

# P R E S S   K I T



## Etched in Bone

A FILM BY MARTIN THOMAS AND BÉATRICE BIJON

Distributed in Australia and New Zealand by **Ronin Films**



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# *Etched in Bone*



*This view of the funeral at Gunbalanya shows the trenches dug to receive the repatriated bones (2011). Jacob Nayinggul is sitting in his wheelchair beside director Martin Thomas. Photograph by Glenn Campbell.*

## Synopses

### **One Line**

When the Smithsonian Institution agrees to repatriate stolen human bones from northern Australia, an Aboriginal elder creates a ceremony that restores his ancestors' spirits to their homeland.

### **One Paragraph**

Jacob Nayinggul, an Aboriginal elder from Arnhem Land in northern Australia, knows that bones of his ancestors were stolen by scientists in 1948. For sixty years they were held by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC as part of a large collection of human anatomy. When, after years of argument, the Smithsonian finally agrees to repatriate the bones, Jacob Nayinggul creates a new form of ceremony. Wrapped in paperbark, the stolen bones—and with them the ancestors' spirits—are welcomed home and put to sleep in the land where they were born.

# *Etched in Bone*

## **Full Synopsis**

In western Arnhem Land (a region of northern Australia), the Aboriginal custodians believe that the landscape is inhabited by spirits of ancestors whose bones were traditionally interred in crevices or caves. With the incursion of white people into the area, these mortuary sites were sometimes raided by archaeologists who collected human bones and put them in museums.

Jacob Nayinggul, the film's central interviewee, is a charismatic elder and lawman who lives in the settlement of Gunbalanya, close to his traditional country. In interviews with historian Martin Thomas, he introduces us to his land near the East Alligator River and describes his obligations to the ancestor spirits with whom he communicates, especially in times of need. Jacob has decided to speak publicly about the relationship between bones and spirits because human remains from the Gunbalanya area are being returned from Washington DC where they were held for more than sixty years in the National Museum of Natural History, a division of the Smithsonian Institution. Jacob is concerned about what happened to the spirits when the bones were taken. He assumes that they travelled to America and is fearful that they became lost while overseas.

Using original colour footage from National Geographic, *Etched in Bone* goes back in time to reveal how the bones were stolen. The man responsible was Frank Setzler, Head Curator of Anthropology at the Smithsonian, who visited Australia in 1948 as a member of the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land (an initiative of the National Geographic Society, the Smithsonian and the Australian Government). Setzler's own diary reveals that he waited until his Aboriginal assistants went to sleep before he plundered burial caves on Injalak, a sacred plateau on the edge of Gunbalanya.

Narration explains how lobbying by the Australian Government eventually convinced the Smithsonian to release the human remains from Arnhem Land. This leads us to Washington where Joe Gumbula, a ceremonial singer, scholar and rock musician is leading a delegation of fellow Arnhem Landers who have travelled to the US to collect their ancestors. As the visitors debate their responsibilities to the spirits of kinsmen taken by Setzler, we meet American historian Samuel Redman who describes the shady origins of the Smithsonian's bone collection. The scene then shifts to the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian where the Indigenous staff provide space for the Arnhem Landers to hold a smoking ceremony that will release the ancestor spirits from the Smithsonian and lead them back to Australia.

When the bones return to Gunbalanya, they are stored in a shed for a year while the community prepares for their interment. Under Jacob's leadership, it is agreed they should be buried in the ground as part of a large, public ceremony. Firstly, however, they must be ritually prepared for their return to the land. This involves the revitalisation of old rites that have not been practised for decades. In moving footage, local men and women remove the ancestors from the museum boxes and carefully rub them with a solution of red ochre before wrapping them in paperbark. Jacob's health is failing, so he oversees the process from a wheelchair, giving orders and talking to the spirits in local languages. The next day they are buried before a large audience of locals and visitors to whom Jacob declares: 'Stealing people's bones and taking them away to study, well it's no bloody good!' Despite his anger at the theft, Jacob's message is ultimately about putting past injustices to bed and paying respect to the people whose bones were taken in the name of science. As Jacob explained his actions: "We want people to see before we take these people to graveyard and put them to sleep. We'll follow, we'll go after them too."

