

# A theory out of the darkness

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Dr Ross Jones...shocked at what he unearthed. *Photo: Eddie Jim*

ROSS Jones loves to scour through piles of long-forgotten papers stored in musty archives. He never knows what secrets he might dig up.

"It's the best fun," he says. "You discover wonderful documents and you go, 'Yes, that's it. Wow, look at this.' When you see a letter, a name, you think, 'this is bigger than I thought'."

And sometimes he is simply shocked, such as when he stumbled upon the uncomfortable details about the promotion of eugenics and racial science in Melbourne in the first half of the 20th century.

Eugenics, based on theories to improve the genetic characteristics of humans, underpinned the Nazi philosophy that led to the Holocaust. Many eugenicists advocated that criminals and people with low IQs should be stopped from having children.

But the important role Melbourne University and the city's academic, social and political elite played in the movement has largely gone unnoticed. Dr Jones, an Australian Research Council postdoctoral fellow at the University of Sydney, says this is because it is hardly mentioned in the official histories of the university.

"They (Melburnians) would be surprised that it was so entrenched and that there was no opposition," Dr Jones says. "I was surprised there was no mention of it in biographies."

One explanation, he says, is that there was a conscious cover up. "The whole thing became taboo after World War II."

At the forefront of the eugenics movement in Melbourne was a renowned professor of anatomy, Richard Berry, who in the 1920s measured people's heads in pursuit of a theory that a small head indicated that a person had low intelligence. White, educated people were the smartest, according to Professor Berry; the poor, criminals and Aborigines the least so. He claimed Ned Kelly was a "mental defective" because his brain size was that of a 14-year-old.

Berry favoured the establishment of a "lethal chamber" to euthanise what he called "the grosser types of our mental defectives".

According to Dr Jones, the Eugenics Society of Victoria was "an offspring of the University of Melbourne". Many members of the society, which ran from 1936 to 1961, were academics at the university, including Sir John Medley, a vice-chancellor. The university's "new" arts building is named after him.

Berry, professor of anatomy at Melbourne between 1906 and 1929, was responsible for the construction of a new anatomy building, which now houses the university's maths and statistics department, and still bears his name.

Berry also collected Aboriginal ancestral remains, which became known as the Berry collection. In 2003, Melbourne University apologised for the "hurt and understandable indignation felt by indigenous Australians" after the collection - which included the bones and skulls of about 400 people, mostly Aborigines - was found locked in an anatomy department storeroom.

Dr Jones says there were other influential eugenicists who made Melbourne a focus for the movement.

"I'd be happy to put my head on the block and argue with any historians that Melbourne was the centre of eugenics in Australia," he says.

According to Dr Jones, the eugenics society's surviving subscription lists read like a who's who of the academic, judicial, scientific and educational elite of Melbourne society. Names include Sir Keith Murdoch, Sir David Rivett, a former chief executive of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, later renamed the CSIRO, and Reverend G. K. Tucker, founder of the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

But Dr Jones says that details about prominent people supporting eugenics have often been ignored or suppressed, due to sensitivities about the Holocaust. He says biographies about Kenneth Cunningham, a long-term president of the eugenics society, do not mention his membership, or if they do it's "just in passing".

Cunningham was founding director of the Australian Council for Educational Research, which was set up in 1930 to measure intelligence and still operates. "He (Cunningham) was a very headline eugenicist," Dr Jones says. "He believed in sterilisation. He was one of the inner circle."

Dr Jones hopes to publish his research about eugenics in Melbourne, which he began during his PhD studies at Monash University. He says knowing about people's involvement in eugenics is important because it helps us understand the influence they had on Victorian social and education policy. Their influence, he says, can still be felt.

Dr Jones, a former secondary teacher, argues that Victoria's first director of education, Frank Tate, a eugenicist, adopted many of Berry's ideas. Tate supported a multi-streamed system of secondary education in which students at the age of 12 would be funnelled into vocational or academic schools.

In Victoria, a system of technical schools was established mainly in the northern and western suburbs in the 1920s. This was because Tate believed that the working class was genetically fit for a vocational education, but not an academic one. As his friend Berry said, "You can't put a brain where there isn't one."

In New South Wales, where the head of education was anti-eugenicist, many more students attended state high schools than in Victoria in the 1920s and '30s.

The Victorian system, according to Dr Jones, was "unique in stressing the 'eugenic' fitness of students for secondary school".

Why were prominent people involved in eugenics? Dr Jones says that a lot of people were "caught up in the times" and the theories were seen as "modern". Newspapers, including *The Age* and *The Herald*, supported eugenics. "It was, if you like, the political correctness of the time," he says.

It can be dangerous, he argues, for people living in the 21st century to cast stones at those from the past. "But this doesn't mean that you can't make moral judgments and say people were wrong."

Unpalatable attitudes and practices, he says, can only change if they are discussed in mature and sensible ways.

Dr Jones says the current attitude of Melbourne University's anatomy department, where he taught the history of medicine and is now an honorary senior fellow, is one of openness. It wants "no more hiding" from the fact that Aboriginal ancestral remains were collected and that cadavers were once procured in unethical ways. "They have a regime of ethical oversight," says Dr Jones, who wrote the department's history.

He believes other lessons can be learnt from looking at the history of bodies and eugenics. "It informs current debate about the use of human tissue and the human genome project," he says. "This is all tied to the early history of the eugenics debate. It's the early history of the modern debate about the genome, and that's about how people can be typed physically. In the past it was about head size, now it's about your genetic make-up."

"The story of eugenics needs to be remembered."

Dr Jones and his colleague Professor Warwick Anderson of Sydney University are examining the influence of Australian scientists on racial ideas in the northern hemisphere.

One of those scientists is Frederic Wood Jones, who succeeded Berry as professor of anatomy. He was highly critical of eugenics and dismissed Berry's idea of linking intelligence to head size.

Wood Jones rejected Berry's view that Aborigines were inferior. Other Australian scientists also rejected eugenics. "They undermined the Nazi idea that physical things define race and worth," Dr Jones says. "These anatomists were really important people informing modern views of race and identity in the civilised sense."

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