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PRINCETON UNIVERSITY LIBRARY CHRONICLE · LXVII · NO. 2 · WINTER 2006

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VOLUME LXVII 2005-2006



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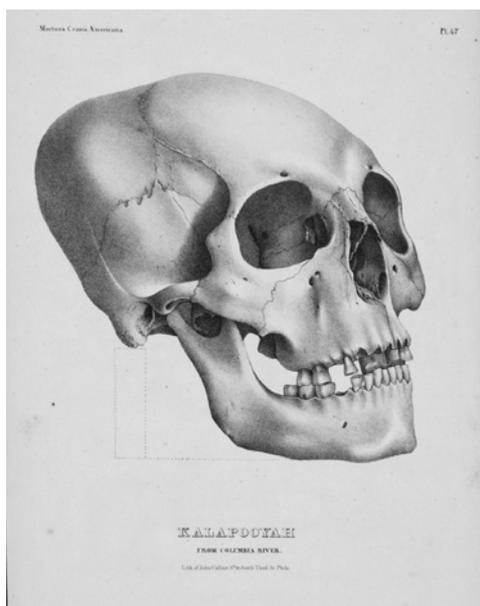
## A Native Among the Headhunters

ANN FABIAN

In January 1839, a twenty-year-old Chinook man from the Pacific Northwest arrived in Philadelphia. A herpetologist, an ornithologist, a collector of Indian portraits, and a craniologist—a good cross-section of the city's intellectual elite—turned out to meet William Brooks, as the young man now called himself. The Philadelphia gentlemen were all curious about Brooks, who had traveled across the country with Jason Lee (1803–1845), a Methodist missionary to Oregon. Lee and Brooks had been preaching up and down the East Coast since early November, raising money for their faraway settlement. Brooks was a good draw. Eastern crowds were curious to hear his grammatical English, test his mental acuity, witness his good manners, and see for themselves his marvelous flattened head.

Few had as strong a professional interest in this head as skull collector and skull measurer Samuel George Morton (1799–1851) and his friend and collaborator George Combe (1788–1858), a genial Scottish phrenologist. That winter Morton was putting the finishing touches on *Crania Americana*, his great illustrated volume based on his private collection of hundreds of Native American skulls. Combe was working on an essay for Morton's book as he traveled around the United States lecturing on the phrenological arts of interpreting character from the bumps on the skull. Although in the next decades phrenology would be taken up by clever charlatans, Morton and Combe still believed there was something serious in phrenology, something to be learned from the contours of the head—if not about the traits of character and personality that distinguished individual persons, then perhaps about the location of qualities or faculties in all humans. Combe also thought the young man might help him answer a question that had long puzzled him. Could it be that people who flattened the skulls of infants were actually instinctive phrenologists, manipulating baby heads to cultivate faculties they most desired to see develop in adults? He liked to think so.

And what a treasure this flattened head would be. For some years Morton had been trying to learn more about deformed crania, and



“Kalapooyah from Columbia River,” plate 47 in Samuel George Morton, *Crania Americana, or, A Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America ...* (Philadelphia: John Pennington, 1839). Rare Books Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Purchase, Elizabeth Foundation Fund.

he had been disappointed when a fellow collector turned down his request to borrow a small selection of “different, peculiar, and useful” flattened skulls. They were simply too valuable to lend. Morton was blunt. He liked Brooks because, as he put it, “[h]e appeared to me to possess more mental acuteness than any Indian I had seen, was communicative, cheerful and well-mannered.” But then he admitted, “What most delighted me in this young man, was the fact that his head was as much distorted by mechanical compression as any skull of his tribe in my possession, and presented the very counterpart” to the skull from the Northwest Kalapooyah tribe pictured in his book. The meeting must have been exciting for Morton, a man who did not much like to travel and encountered most Native Americans as skulls.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Samuel George Morton, *Crania Americana; or, A Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America ...* (Philadelphia: John Pennington, 1839), 206.

But there is more to this story of the Philadelphia meeting. I like to think the history of William Brooks and his trip east belongs in this collection of essays honoring Alfred Bush's years as curator of the Princeton Collections of Western Americana because the western man who appeared in the eastern parlor left a trail through the archives—a reminder of why a collection of Western Americana belongs in an eastern library. William Brooks made his brief appearance in the histories of phrenology and craniology, of course, but he also shot a buffalo, sat for a portrait, preached to Methodist congregations, spent time with a turtle collector, conversed with an ornithologist, and joked with at least one woman. His is a tale of small traces, but one that nevertheless touches on issues in art, science, religion, race, and national expansion that preoccupied many Americans in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Time after time, people enlisted (or tried to enlist) William Brooks in their own projects—whether to raise money for Methodists, to catalog Native America, to construct a hierarchy of American races, or to understand why people reshaped the heads of infants. Yet somehow, despite his encounters with this soul-searching, skull hungry, and very curious crowd, William Brooks managed, in the end, to keep his wits about him and to hang on to his head.



