

The racist professor, the bones and a university naming row

27 March 2017



Richard Berry Building has been rebranded to a less controversial figure

After years of protest, the University of Melbourne has removed the name of a controversial professor from one of its key buildings. It draws a line under an unsavoury past, writes Elissa Doherty in Melbourne.

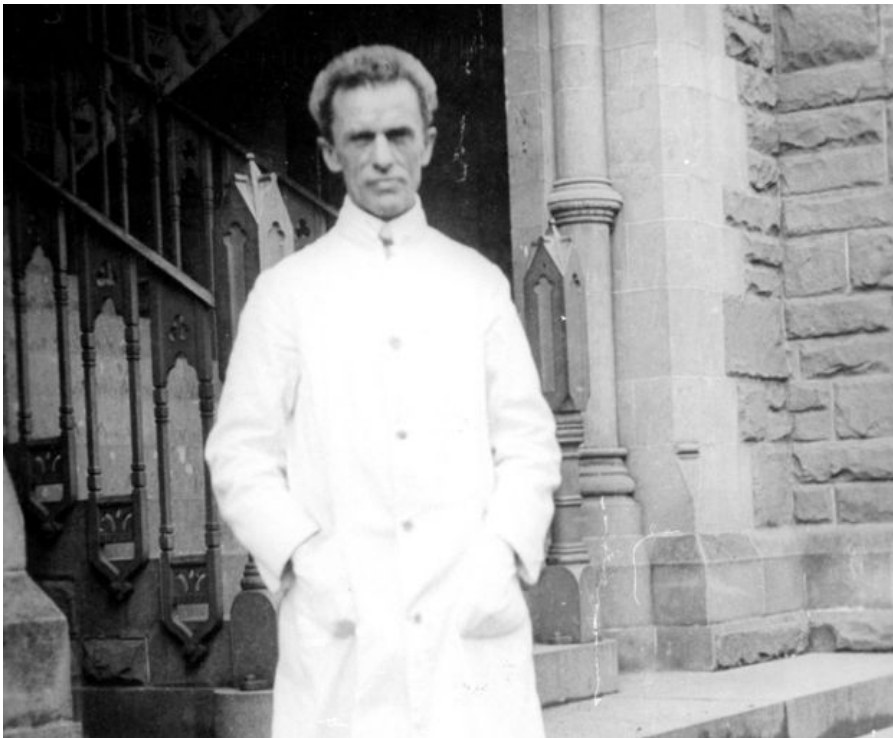
They are the skeletons in the closet of the world's most prestigious universities: buildings and statues still bearing the names of racist professors.

In Australia's case, those skeletons were literally found in an anatomy department storeroom.

Staff at the University of Melbourne in 2003 unearthed the bones and skulls of hundreds of people, many of them indigenous and stolen from traditional graves.

It was a ghoulish symbol of the racist practices of the once-lauded Professor Richard Berry, an anatomy professor at the university from 1906 to 1929 who strove to prove Aboriginal people were not as smart as white people.

The English-born academic was one of the most influential flag bearers of the eugenics movement - using genetics to ostensibly "improve" mankind - which was later appropriated by Nazi Germany.



Prof Berry's views have been condemned in modern times



An article about "crime and degeneracy" written by Prof Berry in 1924

He wanted to segregate and sterilise those who he felt had defective genes and even advocated a "lethal chamber" for the extinction of what he called "the grosser types of

our mental defectives" in a 1930 letter to a British journal, reported local newspaper *The Age*.

The dusty skeletal remains, dubbed the Berry Collection, reflected his obsession for measuring skulls to find a correlation between head and brain size, and intelligence.

But he preferred testing real people and measured thousands of "live" heads in his time - public and private schoolchildren, indigenous people, slum-dwellers, prostitutes, the mentally ill and those with disabilities - to support his theories. He died in 1962, aged 95.

The unsavoury chapter of the university's history has resurfaced following a campaign by staff and students to have his name removed from the former anatomy building.

It's just one example in a global push for universities and colleges to sever ties to racism, slavery and supremacy - and in this case it was successful.

The esteemed sandstone university - Australia's second oldest - recently renamed the Richard Berry Building, Department of Mathematics and Statistics, to honour a less controversial figure after more than a decade of protest.

Dr Ross Jones, a historian at the University of Sydney, said Prof Berry, a former dean of medicine, even argued in 1934 that 25% of the population should be sterilised to obliterate mental deficiency.

The extreme views were indicative of many at the time as eugenics gained a foothold among global movers and shakers in the early 20th Century, Dr Jones said.

"You can't defend his views but he represented the views of the white middle class back then," he told the BBC.

"Finding the bones he had collected wasn't necessarily the issue - he was an anthropologist and many museums and universities have boxes of bones that have been used for scientific pursuits. It was the views that he held that were the problem."

Dr Jones said Prof Berry was highly respected in the state of Victoria last century, with his theories espoused in newspaper columns on a weekly basis and proving influential to politicians.

While many have praised the building's changing of the guard, others like Dr Jones say history shouldn't be censored.

Instead, he believes a plaque should be erected to outline both the good and the bad of the professor's legacy to ensure it isn't forgotten.

In a piece on the website *The Conversation*, Dr Jones wrote that the Eugenics Society of Victoria was started by a who's who of Melbourne society, and continued until 1961.

"Although Melbourne may wish to forget its dark past, the powerful leaders of the eugenics movement once controlled the city, and their beliefs influenced a generation," he wrote.

'Slow progress'

One of the university's student agitators, Tyson Holloway-Clarke, said the institution's powers-that-be had dragged their feet.

"It's been slow progress but this is a demonstration that the university understands," he told *The Age*.

Other buildings remain with the names of eugenicists, but while the University of Melbourne said there were no plans to rename other buildings, it acknowledged there was a need for a review.

"The Berry Building was renamed in response to the death in 2016 of Peter Hall, a prolific and world-renowned mathematician and statistician," said spokesman David Scott in a statement to the BBC.

"While the building had previously housed the Department of Anatomy, it has been home to the School of Mathematics and Statistics for a number of years, the School where Professor Hall completed his internationally-recognised work. Therefore it was appropriate to name the building to reflect its current usage."