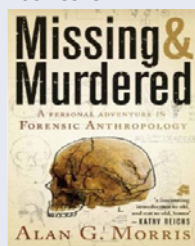




A history of crime in southern Africa – as revealed by bones

Book Title:

Missing & murdered: A personal adventure in forensic anthropology

Book Cover:

Author:

Alan G. Morris

ISBN:

978 -1- 77022 -361 5KALH

Publisher:

Zebra Press; 2011, R198.00

*Book price at time of review:

Review Title:

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Reviewer:

Steve R. Naidoo¹

Affiliation:

¹Independent Forensic Pathologist, Durban, South Africa

Email:

stevenaidoo11@gmail.com

Postal address:

PO Box 95, Desainagar 4405, South Africa

How to cite this book review:

Naidoo SR. A history of crime in southern Africa – as revealed by bones. S Afr J Sci. 2012;108(11/12), Art. #1452, 1 page. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/sajs.v108i11/12.1452>

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Missing & murdered is probably the first scientific book for a general readership on the history of southern African forensic anthropology, but with a great measure of related historical and archaeological work that encompasses the author's wide field experiences in this region. Narrated from a personal perspective and in the manner of a seasoned storyteller, Morris has succeeded in weaving scientific concepts and dreary detail into the riveting examples that illustrate vividly the perplexing challenges of each case. Thus, although scientific and scholarly, it is eminently readable to a non-specialist.

Most importantly – given the outstandingly rich palaeontological and archaeological history of this region and the record of research and scholarship in this southern tip of Africa – Morris is able to portray, to an extent, the contributions of the most eminent scholars of palaeontology and anatomy, such as Dart, Tobias, Drennan and Singer, as well as those of current researchers in anatomy and forensic anthropology in South Africa. The reader is left with an impression of the staggering amount of work that has been done in this small region, and its contribution to the scientific archive.

The first two chapters guide the reader entertainingly into the way that the bones of human remains are recovered, handled and analysed. Whilst Morris is brutally frank about the limitations of his science, the reader is still left very impressed at the amount of information bones can provide. Each of the remaining chapters is an enlightening review of four contexts in which forensic anthropology casework has been undertaken: the criminal, socio-political, historical (archaeological) and the paranormal. The contributing causes to the casework in South Africa are, respectively for each context, a wildly excessive crime (murder) rate; a turbulent and violent past political history; one of the richest archaeological heritages in the world; and a region still caught up in age-old traditional practices such as muti killings.

Whilst the story of Sara Baartman is a must-read, it is only one of many such cases, including that of the skull of Chief Hintza. The parading of Sara Baartman for five years in Europe and what was done to her body after her death is a sad story of the depths to which humans can sink to gratify exotic (and in this case also erotic) interest; there have been many others. The media images of the skull purported to be that of Hintza's on its 'return' from England turned many into would-be anthropologists trying to determine whether or not the skull was, in fact, that of the paramount chief; I recall my own opinion then on the simple facial profile or silhouette of the skull shown on the television screen – that it had a Caucasoid appearance. Morris reports, however, that the taking of native skulls of those killed in local battlefields to England was a practice of the British at that time – a fact that is astounding! Modern-day biomedical ethicists would cringe as they read about such occurrences and wonder what other such acts could have been perpetrated in the past. The forensic anthropological investigations into political deaths, and the experiences of the professionals, are an impressive addition to the historical archive record. The book reveals a depth of insight into events that underpin social realities, as well the previous and prevailing social factors that shaped the circumstances under which individual bodies had perished or were found.

From a personal point of view, the book helped me to place my own piecemeal factual knowledge of our regional forensic experiences into a more relevant and meaningful sequence; it provided me with a deeper understanding of the socio-political dynamics and circumstances behind each case. This book is one that the forensic medic, forensic scientist, legal professional and human rights activist, amongst others, should read. I suspect it will find its way into many of their bookshelves. Then again, it makes out-of-the-ordinary reading for just about anyone.

Overall, reading *Missing & murdered* is like listening to Alan Morris speak – captivating and entertaining. This book is not only a really enjoyable read, but also an enlightening review of local history that has documented the emergence of forensic anthropology as a discipline in South Africa.