# *Etched in Bone*

## **PRINCIPAL CREDITS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Produced by

**Martin Thomas and Béatrice Bijon**

Written, directed and narrated by

**Martin Thomas**

Co-directed by

**Béatrice Bijon**

Cinematography

**Adis Hondo, Scott Wombey**

Editor and colourist

**James Lane**

Original music composed by

**Eric Bijon**

Original music performed by

**Eric Bijon and Joseph Bijon**

Audio post-production

**Tim Duck**

Sound recordists

**Suze Houghton, James Lane and Marianna LaFollette**

Additional cinematography

**Thomas Danielczik and Martin Thomas**

Made by Red Lily Productions

Distributed by Ronin Films

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Screen Australia, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, PARADISEC  
and the Australian National University.

Duration 73 minutes

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# *Etched in Bone*

## **Background to the film**

***Martin Thomas***

*Historian and director of Etched in Bone*

### **Origins**

Back in 2006, I was doing historical research in the sound archives of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). My idea was to track down archival recordings of Aboriginal music that could be digitised and taken to locations where the original performances took place. In this way, I could study them with the input and guidance of Indigenous experts. The process can be thought of as a form of repatriation, although it is very different to the return of human remains. These old sound recordings are inherently fascinating, embedded as they are in the politics of intercultural encounter. Despite the crackle and distortion of the low-fidelity media, you still get a sense of the mutual curiosity between performers and recordists which drove these exchanges.

There is an allusion to these origins in one of the historical flashbacks in *Etched in Bone*. Archival film from 1948 shows two white men and a slightly larger ensemble of Aboriginal people who are gathered around a Pyrox recorder. The Pyrox was a progenitor to the tape machine, only it recorded onto magnetic wire. In this part of the film, a man (named Larry Marawanna) is being interviewed. His interlocutor is an ABC producer and journalist (Colin Simpson). After a few rather awkward questions, there comes a moment when the technician (Ray Giles) hits the playback button on the recorder and the musicians hear one of the songs they had recently sung for the machine. A member of Marrawana's cohort looks curiously into the recorder, trying to locate the source of the sound.



*Residents of Oenpelli Mission make sound recordings with ABC producer Colin Simpson (in pith helmet) and technician Raymond Giles, 1948. Larry Marrawana is holding a wooden pipe. Collection of the National Library of Australia. Photograph: Howell Walker.*

For several weeks in 1948, the men from the ABC carted this machine around the Arnhem Land settlement of Gunbalanya (then known to the wider world by its mission name, Oenpelli). They recorded everything from the riotous choruses of corellas and magpie geese to the sacred proceedings of an initiation ceremony. At that stage, I had only vaguely heard of the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land, a large interdisciplinary research venture which was nearing its final days when Simpson and Giles arrived in west Arnhem Land, not far from the eastern boundary of what is now Kakadu National Park. Their purpose was to gather location recordings and interview expedition members. This material was used in a feature program, aired in late 1948 by the national broadcaster.

As my research progressed, I would learn much more about the 1948 expedition. Tracking the expedition story, I went to the Washington archives of National Geographic and the Smithsonian Institution. These were the two American organisations that co-sponsored the expedition in collaboration with the Australian Government. There I found planning documents, diaries, notebooks, and hundreds of black and white photographs, some of which appear in the film. At the National Geographic Society, an archivist unearthed many hours of sixteen-millimetre outtakes, shot in colour during the course of the expedition.





*Jacob Nayinggul, 2011.  
Photograph: Martin Thomas.*

Once these records had been digitised, I was able to take them to the main Arnhem Land settlements visited by the researchers on the expedition some sixty years earlier. Among all Arnhem Land communities, there is enormous interest in how their forebears are portrayed in historic media, the bulk of it produced by missionaries, journalists, anthropologists or other scholars. The protocol for this sort of archive-based research in Indigenous communities is that a researcher should first show the material to the most senior members of the community. The elders make the call about whether the images can be shown more widely.