It was not as William Brooks that the Native boy began his life or, so it seems, ended his career. William Brooks, the Christian Indian, made his way into a white world that first erased his Native identity in Oregon and then resurrected it in Philadelphia, where he became once more “Stum-Ma-Nu: A Flat-Head Boy.” By becoming William Brooks, Stumanu made a calculated guess at a future, but the men and women who had the upper hand in shaping that future opted instead to preserve him as Stumanu. His two identities chase each other through the archive. In the traces of his speeches, left behind in Methodist histories, he is William Brooks, an eloquent Indian advocate for Christian missions and a sharp observer of white ways. But the visual culture of antebellum easterners captured him as Stumanu, and in the end, it seems this one picture has trumped his thousand words. If you want to find him today, a quick search on the Web will turn up plenty of copies for sale of the portrait of “Stum-Ma-Nu: A Flat-Head Boy.”

That portrait appears in the second of the three volumes of the *History of the Indian Tribes of North America*, the sometimes ill-starred collection of portraits and biographies compiled by retired Indian agent Thomas L. McKenney (1785–1859) and his partner, Cincinnati judge James Hall (1793–1868), and published in Philadelphia between 1836 and 1844. McKenney conceived his portrait gallery in the 1820s, when he was working as Superintendent of the Indian Trade at Georgetown and then for the War Department as the first head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, a post he held from 1824 to 1830. McKenney was struck by the parade of prominent Native visitors to Washington during those years, as delegations showed up in the city to sign treaties or negotiate land cessions, and he commissioned artist Charles Bird King to paint portraits of members of these diplomatic missions. He sensed too that these visits were perhaps the last chance to set down a visual record of peoples he thought likely to disappear.

When McKenney lost his job at the War Department after Andrew Jackson became president, he moved to Philadelphia, the center of American lithography, and set about arranging to publish the collection of pictures. He imagined hiring a small group of talented lithographers who would draw King's portraits (or the artist Henry Inman's copies of them) onto stone and then strike prints for highly talented locals, most of them women, to color. McKenney would compose brief biographies of each of the subjects, and Judge Hall would write a general history of Native America. McKenney pictured a series running through twenty numbers, each containing six portraits and thirty pages of text. When the first number appeared in 1837, he had signed up some 1,250 subscribers, names enough to raise the substantial sum of \$150,000. But the times were not auspicious for the ambitious project, and McKenney's fortunes, along with those of his printers and many of his subscribers, were upended by the severe economic depression that hit the country in 1837. By the time the project limped to completion in 1844, it had run through five different publishers.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Herman J. Viola, *The Indian Legacy of Charles Bird King* (Washington, D.C., and New York: Smithsonian Institution Press and Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976); Herman J. Viola, *Thomas L. McKenney: Architect of America's Early Indian Policy, 1816–1830* (Chicago: Sage Books, 1974).

The portrait of “Stum-Ma-Nu: A Flat-Head Boy” does not exactly belong in the collection of chiefs and diplomats, all of them from regions east of the Rocky Mountains. Stumanu is an ordinary Chinook boy with a flattened head, come east on a religious, not a diplomatic, mission. Nor is it clear who painted the picture. There is no record that Washington-based King traveled to Philadelphia to meet the boy or that Brooks stopped to see King in Washington. For the sitting, he wore a Chilkat blanket lined at the collar with fur. Such blankets were prized by the Tlingit tribes of southeastern Alaska, coveted as chiefly symbols; they certainly were not the common apparel of orphan boys from the banks of the Columbia River. Lee showed the curiously wrought blanket to those who turned out to hear William Brooks. It was spun and woven in an ingenious manner, one observer reported, very thick and covered with hieroglyphs. Lee recognized that this striking Chilkat blanket was a good prop, an object that virtually shouted its exotic origins in the Far West, even if it bore absolutely no relation to William Brooks.<sup>3</sup>

For the biographical sketch to accompany his portrait, William Brooks traced for Colonel McKenney the cultural and geographical journeys that had taken him from the banks of the Columbia to Philadelphia. He told McKenney that his father died when he was two and that an uncle raised him and his younger brother and sister. The uncle taught him to fish and to steer a canoe. Although his people had been dealing with Europeans and Americans for a generation or

<sup>3</sup>The portrait of Stumanu does not appear in the “Catalogue of Known Works” in Andrew J. Cosentino, *The Paintings of Charles Bird King (1785–1862)* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1977), 121–206. In their 1934 edition of McKenney and Hall, Frederick Webb Hodge and David I. Bushnell Jr. list the artist as “unknown” and note that the portrait is not mentioned in William J. Rhees, *An Account of the Smithsonian Institution, Its Founder, Building, Operations, etc., Prepared from the Reports of Prof. Henry to the Regents, and Other Authentic Sources* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas M’Gill, printer, 1859), 55–58; F. W. Hodge, “Introduction,” in Thomas L. McKenney and James Hall, *The Indian Tribes of North America with Biographical Sketches and Anecdotes of the Principal Chiefs*, 3 vols. (repr., Edinburgh: John Grant, 1934), 1: xlvi–liii, 2:287n.8. On the blanket, see George T. Emmons, “The Chilkat Blanket, with Notes on the Blanket Design by Franz Boas,” *Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History* 3, no. 4 (1907), 329–401; and Cheryl Samuel, *The Chilkat Dancing Blanket* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989). The contemporary observation appears in “Oregon Mission Concluded,” *Boston Recorder* 24 (February 15, 1839), 26.



