William Lanne died of “choleraic diarrhoea” in Hobart, Tasmania, on March 3rd 1869 (HM 4.3.69) and his body was removed to the dead house of General Hospital the same evening (HM 20.4.69).

Dr William L. Crowther (Honorary Medical Officer of the General Hospital) had been trying for some time to acquire the skeleton of a Tasmanian Aborigine named William Flower, Conservator of the Royal College of Surgeons of England. He had previously asked permission of another Officer of the General Hospital to send the skeleton to Dry, as did the Royal Society. Dry, faced with two applications and mindful that the Royal Society had claimed the previous Tasmanian skeleton, asked J.W. Agnew, Secretary of the Royal Society, to waive his claim in favour. This Agnew flatly refused, writing that the Society’s right to Lanne’s body was “altogether paramount to that of any other scientific institution in the world” (HM 193.1869).

Dry conceded to the Royal Society but promised not hindrance of any future opportunity to the Secretary of the Royal College of Surgeons of England for the securing of a skeleton for the Society of the graves of the Tasmanian horigincs without violating the feelings of individuals or of the community” (HM 8.2.1869).

Suspecting trouble, Dry gave strict orders to Dr Stockell, Surgeon of the General Hospital and leading member of the Royal Society of Tasmania, that Lanne’s body should be protected from mutilation (HM 27.3.1869) and instructed a Hospital Messenger, James Ware, to guard and protect Lanne, and informed Charles Seager, the House Steward of the Colonial Secretary’s orders (HM 13.3.1869).

It was widely assumed throughout Hobart that Lanne would be given a decent burial and that, at some time in the future, his “so valuable skeleton would not be dug up with decency, for preservation at the museum of the Royal Society” (HM 8.3.1869) at about 4 o’clock on Friday, March 5th, Stockell met Crowther in the street and telling him that Stockell, Crowther and telling Lanne’s body, to respond by informing him of the Colonial Secretary’s orders, he said he wanted that body, to have it. Stockell answered that the Colonial Secretary had promised Lanne to him long ago and repeated that be
would have the body, and might dig it up after burial. can have told hip the Royal Society had the best claim to it, to which pov a fool to keep it in paltry like Tasmania, when it to be sent to a place like London” (133.69). then parted, that Stockell would take take with between 7 and evening. Stockell then returned to the Hospital dead where was lying unharmed, before returning home.

At approximately 7 o’clock the same evening, Alfred William Crowther, arrived at the Hospital. They took a key from the and was seen by him and by James sent to guard entering A few later, for Williams, the at the asked him to find the Hospital into the morgue on his own account, stayed for while he helped Dr Crowther a white man’s . He also stated no time had he seen the near body. James however, testified that Sughrove had remained in the morgue for length of time as had the . Further, Williams stated that he had looked through the key hole in the morgue and Dr Crowther, his son, and the barber leaning over a body, although he could be sure whether the body was of Lanne or was that of a schoolmaster named Ross.

Dr Crowther and his son were seen leaving the house empty at about 7.30 p.m. Ware and Ware testified that was also empty handed.

Meanwhile, Stockell had arrived house was not there and had left no message. Although Stockell that he would at any minute. After writing for half Stockell left house and, suspecting the worst, made his Hospital. Being informed by the that Crowther had him, Stockell hastened to the dead house, arriving there fetched the key and a candle from Mr Seager. entered the went straight to Lanne’s body, where it was immediately evident that the head had been tampered with. There a blood on the and quickly ascertained that a slit had been made in his skull extracted, and that of another man placed inside. Having removed the substituted skull, Stockell established that it a white man. whose body now lay headless in the ‘adjoining dissecting An angry Stockell then replaced the white man’s skull in made an unsuccessful search of the building for the skull before locking the morgue and returning home.
At about 10.30 that same night Williams, looking from a ward window, accompanied by his son, leaving the hospital grounds with something under his arm. According to Williams, a greengrocer reported seeing a movement in the creek at the back of the hospital during the previous night. It would have been easy to throw anything over the back of the hospital, commonly believed to a confederate Stationed in the creek, and it that this was the method by which the had away the Seagcr's coffin bad been carried down the one of burial was not altogether a ‘vain royal Stockell requested the body of Lanne's secreted in the creek, and it was subsequently secreted in the hospital.

The following morning (Saturday 6th March) Stockell communicated actions to J. W. Agnew and Morton (a leading member of Tasmania, who was later to become a major supplier of skeletons to Europe-providing two to the Royal College of Surgeons of England [including the skeleton of Clark, one of the last surviving “pure-blooded” Tasmanians], one to the private collection of Davis in London, one to the Anthropological Society Of London and one to the Royal Museum in Brussels). Agnew and Allport, fearing that Crowther would endeavour to take the whole skeleton, requested that Stockell secure Lanne's hands and feet for the Royal Society, which he did in the presence of Mr. Graves. In his 

stated that after the removal of the head “can the removal of the feet and hands be regarded as the slightest consequence? If a barbarian is it blameworthy if some of the fragments are removed. Is it blameworthy if they are removed.

Rumours had already spread that Lanne’s body had been mutilated, and a number of gentlemen requested that his coffin should be opened in order to satisfy their minds that the ceremony of burial was not altogether a ‘vain show’ (HM 8.3.1869). Inspection seems to have satisfied the gentlemen present, and the coffin was screwed and sealed. It was draped with a black opossum skin rug, upon which was wrapped in a Union Jack, and then carried into St David’s Churchyard by four of Lanne’s friends, followed by over 100 mourners.

