

'Forensic Anthropology – The Journey from Culloden to Iraq

Professor Sue Black OBE FRSE,
Head of Unit, Anatomy and Forensic Anthropology, University of Dundee

Forensic Anthropology – In the real world

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Few disciplines have suffered as much from the intrusion of popular media culture as forensic anthropology. From the smiling skull uncovered for Taggart or reconstructed for Morse to the heroines of Kathy Reichs and Patricia Cornwell. Every now and again we have to even stand up to Amanda Burton and good old Quincy. The cameras have been admitted into our isolated academic world and sometimes it is difficult to live up to the public's expectations.

So what is forensic anthropology? One curmudgeonly Sergeant was overheard to comment in words similar to – 'What the heck do we want an anthropologist for – we're not looking for the Amazon? It is the frequent misconception by the public that forensic anthropology must deal with long lost peoples from unknown civilisations, isolated somewhere up an equatorial rain forest. The other misconception is that it is a subject that just deals with dry old bones but both are far from the truth.

The word forensic is derived from the Latin '*forensis*' meaning 'pertaining to the court' and anthropology literally means the study of man. Therefore by definition, forensic anthropology is the study of man for the purposes of informing the court. Whilst the discipline operates to assist the investigative forces its ultimate lord and master is the courts of justice. The practitioners of this subject are expert witnesses whose testimony in court carries considerable weight and therefore their training must be intensive and lengthy.

Within the UK, forensic anthropologists assist the investigative forces in the identification of the deceased. The victim may have passed from this world recently or it may show significant decomposition or indeed be skeletal or fragmented in its presentation. The forensic anthropologist must be able to carry out their work regardless of the manner in which the body is presented. Our prime function is not to determine the cause or manner of the death (that is the remit of the forensic pathologist) but rather it is to assist in the identity of the deceased. The remit of the job has expanded in the last 10-15 years as we are more frequently asked to assist the international community in the investigation of war crimes, abuses of human rights and humanitarian repatriation. The mass graves of Rwanda, Yugoslavia and Iraq require our assistance as much as the disasters of the World Trade Centre, the Asian Tsunami or the London bombings. Wherever the deceased require to be identified, there is work for the forensic anthropologist.

This is not a profession for the weak or the mildly interested. There is no such thing as a typical day and there is no such thing as an easy job. One case may find you in the wilds of Scotland excavating an abandoned quarry for the skeletal remains of a mother and child who have been missing for 27 years with no more to worry you than the midges. But it may equally find you in the depths of Sierra Leone being surrounded by armed guards whose sole aim is to prevent the rebels from capturing you as a hostage.

Glamorous? Oh dear me no! Nobody looks good in a scene of crime paper suit.

Demanding? Unquestionably. 12 hour shifts for 6 weeks without a break.

Interesting? Absolutely no doubt. No two cases or two days are ever the same.

Addictive? Without question. Each and every case is the challenge that demands to be conquered.

Would I encourage my daughters to follow in my footsteps? Don't be silly!