### **Meeting Jacob**

When visiting Gunbalanya, I was quickly introduced to Jacob Nayinggul. Then in his late sixties, he was a charismatic lawman, educator and cultural broker. Neither he, nor anyone else in the community, had direct memories of the 1948 expedition—a grim reflection of the low life expectancy among Aboriginal Australians. But he remembered many of the people depicted in the footage. He and other elders of his vintage—all now passed away—provided invaluable testimony concerning the songs, ceremonies and other activities documented by the anthropologists and filmmakers on the 1948 expedition.

There was one aspect of the expedition, however, that was a source of great distress to Nayinggul and those around him. The Smithsonian appointed four of its scientists as members of the expedition, the most senior of whom was Frank M. Setzler, Head Curator of Anthropology. He had a history of collecting human remains from American Indian mortuary sites, which he deposited in the Smithsonian's enormous physical anthropology collection. He pursued this interest in Australia. The bones he collected from ossuary caves and other mortuary sites in various parts of Arnhem Land were all shipped to Washington. On each bone he inscribed a museum number and its place of origin.



### **Disputed collections**

By the time I began my research, the Australian government was aware that the bones gathered by the expedition were still being held in storage by the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH), one of the Smithsonian's principal museums. Diplomats and other Australian officials argued that the bones were the property of the Aboriginal peoples of Arnhem Land. They should therefore be returned. A tense standoff ensued, resulting in nearly ten years of inertia. That the Department of Anthropology at the NMNH was not prepared to act on this issue was perplexing to many. After all, the repatriation of American Indian human remains has been going on steadily since the early 1990s. The museum even has a repatriation unit with dedicated officers. Over time, it became apparent that in contrast to the treatment of federally recognised American Indian tribes, Indigenous groups from outside the US were being denied the opportunity to have their ancestors' bones returned to them. This unfortunate instance of American exceptionalism was especially incongruent because the Smithsonian's physical anthropology collection had been drawn from all over the world. Indeed, its very purpose was to represent the human family in all its diversity.

Through a combination of behind-the-scenes lobbying and public agitation on the issue, the Smithsonian began to yield on the question of the Arnhem Land repatriation. Yet some curators were evidently reluctant to lose 'their' collections. In 2009, when they first gave ground, the Department of Anthropology consented to the repatriation of only a proportion of the bones collected in 1948. The remainder would be kept permanently by the museum in the interests of 'science'. Predictably, the Arnhem Land communities were not satisfied. So the lobbying continued. At a 2009 symposium on the 1948 expedition, hosted by the National Museum of Australia, Kim Beazley, who was at that time Ambassador-designate to Washington, made a public statement that he was determined to do all in his power to get all the bones returned. This seems to have precipitated some movement, for within just a few months, the Smithsonian advised the Australian Government that the repatriation of the remaining bones could go ahead.

### **Journey to Washington**

Three men from Arnhem Land went to Washington to bring home their ancestors' remains. They all represented communities from which bones were collected. Jacob Nayinngul was too sick to travel, so a younger man, Victor Gumurdul, represented Gunbalanya. Thomas Amagula represented the people of Groote Eylandt. The most senior figure was Joe Gumbula, from the Yolngu country of northeast Arnhem Land. Gumbula was a highly respected singer and ceremonial leader who performed in a range of genres, ranging from traditional ceremony to rock and roll. He was the recipient of an honorary doctorate from the Australian National University who at the time employed him as a research fellow.



*Martin Thomas, Joe Gumbula and Victor Gumurdul in the National Anthropological Archives near Washington DC, looking at material from the 1948 American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land, 2010. Photograph: Adis Hondo.*

We did not know it then, but the project that would become Etched in Bone began its life with that trip to Washington. Because of my interest in the latter-day impacts of the 1948 expedition, I asked if I could document the repatriation, accompanied by cinematographer, Adis Hondo. Permission was willingly granted, for all participants could see the advantage of having a video record of this historic occasion. An eventful few days in Washington culminated in a ceremony on the premises of the National Museum of the American Indian, another of the Smithsonian's many museums.

Indigenous American curators looked on and assisted as Gumbula led the solemnities, which began with a smoking ceremony, an element common to many Aboriginal funerals. He performed a compelling song that celebrated the paperbark trees in his beloved homeland, a place called Djiliwirri. In this way, carried on a current of smoke and song, the bones were ushered out of the US capital.



