BOOK REVIEW:
KEEPING THEIR MARBLES: HOW THE TREASURES OF THE PAST ENDED UP IN MUSEUMS—AND WHY THEY SHOULD STAY THERE

by Tiffany Jenkins
Oxford University Press, 2016

Reviewed by Kathy Bowrey

This is an opportunistic and dangerous book, which rides on the back of advocacy by First Nations Peoples (and other Nations) for the return of stolen cultural property and human remains. It is worth taking seriously because it has reached a wide audience, in particular due to support by The Guardian newspaper in publicising the book internationally.

The book is designed to put pressure on those misguided people working in museums that are sympathetic to repatriation.

Indigenous peoples are a marginal concern; however, like the Greeks, they are treated as having lost their marbles in a very particular sense. The pun appears to be non-ironic. With respect to Indigenous peoples of Hawaii, the Pacific Islands, New Zealand and Australia, Jenkins argues:

if we are to understand those cultures and how they lived, then their material culture—their objects of everyday use, ritual objects, weapons and items of adornment—is important research material . . . We can study these objects in conjunction with the traveller’s journals, which describe the behaviour, appearance and customs of the native people together with their material culture.1

Indigenous peoples are not recognised as surviving, nor their cultures as living. Their knowledge is treated as tainted by colonisation. She discounts appeals to cultural authority and ownership out of hand, reconstructing sovereign people as ‘ethnic groups’ wanting to control the stories of their objects for ‘therapeutic’ reasons and to perpetuate victimhood for personal gain.2 For a book ostensibly about cultural understanding, there is no recognition that the creative energy that builds strong identities is linked to the conditions of knowledge creation and circulation. There is no appreciation of memory, the ephemeral, the spiritual, or of mystery. Culture and identity are addressed in extraordinarily reductionist terms, both preferably mediated through institutional expertise associated with western knowledge systems.

Throughout the book there is a conflation of sovereignty with nationhood. The great collecting projects are considered to have ended in the 18th and 19th centuries and are always discussed in terms of benevolence, philanthropy and abstract appeals to serving the public good. There is no appreciation that the entire globe was terra nullius, that the justness of any particular transaction
between nations and peoples should not be simplistically
determined by reference to British law or practice, also completely
discounting contemporary international law as a legitimate source
of authority. In the Australian context, there is no actual mention of
empire, military ambitions or land wars. Bizarrely, Lieutenant James
Cook, Sir Joseph Banks and natural historian Daniel Solander are
referred to collectively as ‘travellers’. Cook’s mission is described as
star gazing (viewing the Transit of Venus), without any apparent
awareness of his Secret Instructions to the Honour of the Nation
as a Maritime Power . . . with the Consent of the Natives to take
Possession of the Great Southern land. 2

At a time when, in Australia, there are calls for appropriate monuments to recognise Aboriginal peoples claimed by the
Frontier wars and killed in other human rights atrocities committed
in the name of the British Crown, and when the language of
discovery is widely discredited in Australian schools and universities,
Jenkins is seriously misrepresenting the history of her own nation,
at least as that is commonly understood in this former colony. Her
writing conjures imagery of J M Barrie’s Peter Pan (1902)—shiploads of
cheeky, innocent, young men on a voyage of self-discovery
across the seas—as well as Lost Horizon (1937)—Frank Capra’s
science-fiction romantic drama based on the James Hilton novel
of the same name (1933) about the mysterious civilisation that
survived outside of modern time in Shangri-La, except that the
Hawaiians had the temerity to kill Cook, who is instead described
by Jenkins here mainly in terms of his personal qualities such as
friendliness. 4

It would take a long time to dwell on what is problematic in each
chapter. Jenkins’ argument is not original and it is thinly researched.
On repatriation, for instance, every time there is a mention of
NAGPRA and the ‘identity museums’ in the United States, it is always
followed by several paragraphs decrying changes in Australian
practices of respecting Indigenous community views—even though there is no law; 3 then one or two paragraphs noting similar
practices at Te Papa; nothing about Canada. The flow here matters.
She is trying to set up an historical leap, from the Parthenon marbles
to ‘museum wars’ in Peru, Egypt and Turkey, to Indigenous claims for
repatriation in order to demonstrate the momentum of museums
across the world having ‘gone mad’. 5

This is a work designed to court controversy without concern for
causing offence, and as such, it needs to be handled with care. But
there is also a positive story to be told about Jenkins’ motivation
and why this work is considered worth talking about in the press.
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has been recognised that mausoleums, such as the British Museum,
are stuffed to the brim with other people’s and nations’ art, cultural
objects and human remains. Through successful advocacy, some of
this ‘bounty’ is being repatriated and now, whenever these objects
are exhibited, there are embarrassing protests that get sympathetic
mainstream media coverage, and offend exhibition sponsors, most
recently the British Museum’s BP-sponsored indigenous Australia:
Enduring Civilisation exhibition (2015) and the related National
Museum of Australia’s Encounters exhibition (2016). There is still a lot
to be done to repatriate First Nations cultural property and human
remains. And it remains a long, drawn-out and difficult path that
requires ongoing vigilance and attentiveness. But Jenkins’ book is
a reminder that these efforts have met with considerable success,
and while pressure needs to be kept on the institutional keepers
in Australia and beyond, it is interesting to observe that the tide
is shifting and there is little Jenkins and any of her sympathetic
readers can do about it.

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1 Tiffany Jenkins, Keeping their Marbles: How the treasure of the
past ended up in museums (Oxford University Press, 2016) 25.
2 Ibid 284.
3 National Library of Australia, Secret Instructions to Lieutenant
James Cook Appointed to Command His Majesty’s Bark the
Endeavour (30 June 1768) Museum of Australian Democracy
4 Jenkins, above n 1, 32.
5 Ibid 302.