STUM. MA. NU.

A FLAT-HEAD BOY.

PUBLISHED BY F. W. GREENOUGH, PHILAD.

*Drawn Printed & Coloured at J. J. Bowen's Lithographic Establishment N<sup>o</sup> 24 Walnut St.*

*Entered according to act of Congress in the Year 1838 by F. W. Greenough in the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the Eastern District of Pa.*

“Stum-Ma-Nu: A Flat-Head Boy,” in Thomas McKenney and James D. Hall, *History of the Indian Tribes of North America, with Biographical Sketches . . .*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: F. W. Greenough, 1838), opposite 153. Rare Books Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Gift of the estate of Mrs. Edgar Palmer.

more, Brooks remembered for McKenney a world where the patterns of traditional life—fishing for smelt and salmon and trading the surplus for horses and weapons with people who lived farther inland—still prevailed. Perhaps he sensed that McKenney wanted a portrait of a man who knew “Indian ways,” and so he drew a picture of Chinook life in the 1820s that was connected to the white world but not yet ravaged by rum and epidemic disease.

But the balance was delicate, and the boy’s life changed when his uncle died in an epidemic of “intermittent fever” (either a particularly deadly strain of malaria or influenza) that swept over the tribes of the Columbia River in the early 1830s. The orphaned children sought shelter with whites, turning first to John McLoughlin, chief factor of the Hudson Bay Company and the most powerful white man in the region.<sup>4</sup>

It was McLoughlin who sent the children on to Jason Lee’s recently established Methodist mission and school on the Willamette River, a project McLoughlin supported. McKenney notes that the boys were particularly valuable members of the fledgling mission settlement: farmhands and Indian souls were equally scarce in this recently devastated, sparsely settled country. “The special providence of God has, already, seemed to throw upon our care three poor Flathead orphans; one, a lad of fourteen or fifteen years of age, who is quite serviceable in several ways,” the mission teacher reported to eastern readers in 1835. “These children came to us almost naked, in a very filthy state, and covered with vermin. . . . *J. Lee* cleansed them from their vermin, so that they do not now appear like the same children they were when they first came.”<sup>5</sup>

Lee assigned the children tasks to help assure their material and spiritual well-being, and Stumanu “quickly showed a great fondness, as well as an aptitude, for learning, was industrious and useful on the

<sup>4</sup>Herbert C. Taylor Jr. and Lester L. Hoaglin Jr., “The ‘Intermittent Fever’ Epidemic of the 1830’s on the Lower Columbia River,” *Ethnohistory* 9 (Spring 1962), 160–78; Sherburne Cook, “The Epidemic of 1830–1833 in California and Oregon,” *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnography* 43, no. 3 (1955), 303–25; and Robert H. Ruby and John A. Brown, *The Chinook Indians: Traders of the Lower Columbia River* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 185–200.

<sup>5</sup>Cyrus Shepard, letter of January 10, 1835, printed in *Zion’s Herald* 6 (October 28, 1835), 170, and quoted in Cornelius J. Brosnan, *Jason Lee, Prophet of the New Oregon* (1932; repr., Rutland, Vt.: Academy Books, 1985), 76.

farm, and won esteem by the most amiable qualities of temper.” According to McKenney, he also possessed “what was remarkable in an Indian, a decidedly mechanical genius, and excelled in the construction of tools and implements, and in the imitation of any simple articles of furniture that came under his notice, so that the mission family were fully repaid for the expense of his education and subsistence by his labour.” Stumanu got food and clothes in exchange for his labor and earned a new name when Jason Lee baptized him in memory of a Massachusetts clergyman. In the same way, Stumanu’s sister became “Lucy Hedding.”<sup>6</sup>

If for nothing else, these children were remarkable simply because they survived. Disease and defection plagued the school. Fifty-two pupils showed up during the school’s first four years; at least eight of them died, and others ran away or were taken away by their parents. But Stumanu and his brother and sister had nowhere else to go.<sup>7</sup>

William Brooks lived and worked at the mission school for about two years between 1836 and 1838, but his life changed again in 1838, when the Reverend Lee took him along on a fund-raising tour in the East. “*Duty*,” Lee wrote in his journal, “required me to leave *home* and *wife* and *friends* and retrace my steps to the land of civilization.” He headed east, hoping to recruit “a mission steward or business agent, two carpenters, a cabinetmaker, a blacksmith, and two farmers.” Some sources say he also needed to persuade the faithful that the mission was a spiritual project and not the spearhead of secular settlement. As evidence of his mission’s effectiveness, he took along “two Indian boys—Wm. Brooks (a Chinook) and Thomas Adams,” as well as the three mixed-race sons of a Hudson Bay Company employee, William McKay.<sup>8</sup>

Lee and the five boys departed in the spring, leaving behind Lee’s pregnant wife, a woman he had married somewhat dutifully eight

<sup>6</sup>Thomas McKenney and James D. Hall, *History of the Indian Tribes of North America* . . . , vol. 2 (Philadelphia: F. W. Greenough, 1838), 157; Shepard, quoted in Brosnan, *Jason Lee*, 76.

