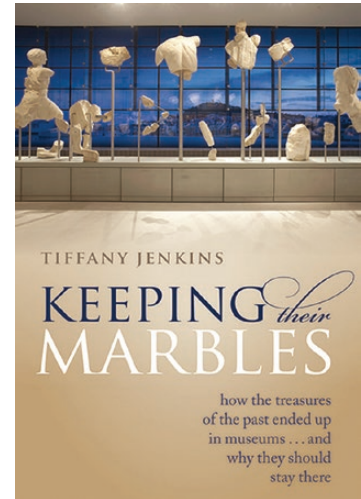

BOOK REVIEW: KEEPING THEIR MARBLES: HOW THE TREASURES OF THE PAST ENDED UP IN MUSEUMS—AND WHY THEY SHOULD STAY THERE

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.

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It needs to be understood that Jenkins is not setting out to write an academic tome, nor to shed new light on history or explain the workings of international cultural heritage law. Rather, this is a highly emotive book written by a journalist with a very particular audience in mind. The pun in the title, *Keeping their Marbles*, reveals who she thinks 'her people' are, and it soon becomes apparent who she believes the 'problem people' to be. The book is designed to put pressure on those misguided people working in museums that are sympathetic to repatriation. The book is a defence of a very old-fashioned and conservative view—the idea of a universal 'rationality' where all humanity is shared, where 'treasures' ended up in Europe due to a 'global trade' fuelled by mutual cultural curiosity and, for the most part, property acquisitions were carried out in accordance with civilised property laws. The claim is that cultural identity and, even more disturbingly, humanity is acquired through warehousing objects for the benefit of 'us': the researchers and members of the public who are interested in museum collections.

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 not 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.³

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 JM 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’;⁵ 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’.

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. The work speaks to a concern that key educated sectors of the public and many researchers and curators working in the world’s largest museums, are now sympathetic to postcolonial politics. It

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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) 35.
- 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 <<http://www.foundingdocs.gov.au/item-did-34.html>>.
- 4 Jenkins, above n 1, 32.
- 5 Ibid 302.