society Research Library.
60. Settle, ed., *The March of the Mounted Riflemen*, 263–64.