**Eugenics, Melbourne University and Me**

By Gary Foley

When I decided late in life that I should take up the challenge of university studies I chose to go to Melbourne University. Some of my mates suggested that this was because I wanted to be ‘flash’ and go to a ‘flash’ uni, but the simple truth was that Melbourne uni was the closest to my home and the easiest to ride my bicycle to. I may have also been interested in the intellectual rigour that I might encounter there, but the primary reason was the short 10km bicycle ride.

At Melbourne uni in the late 1990s I settled into my studies but found myself disturbed every day by having to enter buildings that were named after people who I knew I didn’t like. The first example was the Redmond Barry Building which was named after the judge who had sentenced Ned Kelly to hang . Another was the Baldwin Spencer Building named after the anthropologist who was the first special commissioner and chief protector of Aborigines in 1912, thus beginning a long historic complicity between Australian Anthropology and the genocidal policies of the Australian state.

But probably the most offensive name on any building at University to Melbourne was on the Richard Berry Building. His name is offensive to me because Richard Berry was the Professor of Anatomy at Melbourne University from 1903 to 1929 and was a key and influential Australian advocate of the early 20th Century pseudo-science of Eugenics. These ideas would provide the rationale and justification for notorious Australian government race-based policies such as the assimilation policy, White Australia Policy and the policy of removal of Aboriginal children.

Eugenics was a collection of ideas that emerged in the wake of Charles Darwin’s publication of his theories of evolution in 1859 called *Origin of the Species.* Darwin’s cousin, Sir Francis Galton, was the first to use the term Eugenics in 1883 (derived from the Greek *Eugenes*, meaning ‘well-born’) when he began to apply Darwin’s ideas of ‘natural selection’ and ‘survival of the fittest’ to human society.

This misapplication of Darwin’s ideas led to all sorts of notions that society (meaning white-Anglo society) could be improved by encouraging breeding among ‘superior’ people (white, educated and wealthy) and the removal of inferior specimens (poor uneducated, working-class whites and Aborigines). In Australia the popularity of these ideas coincided with the great racial paranoia that swept Australia in the late 19th Century, and they were embraced enthusiastically by advocates of Federation. The result of this was that one of the first acts of the first Australian Parliament was the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*, better known as the notorious ‘White Australia Policy’.

At the time of Federation in 1901 the majority of Australians wanted overseas non-whites kept out, and they didn’t really care about the Aboriginal peoples because they were believed to be ‘dying out’. However there was grave concern at the number of “half-caste” children growing up in Aboriginal communities. This offended the sensibilities of white Australia in the early 1900s, possibly because it forced them to confront the truth that so-called ‘half-caste’ children were often the result of white men raping Aboriginal women. So rather than confront the white men involved, it was decided the solution should be that the children be removed and ‘brought up white’ in line with the policy of assimilation. Hence we end up with the ‘stolen generations’.

Other lunatic notions of the Eugenicists included sterilization of the poor and mentally deficient. In 1939 the Victorian Parliament passed a eugenics-inspired law that ‘aimed to institutionalise and potentially sterilise a significant proportion of the population – those seen as inefficient. Included in the group were slum dwellers, homosexuals, prostitutes, alcoholics, as well as those with small heads and with low IQs. The Aboriginal population was also seen to fall within this group.’ Mercifully soon after Eugenics lost its gloss when the Nazis in Germany showed what happens when these sorts of ideas get out of control.

Richard Berry was not only a key person involved in the development of eugenics in Australia, he was also one of the most prolific collectors of Aboriginal skulls and human remains in history. That many of these skulls and bodies collected by Berry were, ‘procured in unethical ways’ has been admitted by University of Melbourne when they were forced to hand over the remains of 400 people that were still retained in the Anatomy Department in 2003.

As it happens, at the time I was the *Senior Curator of Southeastern Indigenous Cultures* at Melbourne Museum. As such I presided over the hand-over of these remains, and I was shocked at the arrogance and insensitivity of the University administration in having kept these remains for so long after it had become illegal to do so under Victorian law since the early 1980s.

Over the past fifteen years various groups of Aboriginal students and academics at Melbourne University have protested and called for Richard Berry’s name to be removed from the building it adorns. The University administration has consistently ignored them. So it remains particularly irritating for me to this day to be confronted with Richard Berry’s name every time I visit Melbourne University. And that must also be the case for those Aboriginal students who these days attend Melbourne University and who know anything at all about their own history.

**Gary Foley**

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