After the coffin had been buried, Dry gave orders that a police watch should be placed over these orders were not carried out. George Stockell substituted skull in the coffin rod, and proper burial not carried out. Later, Crowther's body, left the cemetery in a “perfectly decent order” (HM 12.3.1869).
their prize. left the grave empty, with part of the coffin visible. a skull lying (HM 8.3.1869). On the surface and the surrounding ground “saturated with blood” 8.3.1869).

Next day the news that Lanne’s body had been taken spread across the town, and several hundred people, including Sir Richard Dry and the Attorney General, Mr Dobson, gathered at the cemetery (HM 8.3.1869). According to HM (8.3.1869) “had the actual coffin been removed” a search would have been issued as the instance, as executors of ‘Billy Lanne’s, with the warrant instructions in the event of any portions of his body being found of should be taken possession of”. However, it is doubtful whether legal properly in the body exists” (HM 8.3.1869).

Following a Ministerial Enquiry conducted by the Colonial Secretary with the Attorney General and Treasurer present, Dr Crowther was suspended as Honorary Medical Officer and, subsequently, was suspended as a pupil of the hospital (HM 9.3.1869).

Meanwhile, Crowther and Charles Scagcr had been trying to trace Lanne’s body. According to an advertisement (entitled “Et tu, Brute”) placed by Crowther in HM (12.3.1869), Crowther had been informed (on March 7th) that a wheelbarrow, containing a sack filled with “something heavy”, had been seen night before the grave of the cemetery. This was corroborated by Williams’ evidence (1X69), which records that Stockell and the Hospital Gardener had wheeled a wheelbarrow into the Hospital yard covered with blood. Crowther surmised that Lanne had been secreted in a barrow in a disused room of the old Hospital back of the General Hospital, and had followed a trail of blood which led to an old disused room. A man employed in the Hospital yard told Crowther that Lanne’s body had indeed been taken to the disused room where it had been worked upon during the Sunday. Crowther was also told by an eye witness that Stockell had been working in this room most of Sunday on “removing the flesh and sending it away” (HM 12.3.1X69). Williams records seeing Stockell and a number of others up Lanne that night in a morgue (whether in a disused morgue in the Hospital or in the General Hospital is not stated). When asked the door should be opened, he was told that the key could not be found.

Later the same day Crowther returned to the scene accompanied by his son, the police superintendent and a detective. After forcing his way past the Hospital gate Crowther arrived at the same locked door, where he confronted by Stockell, who denied him access. Crowther then broke
Lanne's skeleton was not the men "there discovered a charnel house; and the mould were all over the floor and a table" (HM 12.3.1869). According to Williams, Stockell removed the remains of Lanne's body to a mess room window and subsequently what remained of the skeleton, was placed in a casket which was buried in the old Cemetery.

A further enquiry into the mutilation of Lanne's body (HM 13.3.1869) sat for two days but both Crowther and his son refused to attend, on the grounds that they had not been requested. The enquiry was terminated when requests for the scope of the commission to be enlarged were refused (HM 17.3.1869).

Stockell was acquitted (HM 16.3.1869).

Publucity was because the treatment of the body of the "last" male Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal bodies were treated in the same way, and were subjected to the publicly hated practice of dissection (HM 12.3.1869).

What happened to Lanne's remains? William Lanne's pouch made from his skin, while his hands and feet were received in the Royal Society of Tasmania, the Royal Society of London, and the W.L. Crowther collection in the Tasmanian Museum "articulated left hand", "partly dissected hand" and "articulated right hand", and claims of Abbie (1964: 55).

Abbie cites Williams (1869) as proof that there are no records of the receipt of the remains of Lanne's skeleton, although in this letter Allport told the Royal Society, although in Allport's Museum (letter of W.H. to Flowe 12.1871). If Williams (1869) is correct, at least some of Lanne's remains were buried in a casket in Campbell Street Cemetery.
Allport believed that Lanne's skull was in the hands of Crowther's son in England (letter from Allport to Basil Field 11.7.1872). While Ellis quotes (1981: 140) Agnew as proof that the skull bad been received by Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons of England. However, Allport does not state that the skull was so received, merely that the skull “forwarded” to the College (Agnew 1888: 479). Moreover, Fred (as to Charles) Seager was interviewed in 1912, and claimed to have helped Stockell in “forwarding” Lanne’s skull, and that Lanne’s skull was done so by “Mr. Crowther” at the Royal College. Ellis (1981:153) accordingly cites Turner’s description (1908: 27, no: xxx.2), as follows: “...but the packing had been a seal’s skeleton, sent it to Flower...” and “it was believed [that Lanne’s skull] was thrown overboard during the voyage” (Ellis 1981:153).

Certainly, Lanne’s skull is not among the Royal College of Surgeons (1880) or the second edition of Tasmanian Aborigines” that W.L. Crowther’s grandson, Sir William Crowther (Crowther 1912 in Lowndes 1981:173), never gave these remains to the Royal College.

Ellis (1981: 153) also quotes (1908: 366) of a skull at the Edinburgh University Anatomy Department (catalogue number: 366) of a skull held in a collection of the Royal Society of Tasmania in 1907. However, “either are the “certain odd of the last of the aborigines” and indeed possibly that d William Lanne, the last male to survive” (Turner 1908: 366). However, the original record for the skull (see next section, below) does not provide conclusive proof of its identity and, much more recently, W.W. Howells identified this same male skull as “a female (Howells 1989: 97).

It is clear that 163 years after his death, and the subsequent mutilation of his body, the location of William Lanne’s remains are still “ot certain see the following section). As remarked by H.M. Lowndes .3.1869, “Whether [Lanne’s] skeleton] will be brought together again in this world s which remains to be solved”.

References and Further Reading


Ellis, V.R. 1981 *Trucanini* Queen or Traitor? Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

W.H. 1870. *Flower, Catalogue of the Specimens in the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons*

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