

BOOK REVIEW

Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native America's Culture

By Chip Colwell

Reviewed by Megan Stueve

Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
2017

Who owns the past? This is the primary question that author Chip Colwell asks in his book *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, and the answer to this question proves as elusive as many of the other big questions of life. Colwell uses his profession as curator for the Denver Museum to address the tangled web of repatriation, illustrated in four different case studies. Repatriation here is the returning of sacred Native American objects and human remains to the tribes that have claimed them. Yet the issue is not as simple as merely returning the objects; there is lengthy legal precedent that must be followed, and in some instances museums and other federally funded institutions have rights to these objects as well.

The debate rages over whether Native American tribes have the rights to objects owned by those deceased for centuries—in some instances even millennia—or if museums should be able to keep that which they have obtained legally in order to further the understanding of American prehistory. In Colwell's dissection of the issue, he acknowledges that "every object contains within it the seeds of conflict that have germinated over the decades between religious freedom and academic freedom, spiritual truths and scientific facts, moral rights and legal duties, preserving historical objects and perpetuating living cultures" (8).

In each of the four case studies, Colwell describes the battles Native Americans have had to engage in order to have equal rights under the law with regard to burials. Ultimately, these battles have led to the enactment of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), established in 1990. This law at last afforded Native American graves the same protection and respect that any other American grave would receive. Additionally, it was a landmark ruling in favor of the return of sacred remains and artifacts to Native American tribes.

Colwell only briefly touches upon the plight of academics who face the prospect of losing anthropological data through repatriation. With no

more artifacts, there can be no new information on the cultures they represent. It is even possible that the future of American archaeology would be in jeopardy. Whether he means to or not, Colwell portrays anthropologists, save a select few, as cold and selfish grave robbers, rather than advocates for the preservation of America's history. He seems to forget that not every anthropologist seeks out artifacts solely to destroy them or put them in a museum. There are many who champion for study *in situ* where data can be collected without removing or harming the objects at all. There are still more who advocate for quick study and timely return of items.

Colwell does reveal instances in which anthropologists and Native Americans have worked together to learn as much they can from the artifacts. But to those with minimal backgrounds in anthropology, it might appear from this book that anthropologists and historians are scavengers, only interested in collecting and studying for their own purposes. In fact, most modern anthropologists are willing to return the bones of the deceased and many of the associated artifacts as well. Many wish to undo the damages done by the previous collection of bones for the purposes of eugenics. Instead of portraying scientists as concerned and responsible scholars, Colwell sways the reader by using verbiage such as "plundered" and "stolen," rather than "legally purchased" or "gifted."

Museums, anthropologists and historians are not completely without fault. Colwell writes that several mid-nineteenth century museums that were looking to gain Native American artifacts would offer compensation to individuals for the artifacts they provided. This led to mass plundering of graves, which was then blamed on the institutions rather than on the individuals who did the plundering. Although this is long since illegal, NAGPRA only pertains to federal institutions, and such plundering still occurs for the benefit of private buyers on the black market.

The topic of repatriation has become a hot topic in recent years, with many other books on the subject. They all follow a similar format, tracing a specific item

through its repatriation efforts or describing the history of the law. However, a uniqueness of this book is the description of the effects of Native American repatriation efforts on other countries. NAGPRA has had wide-reaching influence, with other countries waiting to see how NAGPRA plays out in America before establishing similar laws in their own countries. Many countries wish to see the return of their native artifacts that have been spread to museums across the world. Colwell only offers enough on the subject to pique one's interest, and might have teased out this subject a little more.

The debate about who owns the past will most likely never be fully concluded. Yet Colwell aptly describes the historic significance of NAGPRA using real case studies from the museum where he is employed. It would be interesting to include the Christian perspective in this matter. As quoted previously, Colwell acknowledges the pull between religious and academic freedoms. Yet who better to understand this dilemma than a Christian anthropologist; one who is advocating for both religion and the academy. Such a person might shed some light on an appropriate balance between the need for academic understanding and spiritual commitments.

As Christians, we know that we have been given dominion over the earth in order to take care of the created order. While God maintains sovereignty over all things, we have been asked to safeguard and protect all things. Therefore, any ownership of prehistoric artifacts must be to preserve them. This is not disputed between anthropologists and Native American tribes; both want the artifacts to be cared for, yet they have different concepts of such care. Stewardship requires responsibility and accountability which can also be applied to archaeology in the form of Site Stewardship programs which allow Native American archaeology sites to remain as they are—untouched—but monitors them for disturbances or threats. In fact, several states have already established these programs. This allows the archaeological community to record the sites and collect as much information as needed, but leave them intact.

As long as the artifacts are honored and protected, as Christians we are fulfilling our vow of stewardship. By working together, anthropologists and Native American tribes can reach a mutual agreement on how to proceed.



Megan Stueve is an archaeologist at Lake Mead National Recreation Area in Boulder City, Nevada. She has research interests in Southwestern Archaeology and human impacts on the ancient environment.

Author email: mstueve@eastern.edu
or megan.stueve@partner.nps.gov