<sup>7</sup>Claude E. Schaeffer, “William Brooks, Chinook Publicist,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 64 (1963), 41–54; Robert Moulton Gatke, “The First Indian School of the Pacific Northwest,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 23 (1922), 70–83; Robert H. Ruby and John A. Brown, *Indians of the Pacific Northwest* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 71.

<sup>8</sup>“Diary of Rev. Jason Lee,” *Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society* 17 (December 1916), 405, 416; Brosnan, *Jason Lee*, 93, 97.

months earlier. She died in childbirth as the little party headed east, and Lee mourned her in his journal. Still, the trip apparently had its pleasures, and Lee boasted that he and Brooks each brought down a buffalo. Lee killed his with his third shot. "Wm. also killed one," he wrote. "We thought we did very well, as there were but seven buffaloe, and so many old hunters, considering this was our first trial."<sup>9</sup> Did the ever-adaptable Brooks share Lee's first-person plural, thinking along with him that "we did very well"?

Lee soldiered on east and dropped McKay's boys at their appointed schools (two of them at his alma mater, Wilbraham Academy in Massachusetts). He kept Brooks around to help him raise money—the two of them representing Methodist success in the mixed-race world of the West.<sup>10</sup> The exotic Indian boy attracted large crowds as Lee sermonized up and down the eastern seaboard in the winter of 1838–1839. Lee quickly learned that there was money to be made for his settlements at just those points where the sermon shaded into a show of curiosities, where piety mixed with popular entertainment. The crowds liked the boy.<sup>11</sup>

Brooks grew easy in English on that trip, confident, it seems, in expressing criticisms of white civilization and deft at avoiding the objectification of both skull hunters and Methodist congregants. Morton complimented his accent and his grammar, and the boy pleased other potential supporters with his good table manners, apparent piety, and surprising speeches. Lee recalled, "Seldom did he arise to address a congregation without bringing forward something new and striking that he had not mentioned in any previous address; so that, contrary to what might be expected, his daily communications, instead of becoming stale and tiresome to me, by their tame monotony, were always interesting, and sometimes delightful, pathetic, and thrilling, even beyond anything I had dared to hope from him."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup>"Diary of Rev. Jason Lee," 425.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas Adams fell ill along the journey and recuperated in Peoria, Illinois, before rejoining Lee and Brooks in the spring of 1839. Brosnan, *Jason Lee*, 100.

<sup>11</sup>Brosnan, *Jason Lee*, 104; H. K. Hines, *Missionary History of the Pacific Northwest, Containing the Wonderful Story of Jason Lee . . .* (Portland: H. K. Hines, 1899), 194; and Robert J. Loewenberg, *Equality on the Oregon Frontier: Jason Lee and the Methodist Mission* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976).

<sup>12</sup>*Christian Advocate and Journal* 14 (October 4, 1839), 25, quoted in Brosnan, *Jason Lee*, 111.

It is hard to know what Brooks thought of Lee's addresses because our sense of him comes with so many layers of mediation. Perhaps he tried to break the stale monotony of some of his patron's sermons by incorporating into his own speeches observations on the people and things that impressed or amused him on their tour of the East. Accounts mention Brooks's skill with his audiences and suggest that he took some pleasure in expressing his opinions.

Methodist publications describe him addressing audiences in his native language and then in English. On December 31, 1838, Brooks made his first effort in English. Lee later admitted that he "of course, expected a failure. But I was agreeably disappointed. . . ." One observer noted that Brooks's "tears spoke with resistless eloquence." He also made audiences laugh or, as Lee put it, "excite[d] the risibles." Brooks "spoke with much feeling" about the death of Mrs. Lee, his teacher, to a congregation in Connecticut and so aroused the sympathies of an audience in Massachusetts that workers from a shoe factory presented him with a new pair of boots. At each stop, he moved audiences to open their purses.<sup>13</sup>

Early in 1839, some three or four months after Lee and Brooks had arrived in the East, Methodist journals reported that the boy began to wonder aloud "at the wickedness he saw." In his somewhat ambiguous English, he chastised those who viewed the mission in Oregon as part of a secular settlement. Brooks's assertion may have helped quiet some of Lee's critics, who suspected him of just such ambition, but he also made observations of his own. He was particularly struck by a blind man he met in Baltimore. "He's colored man—he belongs to our Church. He can't read, he can't see nothing, but he sees Jesus Christ. Children, you say that old blind man, colored man, miserable—but he be very happy. O, I love that old man, because he love Jesus Christ."<sup>14</sup>

Brooks pointed out white hypocrisy, denouncing white men who sold rum to Indians. And he didn't much like the "rude and wicked" children who insulted him, laughing at him as he walked the streets.

