MÜTTER MUS. OF THE COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS OF PHILADELPHIA

Bones from the US Civil War, on display at the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

MUSEUMS

Ethics of exhibition

David Hurst Thomas explores the controversies over collections of human remains and plundered artefacts.

Three months before the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, anthropologist Margaret Mead published a prescient piece in *Natural History* entitled 'Museums in the Emergency'. Mead found the US citizenry "suspicious of every means of communication" — except museums. She attributed this remarkable faith to the museum practice of asking, "Is this true?" rather than, "Will this make a hit?" A stubborn insistence on truth, Mead believed, could keep the museum as "a place in which [people] can renew their trust in science and in democracy".

Two books look at truth and trust in the museum world. In *Bone Rooms*, historian Samuel Redman tracks the evolving role of collections of human remains and their public display in framing issues of race. Cultural sociologist Tiffany Jenkins crafts a spirited read in *Keeping their Marbles*, with much to offer regarding the genesis of the world's great museum collections. She transports the reader from the Napoleonic campaigns that stocked the Louvre in Paris with Egyptian treasures to British imperialists funnelling global booty to London's British Museum. Many countries now want their treasures back; Nigeria, for instance, wants the return of its bronzes, taken when the British Army flattened the then-kingdom of Benin in the late nineteenth century. Both books explore the question of who owns the past, with remarkably different answers. *Keeping their Marbles* advocates maintaining the finders-keepers mentality that created the museum collections. *Bone Rooms* argues that human remains were sometimes inappropriately acquired in the name of science, and that meaningful steps must be taken to redress the balance.

Redman documents the US 'skull wars' of the late nineteenth century, when museums competed to collect human skulls, whole skeletons, mummies and fossils. Battlefield casualties became fair game, as did archaeological sites, Native American cemeteries and indigenous people unfortunate enough to pass away at a World's Fair. Even isolated body parts were accessioned, as bizarrely illustrated by the Civil War veteran who found his own amputated arm in the Army Medical Museum in Washington DC.

Bone Rooms: From Scientific Racism to Human Prehistory in Museums
SAMUEL J. REDMAN
Harvard University Press: 2016.

Keeping Their Marbles: How the Treasures of the Past Ended Up in Museums and Why They Should Stay There
TIFFANY JENKINS
Oxford University Press: 2016.

Bone Rooms details the nascent views of racial science that evolved in US natural history, anthropological and medical museums. These debates spilled into public museum spaces, arraying human bodies in sometimes controversial, even macabre, exhibits. Redman effectively portrays the remarkable personalities behind them, particularly pitting the prickly Aleš Hrdlička at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC against ally-turned-rival Franz Boas at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Debates over racial science should have evaporated when Boas conclusively demonstrated that language, culture and biology ('race') are independent — the premise of modern anthropology. But the myth of scientific racism (typically involving questionable concepts such as 'racial essence' and 'racial genius') persisted for a century more, due in part to Hrdlička's powerful influence over widely attended exhibitions that promoted the now-discredited idea that races are immutable, with evolutionary change transpiring only within (not between) human races.

Bone Rooms also highlights ethical concerns over collecting, curating and exhibiting human remains that simmered in the 1930s and boiled over after the Vietnam War. Native Americans increasingly expressed shock at the tens of thousands of ancestral skeletons appropriated without their permission or, usually, knowledge. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 required museums to inventory holdings of human remains (plus potential sacred, patrimonial and funerary artefacts), then to consult tribes about cultural affiliations and time and manner of repatriation. Although most human remains stayed in storage, tens of thousands were repatriated. A few hotly disputed cases linger on, including Kennewick Man (an 8,400-year-old skeleton now held in limbo at the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture in Seattle, Washington). Redman concludes (correctly, in my view) that, on balance, repatriation programmes are "successful steps forward".

Keeping their Marbles views museum truth and trust differently. Jenkins does an excellent

job of portraying the extreme reactions elicited by repatriation conversations — from the smug 'we-stole-it-fair-and-square' to the angst parodied by historian Elazar Barkan as 'performance guilt' (in which "leaders theatrically say sorry for acts from the past for which they had no responsibility"). Although granting that great museum collections "were wrenched from their original contexts by means that often amounted to theft", Jenkins bristles at returning items. Rather, she stresses three principles — preservation, truth and access — that determine what is best for objects, scholars and the public. "The mission of museums," she argues, "should be to acquire, conserve, research, and display their collections … That is all and that is enough."

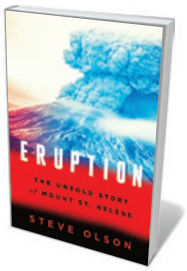
I don't believe that is enough — particularly with respect to human remains. As a practising dirt archaeologist, I still on occasion excavate human burials. As a museum curator, I sometimes exhibit human remains. But as a museum-based researcher, I acknowledge my responsibilities to consult meaningfully with relevant descendant and stakeholding communities — and listen to what they say. Jenkins is correct that repatriation will render some human remains unavailable for research. The public display of certain human remains is likewise often inappropriate. These are limitations that many of us accept today.