*Thomas Amagula, Victor Gumurrdul and Joe Gumbula sing the bones out of the Smithsonian Institution, 2010. Photograph: Adis Hondo.*

### **Old and new footage**

When the bones were back in Australia, I showed the Washington video to Jacob Nayinggul. He watched it several times and we discussed at length what had happened there. That is how the idea of developing the story of the bone theft into a public documentary began to take root. Among the materials that could be woven into a cinematic tapestry were the photos taken by expedition members and archival manuscripts, including Setzler's diary with its sickening revelation of how he intentionally avoided Aboriginal scrutiny when he raided mortuary sites. That is to say, he was fully aware of the extent of his transgression. On Injalak, the sacred plateau on the edge of Gunbalanya (seen often in the film), he actually waited until his local guides took a siesta before robbing a cave of its bones.



Setzler concealed this aspect of his work from Aboriginal people, but to his compatriots back home he was keen to advertise it. Hence the disturbing archival footage used in the documentary where Setzler, hamming it up for the camera, 'discovers' a cache of bones in a crevice. You see him pulling them out, handling them, and showing them off to the camera, before packing them into ammunition boxes. His diary reveals that he made specific arrangements with the National Geographic photographer (Howell Walker), assigned to the expedition. They climbed the hill with another white man (Bill Harney) and did the filming. The outtakes in the National Geographic Society archives contain multiple versions of the scene. Setzler 'performs' the theft, then returns the bones to the crevice before re-performing it with a different emphasis. Unsurprisingly, Jacob Nayinggul was profoundly offended by this footage. But he felt that if the story of the stolen bones was to be told properly, it needed to be included in the film. Audiences had to feel the impact of the bone theft, if only to ensure that nothing like it could happen again.

The interviews with Jacob that appear in the first fifteen minutes of the film were born of these discussions. He chose the location: his ancestral country, a dozen kilometres east of Gunbalanya. When shooting, he often made suggestions. He had appeared in other documentaries and he related strongly to the medium of cinema. He was also extremely photogenic. He specifically asked us to film inside the small rock shelter where the bones of one of his ancestors are visible. The causeway, known as Cahills Crossing, on the East Alligator River, was another site that he wanted us to shoot. At home in his ancestral country, Jacob talked about the responsibilities of land ownership in the Aboriginal world. This included a duty to the ancestors, whose spirits inhabit the country and whose presence is embodied in their physical remains, which are laid to rest within the boundaries of their traditional country and where they would expect to stay in perpetuity.



*Cahills Crossing on the East Alligator River is one of several locations on Jacob Nayinggul's ancestral country that he wanted included in the film. Photograph: Martin Thomas.*

Jacob's discussion of the spirit world was one of the great illuminations in the long journey of making the film. Some Westerners might regard the theft of the bones as a case of stolen patrimony. That is true, but it only touches the surface of the problem. Theft is a crime against property, whereas Jacob saw this as a crime against people. The fact that they were dead people did not lessen—indeed possibly it heightened—the degree of offence and its impact on the living people of today. Everyone from Arnhem Land with whom I discussed the matter was fearful that when the bones were collected, the spirits of their owners were wrenched from their country and taken to the United States.

### **Returning to country**

As the Gunbalanya elder responsible for deciding what to do with the repatriated bones, Jacob's challenge was to find a way of reintegrating the 'de-patriated' spirits to their homeland. The rituals for doing this occurred in July 2011 and are well documented in the film. In a revival of traditional mortuary rites (that have now been replaced by Christian-style funerals), the bones were removed from their museum packaging and respectfully painted with red ochre.

The bones of each person were then wrapped in paperbark. The next day, they were buried in a large public funeral.



*Jacob Nayinggul  
in July 2011 after  
the burial of the  
repatriated bones.  
Photograph: Martin Thomas.*

By that time, Jacob Nayinggul was a very sick man. The vigour with which he led the ceremony rather belied the reality that he was in almost constant pain from cancer and complications relating to diabetes. I returned to Gunbalanya about a month after the burial and recorded his final reflections on the repatriation. He died a few months later.