<sup>13</sup> *Christian Advocate and Journal* 13 (February 15, 1839), 102, (March 1, 1839), 109, and 14 (October 4, 1839), 25, quoted in Brosnan, *Jason Lee*, 110, 111, 114, 116; *Zion's Herald* 10 (February 13, 1839), 26, quoted in Brosnan, *Jason Lee*, 118.

<sup>14</sup> *Oregonian and Indian's Advocate*, 1 (January 1839), 125–27, quoted in Brosnan, *Jason Lee*, 121; *Zion's Herald* 10 (February 13, 1839), 27, quoted in Brosnan, *Jason Lee*, 112.

With some “saucy” questioners, however, he apparently joked about his flattened head. Several Methodist chroniclers record the story of a woman who asked the boy about his skull, “rallying him somewhat on the curiosity of the fashion. William replied, ‘All people have his fashion. The Chinese make little his foot. Indian make flat his head. You,’ looking at her waist and putting his hand to his, ‘make small here.’ She at once decided if his head was flat, his wit was sharp.” Or so the story goes.<sup>15</sup>

In the winter of 1839, the odyssey Brooks had begun among the Oregon Methodists crossed into the territory of the Philadelphia naturalists. To look at Brooks, Morton said, one would notice his “marked Indian features, a broad face, high cheek bones, large mouth, tumid lips, a large nose, depressed at the nostrils, considerable width between the eyes, which, however, were not obliquely placed, a short stature and a robust person.” If Brooks knew Morton coveted his skull, if he thought for a moment that he had wandered unwittingly into a land of headhunters, he did not let on, and he graciously let the good doctor measure his head.<sup>16</sup>

Morton reported that Brooks was staying with Dr. William Blanding, the ranking expert on American turtles. But there was also an ornithologist at their meeting, John Kirk Townsend (1809–1851), “who knew this young man . . . in his own country, and they recognized each other when they met in Philadelphia.” Seeing Townsend again, Brooks may have remembered that in Oregon the ornithologist was nearly as avid a collector of skulls as he was a student of birds. In fact, Townsend had donated to Morton’s collection Brooks’s “coun-

<sup>15</sup> *Christian Advocate and Journal* 14 (October 4, 1839), 25, quoted in Brosnan, *Jason Lee*, 113; *Oregonian and Indian’s Advocate* 1 (January 1839), 125–27, quoted in Brosnan, *Jason Lee*, 121; Hines, *Missionary History*, 197. The anecdote also appears in Rev. A. Atwood, *The Conquerors: Historical Sketches of the American Settlement of the Oregon Country* (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1907), 73n.

<sup>16</sup> Morton, *Crania Americana*, 206. Other craniologists did not find their subjects so cooperative. “It is no easy thing to obtain actual measurements of Indians’ heads,” wrote Daniel Wilson, a British-born historian, ethnographer, and craniologist working in his adopted Canada. “I have seen an Indian not only resist every attempt that could be ventured on, backed by arguments of the most practical kind; but on solicitation being pressed too urgently, he trembled, and manifested the strongest signs of fear, not unaccompanied with anger, such as made a retreat prudent.” Daniel Wilson, *On the Supposed Prevalence of One Cranial Type throughout the American Aborigines* (Edinburgh: Neill and Company, 1858), 19.

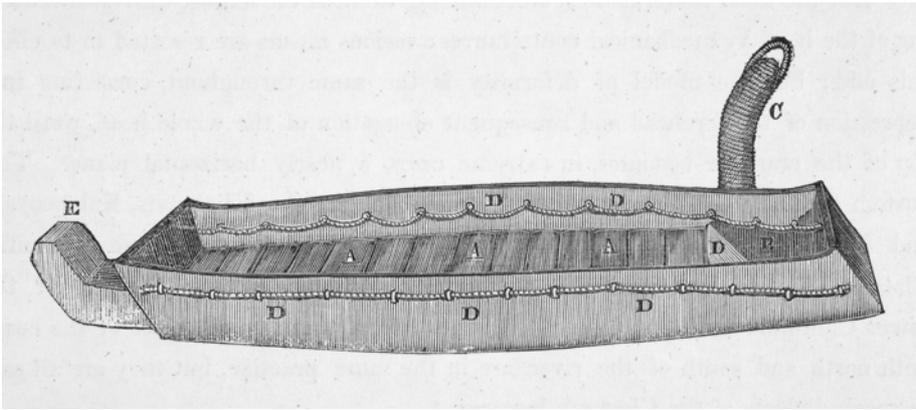
terpart,” the Kalapooyah skull. Townsend penned for eastern readers an often reprinted description of the cradle boards used to flatten infant skulls, but he also recognized that skull gathering could be more than an intellectual enterprise. He boasted to Morton that he was so determined to keep his promise to bring back some skulls to Philadelphia that he risked his life to rob an Indian burial place in Oregon, sneaking off with a reeking pack of human remains.<sup>17</sup>

