

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE TASMANIAN HISTORICAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION
HELD IN THE ROYAL SOCIETY ROOM, TASMANIAN MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY, ON
TUESDAY 13 OCTOBER 2009.**

Present: The President, Dr Alison Alexander, in the chair and about 50 members and friends.

Apologies: Elizabeth Parkes, Leone Scrivener, Dianne Snowden.

Minutes: The minutes of the August meeting were read, and approved as a correct record.

Business: Dr Alexander referred to the recent deaths of Mary Nicholls and Marjorie Tipping, both long terms members of the Association who had contributed much to Tasmanian historical studies. Otherwise, the Association's activities were proceeding well. The committee would welcome hearing from anyone prepared to manage the Association's website.

Speaker: Dr Alexander introduced Caroline Evans as a doctoral graduate from the University of Tasmania, whose publications included a history of Risdon prison. Her subject tonight was -- 'A Funny Old Hobby: Sir William Crowther's Collection of Aboriginal Remains'.

Dr Evans began by remarking that her study arose from a commission by TMAG consequent upon the policy of repatriating its holding of indigenous remains to appropriate communities. The Museum had been the chief repository of Crowther's collection of Tasmanian Aboriginal material. Born in 1887, the future Sir William heard family stories about the Aborigines dating back to the 1820s; both his grandfather and father were medical men, the former remarkable for having in 1869 secured the skull of William Lanne, sending it to the Royal College of Surgeons. That the family owned land at Oyster Cove, embracing the final Aboriginal station, sharpened this interest. As a medical student at the University of Melbourne, Crowther's knowledge concerning the Tasmanians attracted the interest of Professor RJ Berry, who in 1909 led a party that excavated the remains of twelve persons at Oyster Cove. Crowther kept most of this material. In later years he added further human remains to this collection, but his greater target became stone tools and other artefacts. He traversed the island in this quest most busily in the inter-war years, keeping precise record of his researches. Among locals who joined him were his wife, Clive Lord, Robert Legge, and WI Clark. However Crowther's contacts ranged wider. While the University of Melbourne remained within this purview, more important was a group based in Adelaide led by JB Cleland and F Wood Jones. They in turn introduced Crowther to J Wunderly and JB Birdsell, who did field work in Tasmania in the 1930s. Crowther engaged in a good deal of inter-state travel, and to New Zealand. Close collegiality developed with his associates, marked by exchange of letters and artefacts.

These scholars generally, and Crowther himself, belonged to a school of physical anthropology which concentrated on skeletal remains, especially of the crania, endeavouring to place the Australian and Tasmanian Aborigines in a framework based on Darwinian evolution. Such peoples were seen as primitive, Tasmanians especially so. The latter's extinction was presumed, Crowther giving no heed to the Bass Strait islanders or other descendants. This extinction was seen as part of inexorable evolutionary process, foreshadowing a like fate for the Australians. A different approach was followed by the functionalist anthropology that developed at the University of Sydney, interested in how Aboriginal societies worked, and doing field study among them, thus developing a degree of human empathy. Crowther always remained essentially of the older school, as is evident in papers that proposed links between the Tasmanians with anthropoid apes and Neanderthal man; withal, he questioned prevailing views that the Tasmanians never ate scale-fish, and otherwise modified primitivist interpretations. He speculated too on how the Tasmanians reached the island, suggesting they originated in Melanesia, journeying south in many short stages. A paper of 1963 expressed a human bond with those who died at Oyster Cove, with Crowther then and increasingly thereafter speaking of his remorse apropos the 1909 exhumation. Yet he ever proposed that the TMAG display his skeletal collection in a format shaped by the old physical anthropology.

The President thanked the speaker for her powerful address, and the meeting closed at 9pm.

Michael Roe for Secretary
Alison Alexander, President