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'GO AND TAKE A LOOK AT MILLIE NOW'

Murder, tattooed remains and museum ethics in Quebec

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Introduction

The remains of a woman named Mildred Brown, who died in 1929, are buried without a headstone near the easternmost point of the Island of Montreal in Hawthorn-Dale Cemetery. According to Brian Young, Hawthorn-Dale's 'mission was to provide an accessible, attractive site for modest burials' that the most destitute could afford.[1] The interment of Brown's remains in this cemetery and without a gravestone suggest that she did not have many assets and that her family, who paid for the burial, did not either. Brown's socio-economic status also impacted her body's posthumous treatment. When laid to rest, a small piece of her corpse was missing and now resides in a museum storage facility over two hundred kilometres away. Investigating the circumstances surrounding the removal and preservation of Brown's tattooed skin, I show that this object provides a counterpoint to the 'official' history of Quebec's medicolegal apparatus, which otherwise overlooks how one of the province's foremost physicians collected and displayed bodily pieces from the corpses of those victimised by crime.

Brown relocated to Montreal from Sydney on Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Island. It is unclear why she moved, but by the late 1920s the region's shipbuilding, coal and steel industries were declining and Cape Bretoners dispersed across Canada for employment.[2] Women's work outside the home was an established feature of Montreal life by the time she arrived.[3] Sydney and Montreal's respective economies likely played a role in Brown's move. Montreal was at the height of a pre-Depression economic boom and the city's factories, shops and garment industry employed working-class women like her.[4] Simultaneously, Brown exemplifies how some women navigated and resisted gender and class barriers created by religious, medical and legal institutions, since her lifestyle – as an unmarried woman living and working far from her birthplace – was a noticeable deviation from the Catholic conservatism expected of women in Montreal.[5]

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The events leading to Mildred Brown's death began early on 3 July 1929 at a residence that doubled as a speakeasy. The twenty-eight-year-old was drinking alcohol with two other women, a waitress named Doris Campbell Morrison, who went by Nancy, and Margaret Laird. Alongside them were two men, Thomas Stevens, a ship steward and Brown's boyfriend who she lived with in the Irish working-class Point Saint Charles neighbourhood, and a sailor named Emmanuel Borga. According to newspapers, Brown accused Morrison of trying to steal Stevens, creating tension between friends. After comings and goings and continued drinking, Morrison returned in the evening and confronted Brown. She picked up a wooden beam, struck Brown several times, and invited the others to, 'Go and take a look at Millie now'.[6] Brown was taken to hospital and died within hours. Police arrested Morrison, who the Coroner's Court found responsible for the death, thus sending her to trial for murder that September. Before trial, she pled guilty to the lesser charge of manslaughter. 'Millie was my best friend', she told Justice C. A. Wilson, 'but we were both drunk at the time and I did not know what I was doing'.[7] Wilson sentenced the twenty-two-year-old to five years in prison and in December she was transferred to Quebec City's Saint-Vincent-de-Paul Penitentiary to serve her sentence.[8] She faded into obscurity after her release but the implications of her actions still reverberate, raising issues about how museums collect and display body parts from crime victims from over a century ago to the present day.

A cause célèbre

Brown's deceased body was transported from hospital to the provincial medicolegal lab, which opened under the Directorship of physician Wilfrid Derome in 1914. Abrasions on her body told the story of a violent assault. Derome also discovered marks she had acquired voluntarily. Brown had tattoos, which many Western women – from sex workers to the bourgeoisie – began to wear by the turn of the twentieth century.[9] Tattoos, in other words, transcended class but records of these markings have skewed Western tattooing's history in that they typically come via people whose bodies were inspected by those in positions of power over them, namely lower and middle working-class male groupings such as criminals and sailors.[10] Much less is known about tattoos that belonged to normal working-class women like Mildred Brown because their bodies were not systematically examined in comparison. Brown's tattoos therefore straddle this schism: due to her death, we come to learn about one otherwise ordinary woman's tattoos and, more particularly, one doctor's interest in them.

Derome photographed Brown's body, believing that photographs had investigative value for identification.[11] He believed tattoos had a similar use. 'The value of tattoos as identifiers is highly important', he indicated prior to Brown's death.[12] But the doctor's attention to her tattoos was not for this purpose: Brown's identity was always known. Derome nevertheless removed at least one professionally rendered tattoo from her body, which depicted an American flag with her initials, 'M.B'.[13] There was already a model for such an act. An unidentified male cadaver found in Montreal's Saint

Lawrence River during 1920 bore several tattoos: a heart with a sword, an anchor, clasped hands over a heart and a rose.[14] Without leads regarding his identity, one newspaper reported that the tattoos were 'cut out by the doctor and placed to dry to enable the reading of the marks'.[15] This instance establishes that the removal of tattooed skin from deceased bodies in the city was done under the direction of a doctor, likely Derome, and underscores that such an undertaking was, apparently, to help identification. Subsequent actions, however, strongly hint that identification was not the reason the doctor collected Brown's skin.