Townsend’s reports, set down in his *Narrative of a Journey across the Rocky Mountains*, provide some good details on the work of skull collectors. He found the people of the Columbia River region “shrewd and observant,” as did most visitors, and concluded that skull flattening did not harm the intellect. He described how mothers carried infants in a “sort of cradle . . . formed by excavating a pine log to the depth of eight or ten inches.” They lined the cradle with “a bed of little grass mats” and placed a child in it, but then they tied a “little boss of tightly plaited and woven grass . . . to the forehead, and secured [it] by a cord to the loops at the side. The infant is thus suffered to remain from four to eight months, or until the sutures of the skull have in some measure united, and the bone become solid and firm. It is seldom or never taken from the cradle, except in case of severe illness, until the flattening process is completed.”<sup>18</sup>

A skull properly flattened, Townsend observed, remained the mark of a child well raised. And with that thought in mind, he may have noted that Stumantu’s flattened head registered his mother’s plans for the boy’s good future among his own people. Grown-up tribal leaders had flattened skulls; captives and slaves—individuals taken from other tribes—did not. Still, Townsend found skull flatteners somewhat less than human. He admitted he was frightened and disgusted by a young child recently removed from a cradle board—a child that remains an “it” in his account: “Although I felt a kind of chill creep over me from the contemplation of such dire deformity, yet there was something so stark-staring, and absolutely queer in the physiognomy, that I could not repress a smile; and when the mother amused

<sup>17</sup> Morton, *Crania Americana*, 206, 213; J. K. Townsend to Samuel George Morton, Fort Vancouver, Columbia River, September 20, 1835, Samuel George Morton Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia.

<sup>18</sup> John Kirk Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey across the Rocky Mountains, to the Columbia River, and a Visit to the Sandwich Islands, Chili, &c. . . .* (Philadelphia: Henry Perkins, 1839), 176.



“My friend Mr. Townsend was so kind as to bring one of these cradles. . . .” Samuel George Morton, *Crania Americana; or, A Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America* . . . (Philadelphia: John Pennington, 1839), 204. Rare Books Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Purchase, Elizabeth Foundation Fund.

the little object and made it laugh, it looked so irresistibly, so *terribly* ludicrous, that I and those who were with me, burst into a simultaneous roar, which frightened it and made it cry, in which predicament it looked much less horrible than it had before.”<sup>19</sup>

Such a strange practice piqued the skull hunter’s curiosity, and Townsend was among the collectors who benefited, indirectly, from the diseases that decimated the people of the Northwest Coast in the early 1830s. He encountered people so devastated that they could no longer bury the dead, let alone keep watch over corpses. Depopulation along the Columbia “has been truly fearful,” Townsend wrote.<sup>20</sup>

Escalating death rates strained traditional ways, making it difficult for people to follow customary mourning and burial practices. Townsend saw that proper disposition of the dead helped to anchor a people in place and in time. Conquest destroyed both spatial and temporal connections, and skull hunters had their own small parts to play in this drama of destruction. Stumanu’s reshaped head may have been an expression of his mother’s faith in the future; Stumanu’s proper care for his mother’s dead body would have helped link

<sup>19</sup> Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey*, 176–77. The editors of *The Family Magazine* reprinted this account as “Flathead Indians,” 3 (1835–1836), 451.

<sup>20</sup> Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey*, 232.

his people's past to a future. But events in Stumanu's life in the messy present of the 1830s destroyed connections with the past as surely as they demolished the roads to his mother's imagined future.

Townsend left us descriptions of the skull collector's part in the dramas of this changing world. He recorded the risks collectors ran as they encountered resistance from people determined to defend customary ways. "I have been very anxious to procure the skulls of some of these Indians," Townsend wrote in his narrative, "and should have been willing, so far as I alone was concerned, to encounter some risk to effect my object, but I have refrained on account of the difficulty in which the ship and crew would be involved, if the sacrilege should be discovered; a prejudice might thus be excited against our little colony which would not soon be overcome, and might prove a serious injury." Numerical dominance of long-time residents apparently afforded some protection for the dead.<sup>21</sup>

The British navigator Sir Edward Belcher recorded similar sentiments in 1839, commenting that fear of European desecration had prompted "great secrecy" surrounding burial ceremonies of the tribes along the Columbia. They would punish members of other tribes who violated tombs, and "so are they inveterate, and tenaciously bent on revenge, should they discover any act of the kind perpetrated by a white man." The crew of one vessel, Belcher continued, "suffered because a person who belonged to her (but not then in her) was known to have taken a skull; which, from the process pursued in flattening, has become an object of curiosity."<sup>22</sup>

Townsend liked to imagine himself a brave collector, and he described in detail one particular adventure on February 3, 1836. "During a visit to Fort William, last week, I saw, as I wandered through the forest . . . a canoe, deposited, as is usual, in the branches of a tree, some fourteen feet from the ground. Knowing that it contained the body of an Indian, I ascended to it for the purpose of abstracting the skull." But instead of a dried skeleton, Townsend found "a perfect, embalmed body of a young female, in a state of preservation equal to any which I had seen from the catacombs of Thebes." He was determined to have this mummy and returned that night, "at the

<sup>21</sup> Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey*, 181.

