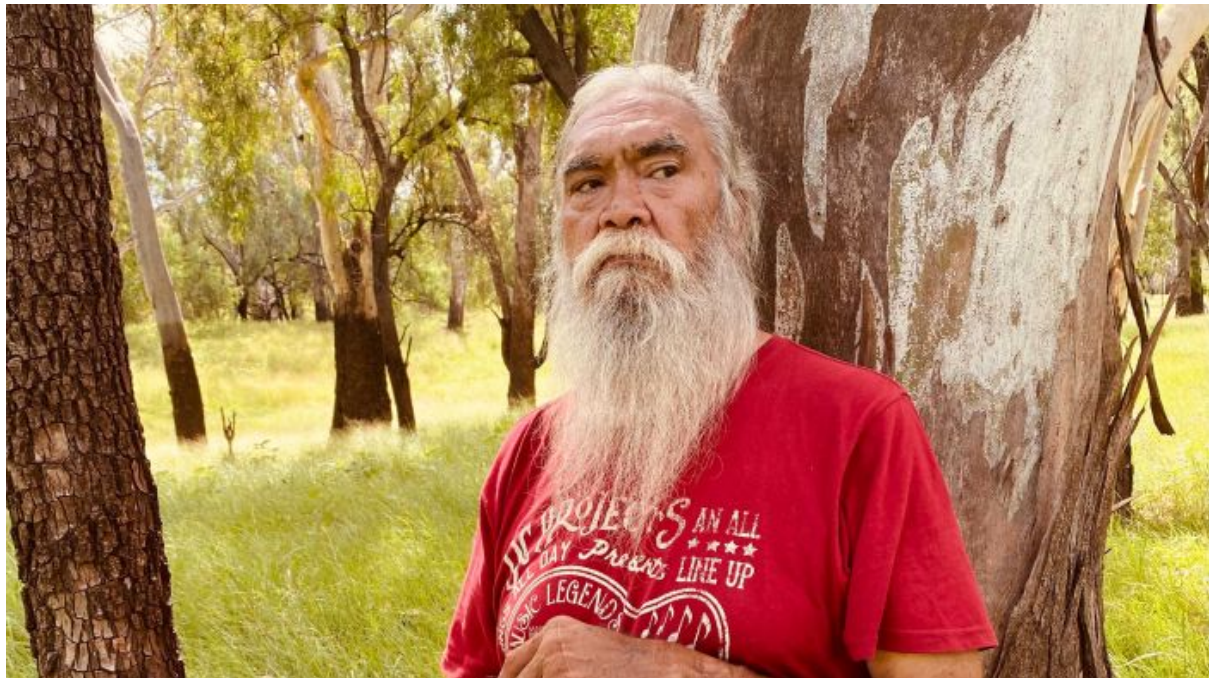


Opinion “We’ve got to bring them home ... to journey into the spirit world”: Bob Weatherall and his lifelong struggle for the rights of the dead

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Since the 1980s, Kamilaroi elder Bob Weatherall had committed himself to bringing the dead home and holding those museums that stole them accountable. (Tracey Spring / ABC).

[You can watch “We Come to Take You Home” on Compass on Sunday, 10 July, at 6.30pm and anytime on iview.]

Kamilaroi elder Bob Weatherall has dedicated his life to returning Ancestors of this ancient land, who were traded across the globe and boxed up as objects in museums, back to their Country. His life’s work is profiled in a NAIDOC week episode of Compass — a heartfelt account of his long battle to bring home Ancestors and raise awareness of the history of stealing Indigenous peoples’ relations that has gone on since contact with Europeans.

As a researcher in Aboriginal history, I have long known of the work of Bob Weatherall, particularly his dedication to restoring dignity to those Ancestors removed from their burial sites to museums.

In a recent performance with Brisbane band Halfway, Bob performs a dialogue between the past and present, Ancestor to Descendant. Seeking and comforting those ancestral remains held captive in museums, “restless and angry” and “waiting for rescue”, he invokes their presence:

We’re coming to get you

We’re trying to find you

I can feel your presence ...