At this stage, we had the backbone of the film: the interviews with Jacob; the trip to Washington; the footage of the bone wrapping and the burial ceremony. But the project had to go into abeyance during the period of mourning. In Arnhem Land, and in many other parts of Australia, there is a taboo on naming or in other ways depicting a recently deceased person. This prohibition extends from verbal naming to depictions of the deceased in all forms of media, including photography and voice recording. In the case of a senior person, the taboo can last for several years.

These were difficult times for all of us involved in the film. The mourning process for Jacob had come to an end, and we were ready to go back to the project, when Joe Gumbula died of kidney-related illness in 2015. He was sixty years old. Later that year, cinematographer Adis Hondo died of cancer.



### **The film takes shape**

The next year, 2016, I had a period of extended leave from the Australian National University and was able to return to the project. Etched in Bone now had a distributor: Andrew Pike of Ronin Films, himself an experienced filmmaker. He saw rushes from the project and offered to distribute the finished product. He recommended the film's editor James Lane who, alongside cinematographer Scott Wombey, is the mainstay of Associative Producers, a small and dynamic production house based in Canberra.

For both my wife Béatrice Bijon (producer and co-director) and for me, this was our first foray into filmmaking, and it was becoming dauntingly clear just how much work the post-production process would involve. Serendipitously, Béatrice was also at a moment when she could commit a significant amount of time to the project, having just submitted a long book manuscript to a publisher in her native France. Despite having the essentials in terms of actuality, there were still major elements of the production that were unresolved. There was the history of the 1948 expedition to be scripted and the archival footage selected. We also needed to tell the story of the Smithsonian and its huge collection of human anatomy. In another serendipitous event, Bone Rooms, a significant book on this subject, was published by Samuel Redman, an emerging historian in Massachusetts. Béatrice and I flew to the US to interview him in September 2016.

Afterwards, we travelled to Gunbalanya for a final shoot in October 2016. James Lane, by this time well into his stride with the edit, put on his sound recordist's hat to work with Scott Wombey who filmed exquisite landscape and rock art footage. Also on that shoot, we filmed the unique sequence that opens Etched in Bone: the scene where Alfred Nayinggul, Jacob's son, ritually smokes the computer hard drive containing video files for the film. They included all the actuality we had shot as well as the archival footage, including Setzler stealing the bones. The reasoning behind the smoking ritual was that the spirits of the ancestors might become disturbed or angry by the airing of footage showing their bones. The smoking has a calming effect. In this way, Alfred ensured that protection of the audience was firmly factored into the structure of the film.



*Filming in Arnhem Land, 2016. Photograph: Martin Thomas.*

The smoking sequence is emblematic of the ethos that governed our filmmaking, which we see as an inherently intercultural process. That requires responsiveness on our part to the input and ideas of the people with whom we work. Not only is this an ethical approach to the creation of documentaries, but it brings great excitement to the creative process—and inevitably it shapes the film.

Another occasion when Béatrice and I experienced this sort of shaping occurred on the Arnhem Land island of Galiwin'ku where Joe Gumbula lived much of his life. We went to consult with Joe's widow, Pamela Ganambarr, about whether we could use footage of him in the film. We were warmly received by Pamela, her daughter Farrah, and Joe's brother Brian Garawirrtja. Teary as they were at seeing the footage of Joe performing in Washington, their impulse—which we encountered so many times—was to be suggestive, not restrictive. The song that Joe sang in DC contained recitation of the names of different parts of the paperbark tree. Wittingly or unwittingly, it anticipated the fate of the bones that returned to Gunbalanya. That evening, after a day spent reminiscing about Joe and recording information about his singing, the family screened for us a video copy of Joe's 'Djiliwirri' video clip from the 1990s, a rousing celebration of the paperbark swamp in his traditional country. They urged us to weave it into the film. We had no hesitation in doing so: thematically and musically it is magnificent. Once again, the production was immeasurably enhanced by this input.