<sup>22</sup> Sir Edward Belcher, *Narrative of a Voyage round the World, Performed in Her Majesty's Ship Sulphur, during the Years 1836-1842*, 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, Publisher, 1843) 1:292-93.

witching hour of twelve”—a particularly nice touch in this account of a “scientific” grave robber—armed with a rope. He lowered the body to the ground and carried it off to his waiting canoe. “On arriving at the fort,” he continued, “I deposited my prize in the store house, and sewed around it a large Indian mat, to give it the appearance of a bale of guns.”<sup>23</sup>

But this is not the end of the story. He needed to get the body to Vancouver so he could ship it east. He knew the Indians he had hired to paddle his canoe would not be happy to have the body as cargo, and so he asked the commander of the fort to stow it “under the hatches of a little schooner, which was running twice a week between the two forts.” The commander did not oblige. Instead, he sent Townsend a note, explaining that “the brother of the deceased” had come to the fort to complain that his sister’s grave had been disturbed. He “had been in the habit of visiting the tomb of his sister every year. He had now come for that purpose, . . . and his keen eye had detected the intrusion of a stranger on the spot hallowed to him by many successive pilgrimages. The canoe of his sister was tenantless, and he knew the spoiler to have been a white man, by the tracks upon the beach, which did not incline inward like those of an Indian.”<sup>24</sup>

The commander preferred not to risk the wrath of locals and returned the body to the mourning man along “with a present of several blankets, to prevent the circumstance from operating upon his mind to the prejudice of the white people. The poor Indian took the body of his sister upon his shoulders, and as he walked away, grief got the better of his stoicism, and the sound of his weeping was heard long after he had entered the forest.”<sup>25</sup>

The weeping man cuts a fine sentimental figure in Townsend’s account, but such tender moments did not deter his grave robbing. Townsend headed back to Philadelphia, his pack full of spoils. In his final tally of skulls, craniologist Morton thanked the ornithologist for the skull of the Kalapooyah, and for the heads of a chief, a child, and a slave, as well as for a cradle of the sort Stumanu’s mother might have used to flatten his head.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey*, 236–37.

<sup>24</sup> Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey*, 237.

<sup>25</sup> Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey*, 237.

<sup>26</sup> Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey*, 236–237, also 180–81; Morton, *Crania Americana*, 207–15; J. Aitken Meigs, *Catalogue of Human Crania, in the Collection of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1857), 57, 63–64.

We cannot know if Townsend rehearsed his Oregon exploits when he met William Brooks in Philadelphia. But just a few months after that January meeting, Brooks's head became the object of a new kind of contest.

In the final paragraph of his biography of the Flathead boy, McKenney reports, "On the eve of the departure of the Rev. Mr. Lee to the scene of his labours on the Wallamette [*sic*], Stumanu, flushed with the prospect of once more mingling with his kindred and friends, and gratified with all he had seen of the white man's capacity and powers was taken suddenly ill, in New York, and after a short but severe attack, died on the 29th of May, 1839." An attack of what, the colonel did not say. Nor did the editors of the *New York Herald*, who noted among the dead "[o]n Wednesday, 29th inst., Wm Brooks, a native Flathead Indian, aged about 20 years."<sup>27</sup>

Methodist histories report that Jason Lee watched over William Brooks in his last illness with "the care of a father." Shortly before he died, they say, Brooks said to Lee: "I want to go home." "What home?" said Mr. Lee; "your home in Oregon?" "No; my heavenly home."<sup>28</sup> Did such a conversation take place? Perhaps. Or maybe William Brooks on his deathbed has been made to serve the purposes of a pious fable. Or maybe his thoughts mixed the images offered by McKenney and Lee. Maybe he died, as McKenney put it, "flushed with the prospect of once more mingling with his kindred and friends," but pictured that meeting in Lee's Christian heaven alive with Native dead.

The Philadelphia *North American* covered the New York funeral of this "estimable youth, beloved by all who were acquainted with him. But the best of all is, he died an experienced Christian." The paper noted that "[t]he corpse was taken to the Greene-st. church on Thursday, and an address delivered on the occasion by Rev. Dr. Bangs." The boy's body was buried near the Bedford Street Methodist Episcopal Church in the city of New York.<sup>29</sup>

In most life histories, this scene would be the end of the story: a eulogy by Lee, the assurance that "[o]ne native Indian, at least, of

<sup>27</sup> McKenney and Hall, *Indian Tribes of North America*, 2:158; *New York Herald*, May 30, 1839.

<sup>28</sup> Hines, *Missionary History*, 196–97.

<sup>29</sup> *North American*, June 5, 1839, quoted in Brosnan, *Jason Lee*, 140–41n. The body was likely removed to Queens with other buried dead when the city of New York extended Seventh Avenue south of Bedford Street in the 1910s.

Oregon, is saved, as the fruit of missionary labor,”<sup>30</sup> and a corpse buried in a New York churchyard. But given William Brooks’s encounter with skull collector Morton, his agent Townsend, and the traveling phrenologist George Combe, one has to ask at least about the material afterlife of his body. Lee coveted his soul; others—perhaps Morton, but certainly Combe—coveted his head.