The alternative — the free-ranging, science-*über-alles* mentality articulated in *Keeping Their Marbles* — reprises the cavalier attitudes towards communities of descendants that characterized Americanist archaeology for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That sordid legacy, which necessitated reburial and repatriation legislation in the first place, seems particularly inappropriate for the responsible practice of twenty-first-century science. What of Margaret Mead's belief in modern truth and trust? Today's headlines target different 'Museums in the Emergency', from the systematic looting of the National Museum in Baghdad to the Islamist terrorist group ISIS taking sledgehammers to Syrian antiquities. The prominent Syrian scholar Khaled al-Asaad was beheaded by ISIS for refusing to disclose where ancient treasures from Palmyra had been hidden for safe keeping. The right of museums to hold and display collections is today contested at every turn.

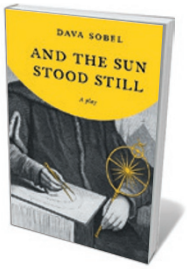
Modern museums have multiple meanings, objectives and constituencies. But one thing is certain: nowhere is there now a museum where all people "can renew their trust in science and in democracy". No matter where the Parthenon Marbles end up, that museum world has become an artefact of the past. ■

David Hurst Thomas *is a curator of anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History, New York City.*
e-mail: thomasd@amnh.org

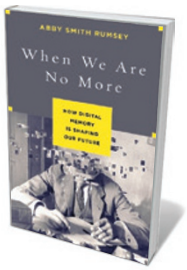
Books in brief



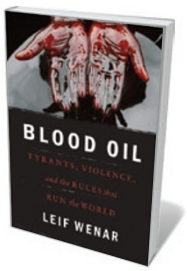
Eruption: The Untold Story of Mount St. Helens
Steve Olson W. W. Norton *(2016)*
When Mount St Helens in Washington state erupted in 1980, it woke the nation from political and economic torpor. The huge sideways blast — a pyroclastic flow — killed 57, triggered the largest landslide ever recorded and spewed ash over 11 states and several Canadian provinces. Steve Olson intercuts stories of victims including David Johnston, the volcanologist who was monitoring the explosion, with an account of its impact on science — such as popularizing the use of lidar. With 1,500 potentially active volcanoes worldwide, this is an urgent reminder of the need for advances in the field.



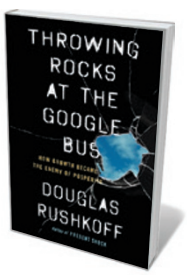
And the Sun Stood Still: A Play
Dava Sobel Bloomsbury *(2016)*
The centrepiece of science writer Dava Sobel's acclaimed 2011 history *A More Perfect Heaven* (Bloomsbury) is a dramatized telling of a crucial meeting: the 1539 encounter between Nicolaus Copernicus and German mathematician Georg Joachim Rheticus, who would broker the publication of the Polish astronomer's great treatise on heliocentrism, *De Revolutionibus*. Now reworked as a play, Sobel's imaginative exploration of how Rheticus convinced the "starry canon" to air his theory is a revelation of world-shifting science illuminating the human mind, leavened with a sparkling immediacy.



When We Are No More: How Digital Memory Is Shaping Our Future
Abby Smith Rumsey Bloomsbury *(2016)*
A door is opening on a frightening prospect: the future of history. So notes scholar Abby Smith Rumsey in this erudite treatise on how the digitization of archival technology makes it all too easy to rewrite our cultural past. She analyses our journey in recorded memory, interweaving neuroscience with a history of the archive, and ranging from classical mnemonic devices to the collective amnesia that can follow the destruction of libraries. Books, she shows, are "memory machines" that we have learned to manage. Digitized data *in toto* is a different beast — and one bucking under our attempts at control.



Blood Oil: Tyrants, Violence, and the Rules That Run the World
Leif Wenar Oxford University Press *(2016)*
Petroleum is truly globalized. But for exporting countries such as Nigeria, high-demand raw materials can be a "resource curse", linked to political corruption and socio-economic inequality (see J. Vidal *Nature* **482,** 306; 2012). In this straight-talking manifesto, philosopher Leif Wenar draws on economics and political science to call for a rethink on global supply chains. Clean trade policies to protect public property and accountability are needed, he argues, if poorer nations are to achieve resource sovereignty and Western importers are to stop buying blindly into oppressive regimes.



Throwing Rocks at the Google Bus
Douglas Rushkoff Portfolio *(2016)*
Technology writer Douglas Rushkoff delivers an incisive analysis of digitized culture in this shrewd study of the economic rot at its heart. Issues such as the corporate growth model and "platform" monopolies are, he shows, threatening the public good. He suggests that the rage of protestors who attacked shuttle buses carrying Google employees in 2013 would be better channelled into "digital distributism" — an economy that hinges on democratic ownership of the means of production, cooperatives and genuine sharing. **Barbara Kiser**