### **Repatriation revisited**

As the filmmakers, Béatrice and I bear responsibility for the final product. But if *Etched in Bone* has succeeded at all in presenting to the wider public the cultural challenges of bone theft and repatriation, it is because of the input

provided by the Aboriginal people with whom we worked. In this regard, the longitudinal nature of the project served us well. The journey has lasted eight years. Certainly, we wished at times for a quicker resolution. But the advantage of taking that much time is that we have been able to maintain and develop our relationships with the community.

During post-production, as the rough cut became a little smoother, we returned to Gunbalanya and sought approval. Not many changes were suggested, but we always made them. In post-production, as in the shooting, we have had enormous assistance from the community. The translation of dialogue from Kinwinjku (the main Aboriginal language in the film) to English was itself a significant undertaking. Unlike many research 'products' generated by academics, this one is fully accessible to the mob at Gunbalanya. You could say that the filmmaking process is another sort of repatriation—an ongoing cycle of feedback in which the story reconnects with its site of origin, much like an incoming tide.

When we launch the film in Canberra on 4 October 2018, it will be almost seventy years since the end of the 1948 expedition and the removal of the bones from Gunbalanya and other locations in Arnhem Land. Etched in Bone deals only with the Gunbalanya experience. Other communities, on Groote Eylandt and around Cape Stewart, have their own repatriation stories to tell, should they decide to do so.

In early November 2018, we will be back in Gunbalanya for a community screening and celebration. That will coincide, almost exactly, with the departure of the expedition with its grim trophies packed in boxes. What an interesting sequence of events has led to the point where the bones are back and buried. We will be sure to visit the grave site, located in the old mission cemetery on the edge of town and marked by four metal stakes, but otherwise reclaimed by vegetation. As Jacob Nayinggul expressed it with his customary eloquence and compassion: the ancestors are 'back into their own bodies and back into their country.'





*Martin Thomas interviewing Isaiah Nagurrurrba on Injalak with Scott Wombey filming and James Lane recording, 2016. Photograph: Béatrice Bijon.*

## The Filmmakers

**Martin Thomas** (Director, Producer and Narrator) is Associate Professor in the School of History at the Australian National University. He is the author of *The Artificial Horizon: Imagining the Blue Mountains* (2003) and *The Many Worlds of R. H. Mathews: In Search of an Australian Anthropologist* (2011), which won the National Biography Award of Australia. He is editor or co-editor of several volumes on exploration including *Exploring the Legacy of the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition* (2011), *Expedition into Empire* (2015) and *Expeditionary Anthropology* (2018). While Etched in Bone is his first film, Thomas has made numerous radio documentaries for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. The best known is *This is Jimmie Barker* (2000), a portrait of an Aboriginal sound recordist from Brewarrina which won the New South Wales Premier's Audio/Visual History Prize. As an interviewer for the Oral History and Folklore Collection of the National Library of Australia, Thomas has recorded more than 30 whole-of-life interviews with prominent Australians. For more than ten years, he has been working with Aboriginal communities in Arnhem Land, interpreting historic film and sound recordings with elders. In 2019-20 he will be based in Ireland where he has been appointed Keith Cameron Professor of Australian History at University College Dublin.



*Béatrice Bijon and Isaiah Nagurrurrba in a cave on Injalak plateau during the 2016 shoot. Photograph: Martin Thomas.*

**Béatrice Bijon** (Producer and Co-Director) is a scholar of English literature and women's history and a Visiting Fellow at the Australian National University. In her native France she was senior lecturer at the University of Lyon. She is co-author of *Suffragistes et suffragettes: la conquête du droit de vote des femmes au Royaume-Uni et aux Etats-Unis*, published in December 2017. She is editor or co-editor of several volumes on travel writing and world literature, including *In-Between Two Worlds: Travel Narratives by Female Travellers and Explorers, 1850-1945* (2009) and *The Production of Strangeness in Postcolonial Literatures* (2010). Bijon relocated to Australia in 2011 after a Harold White Fellowship at the National Library of Australia. Her migration to Australia took her into new areas of research. Work in Arnhem Land communities in 2012 led to her involvement in the Etched in Bone project. In 2018, she curated at the National Library of Australia *Deeds Not Words*, an exhibition to mark the centenary of some women getting the vote in Britain for the first time. She is currently lecturing in the School of Literature, Languages and Linguistics at the Australian National University.