Combe was a serious man, a scientist, not the kind of fortune-teller or carnival charlatan who came to be associated with phrenology in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. In the spring of 1839, he was about midway through his “phrenological tour” of the United States. The Scotsman had spent the last fifteen months traveling around the Northeast, lecturing on phrenology, visiting schools, asylums, and prisons, and observing American society, often critically. He was pleased, however, to find American audiences still receptive to practices of skull reading that their European counterparts had abandoned. Some Americans seemed to think phrenology might be a useful tool in an unsettled social landscape, something that would help them “read” the strangers they met. On the road, Combe played the part of an amateur neurologist, meeting with prodigies like the deaf and blind Laura Bridgman and examining the heads of those with strange complaints: a man who could no longer see colors, a policeman who had gone suddenly mute on a cold night in Harrisburg, and a New York child, mentally healthy, but missing a portion of the skull she damaged in a fall from an open window.<sup>31</sup>

Little wonder, then, that the heads of William Brooks and his friend Thomas Adams excited Combe’s curiosity. Late in May, he met Jason Lee in New York. Brooks was too ill for an interview, but the minister let Combe talk to Adams. Combe found the boy “intelligent, ready, and fluent” on things that demanded only “observation.” On questions that required “the aid of Comparison and Causality, he was dull, unintelligent, and destitute equally of ideas and language.” Combe surmised that manipulation of the skull must have damaged the mental faculties of comparison. But had he listened to Brooks’s words to the Methodist woman rather than looking at his companion’s head, he might have noticed that the boy in fact had an acute gift for comparative observation. Combe admitted that he could not

<sup>30</sup> *North American*, June 5, 1839, quoted in Brosnan, *Jason Lee*, 141n.

<sup>31</sup> Combe, *Notes on the United States*, 2:205–6 (Bridgman), 1:301 (color); 1:244–45 (policeman); 2:43–45 (damaged skull).

figure out precisely how head flattening changed the brain, and so he asked Lee “to carry a cast of a normal European brain with him, when he returned to his station, and to beg the medical officer of the Fur Company . . . to examine carefully the brains of these Flat-headed Indians after death, and report minutely the differences in the size and distribution of the convolutions.”<sup>32</sup>

It bothered the phrenologist that a brain closer at hand eluded him. Shortly after he left New York, Combe read an announcement of William Brooks’s death, and he voiced his frustration that he had not been able to arrange to dissect the Indian’s brain. If Brooks had ever intended to preserve his body intact, he had a little bit of luck at the end of his life. A doctor by the name of David Meredith Reese (1800–1861) attended Brooks in his last illness. Physician-in-chief of Bellevue Hospital, Reese was a cranky, outspoken, obnoxious man; a passionate advocate of colonization, of sending freed slaves and free African Americans to settle in Africa; and a dyspeptic opponent of things he considered popular fads. He campaigned against the extreme passions he dubbed “the humbugs of New-York.” These included “quackery in general,” “ultra temperance,” “ultra abolition,” and, in his mind the worst of all, phrenology—a pure humbug that had somehow seduced learned men.

Reese wondered how sensible and intelligent people could believe the absurd proposition that the soft stuff of the brain molded the hard matter of the skull. How had it come to pass that “[m]en and women of reason and religion, who eschew fortune-telling, witchcraft, and astrology . . . submit their own heads, and those of their sons and daughters, to these fortune-tellers, who itinerate through the country like other strolling mountebanks, for the purpose of living without labour, by practising upon public gullibility”? Reese figured that simple flat-tery explained phrenology’s popularity. Phrenologists delivered compliments, telling people just the sort of things they wanted to believe and were stupid enough to believe about themselves.<sup>33</sup>

It was the fight over phrenology that protected the corpse of William Brooks. To Combe’s consternation, Reese, in his effort to suppress the charlatans, “allowed this young man to be buried without

<sup>32</sup> Combe, *Notes on the United States*, 2:49–50.

<sup>33</sup> David Meredith Reese, *Humbugs of New-York: Being a Remonstrance against Popular Delusions whether in Science, Philosophy, or Religion* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1838), 64, 69.

examining his brain, or at least without reporting on it, or calling in the aid of phrenologists to do so.” The interests of science demanded an investigation of so rare and valuable a head, Combe maintained. “It is strange that those who are so confident that phrenology is a ‘humbug’ should be so averse to producing evidence by which alone it can be proved to be so. The condition of the brain in a Flat-headed Indian is an interesting and unknown fact in physiology, and any medical man who has the means of throwing light on it, and neglects to use them, is not a friend to his own profession or to general science.”<sup>34</sup>

If Reese was not a friend to science, perhaps, in the end, he was a friend to William Brooks, who had come from a people with a high regard for the bodies of their dead kin. Although Brooks’s body was not handled as it would have been at home in Oregon, he was at least interred according to the customs of his adopted religion. That must have been preferable to falling into the hands of even so amiable a body snatcher as George Combe or so careful a skull collector as Samuel Morton. Morton’s “American Golgotha”—his collection of some one thousand skulls—suggests that others were not so lucky.

<sup>34</sup> Combe, *Notes on the United States*, 2:50n.