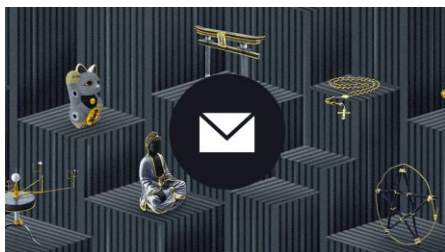
We’ve been waiting so long

We’ve been trying to find you

We’ve come to take you home.

The tireless work of Weatherall, alongside several other First Nations activists, have made their mark. Museums were initially hostile to the challenge that revealed them as lead actors in the violence perpetrated against Indigenous peoples in the name of science, which upended the category “object”. Today, however most, but not all, museums are negotiating the return of Ancestral Remains and have recalibrated their role and purpose in telling the stories of the past. The Queensland Museum has issued an apology and are committed to repatriation of Ancestral Remains.

This challenge to the legacy of museums, and now the acknowledgment of the respect and care for the dead, for Indigenous remains, is significant. We can see this in the federal government’s announcement of the construction of the Ngurra Cultural Precinct, which will, among other things, be a temporary home for those Ancestral Remains making their way back to country.



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The actions surrounding the theft of Indigenous bodies is harrowing. It was against the law at the time; it was always objected to and carried out against the wishes of mourners. There is evidence of body harvesting from morgues and asylums. Bodies were collected initially as curios, trophies of empire and, from the mid-nineteenth century, as tradeable specimens for scientific work that saw race as the defining feature in a hierarchy of humans. It was no secret this was taking place. While some colonial settlers were outraged, most were dedicated acolytes of the new scientific racism that soon characterised Aboriginal people as inferior and gave rise to administrative regimes.

By the 1980s, Bob had committed himself to bringing the dead home and holding those museums that stole them accountable. He thereby made museums understand “objects” as Ancestors. In place of the callous actions committed in the name of science, he offered something else — the deep regard for Indigenous people and their abiding connection to place. What now needs to happen is to acknowledge the responsibility Indigenous people hold for their Ancestral Remains.

After years of lobbying, Bob was finally able to bring his own people home in 2013. The [Compass episode](#) shows rare footage of this historic repatriation of 42 Kamilaroi elders who were brought home. Most were from the Queensland Museum, while eight travelled home from Sydney, and some from private collectors. The ceremony home included honouring the country they travelled through on the

nine-hour car ride with the gifting of carved message sticks. A large group of school children gathered along the route to welcome the Ancestors back. Returning the Ancestors was regarded as a “big deal” and “big task” — a “privilege to do that for our old people”.



Bob Weatherall with his son, Warraba, and grandson, Garruwi, at the burial site. (Tracey Spring / ABC)

Reflecting on Bob’s mission reminds us how much the post-1970s Indigenous activists achieved. His health is now failing, and he worries he hasn’t done enough: “I know there’s more we can do here” — the question is, “Who is going to take it on?”

Almost a decade since that repatriation, Bob takes his son, Warraba, and grandson, Garruwi, back to his home country in St. George, in western Queensland, to visit the burial ground. For Bob, returning to the sacred resting place is bittersweet, and we witness his deep connection to country and to the past. “The blood of the Ancestors still runs today in the blood of my grandchildren and in their generation”, he says. Adopting the classificatory schema developed in the collecting of Indigenous bodies, Weatherall says, *Same bone, same skin, same hair, same blood: same bloodline. It’s something that doesn’t leave you.* Rather than “samples”, “specimens” and “objects” that define you in scientific and hierarchical terms, Weatherall suggests they *are you*, indelible and relational.

The necessity of safe repatriation of those Ancestors, where possible, has been the labour of elders and other advocates like Bob Weatherall. Now he’s urging all Australians to support community efforts to bring our Ancestors back to country and reconcile their spirit, and ours. His story shows the determination and tenacity of Aboriginal people. Bob has forced museums to be accountable — but more than that, he has brought calm and healing. A chance to reconcile. That is what is most significant of all.

Professor Heidi Norman is a leading Australian researcher in the field of Aboriginal political history. She is Associate Dean (Indigenous) of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

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