Derome placed a photograph of Brown's corpse in a scrapbook he maintained, the *Album des causes célèbres*, wherein he juxtaposed images of victims of crime alongside coinciding newspaper reportage, obscuring boundaries between personal and professional interest. Documenting murder through photographs, media coverage and retained body parts was a practice the doctor engaged in well before Brown's death. Aside from Brown, other cases in the album that correspond to human remains Derome kept include that of Rita Dupuis, a victim of an unsolved murder in 1925; Charles Bernard, who was slain alongside his wife in 1925; Antonia Poitras, who was shot to death by her husband in 1926; eight-month-old Laurisse Roy and her four-year-old brother, Roger, who died from injuries inflicted by their father in 1929; and Thilnā Scobeil, who was killed by her husband in 1929.[16]

Legislation provides insight into the scope of authority given to those who investigated death in the province, which may have impacted the doctor's ability to save parts of deceased people's bodies. The *Coroner's Act* explicitly stated that 'for the purposes of an inquest the coroner shall take possession of the body and *everything* [emphasis added] that may be useful as evidence'.[17] Derome was not a coroner, but the Coroner's Court invested substantial power in him as the province's *foremost* expert in forensics – having testified on a near weekly basis – and this status ensured little oversight over his work. Brown's murder was one of seven in the city during 1929, but what made it so intriguing to the media and legal system was its commission by a woman.[18] Taking a piece of Brown's body may have been a way for Derome to extend his fascination with this *cause célèbre* and add to his growing assortment of human remains associated with crime, accentuating the sense of ownership the doctor felt over bodies at his lab and the power he held to do so.

Alongside Brown's skin, Derome amassed bones, internal organs, parts of men and women's reproductive systems, and foetuses at varying stages of development. They entered what he described as 'a museum where hundreds of articles, specimens of anatomy and instruments, all connected with crimes, are carefully set up and classified'.[19] Crime museums of this sort emerged across the world by the twentieth century. Police, criminologists and doctors established them for reasons that ranged from research to signifiers of professional accomplishment. Generally, institutional crime museums were not open to the public, shielding them from outside scrutiny of their holdings. The collections these museums developed reflect the access those who managed them had to certain objects and the authority they had to retain and display them. Police, for instance, kept evidence but did not typically have the ability to accumulate body parts in the same way that doctors

like Derome did. The remains the physician collected came predominantly from that he had regular access to as a medicolegal physician: corpses of working-class crime victims like Mildred Brown.

There was a long precedent for collecting tattooed skin and displaying it in crime museums by the time Derome did so. Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso founded a crime museum at the University of Turin in the late nineteenth century.[20] Lombroso collected remains of criminals to support his contention that criminality was a born trait and his assortment of tattooed skin was presumably to bolster his contention that tattoos were an atavistic manifestation of a biological criminality.[21] Lombroso's French contemporary Alexandre Lacassagne collected tattooed skin that he likewise displayed in a museum at his medicolegal laboratory in Lyon. Lacassagne differed from Lombroso in that he viewed tattoos as signifiers of a learned, socially acquired criminality.[22] Derome diverged from the two men in that he did not believe – so far as his available writing suggests – that tattoos denoted criminal tendencies and he did not publicly ascribe to them any inherent qualities regarding the personality of a wearer such as Mildred Brown. Consequently, Derome's pragmatic emphasis on tattoos as marks of identification supports my contention, reinforced by his cataloguing of Brown's death in a scrapbook, that he did not remove her tattoos for this purpose.

Helen MacDonald has shown that dissection became a cultural activity for many doctors and the circulation and display of body parts had a social component.[23] Not far from Derome's museum, the Maude Abbott Medical Museum at McGill University had pieces of tattooed skin in its collection that predated Brown's. Similar to the tattoos Derome collected, these came from people on the margins of society, so much so that their names were not even recorded in coinciding textual records – their body *parts* mattered more than their *whole* bodies as once living human beings. One specimen Abbott received from the Army Medical Museum in Washington, D.C. was referred to as 'tattooing of skin of negro'. Two obtained from New York's College of Physicians and Surgeons were catalogued simply as 'skin with tattooing'.[24] Unknown bodies, racialised bodies, criminal bodies and the bodies of poor, working-class people like Mildred Brown who died without financial means were the predominant sources of tattooed skin that these institutional museums collected and displayed. Outside museums, gathering and exhibiting human remains was normalised in Montreal's medical profession. A recurrent event at the Société Médicale de Montréal's meetings was the presentation of anatomical specimens. Physicians displayed these objects to their colleagues and gave a narrative of the patient's medical condition from who they came. In 1909, Derome showed his colleagues an ovarian cyst he removed from a woman.[25] Over successive years, his collecting continued. A label on another surviving object – a pregnant uterus encased in plastic – indicates that Derome obtained the specimen in 1911, during which time he worked at a local hospital. When his laboratory opened three years later, the institution and his position as its Director afforded him nearly carte blanche to continue collecting pieces from the bodies of people such as Mildred Brown to a greater degree while also providing space to display them.

The laboratory's museum may have had an educational impetus, but the peculiarities of the objects collected and the methods used to display them reveal that Derome and his successors considered aesthetic factors as well. Alike objects were grouped together and often affixed alongside one another on wooden supports, forming sculpture-like assemblages. Brown's skin was nailed to a piece of vinyl that was then fastened to a wooden display plaque. Brown, or at least part of her, literally became objectified. Alongside Brown's, additional pieces of tattooed skin were mounted to this object. Some of these tattoos closely match descriptions of those that belonged to the above-mentioned man whose skin was removed after he was found dead in the Saint Lawrence River. Wood discolouration on nearly the entire apparatus, except for a small rectangular section near the bottom, indicates the removal of a label previously fastened to the object. If Derome believed, at least in part, that the value of tattoos was for identification, perhaps it bore names of those the skin once belonged to, and, as I come to show, ascertaining their identities has been an endeavour that government and Museum employees want to prevent.

Objet d'emotion

Physician Rosario Fontaine assumed responsibility for the laboratory after Derome's death in 1931. Over successive decades, the Museum increasingly fell by the wayside. When plans were afloat for a new building in the 1940s, the Museum's contents were considered integral to the institution and needed appropriate storage.[26] During the early 1950s, Fontaine and his protégé, Jean-Marie Roussel, stressed that the laboratory needed better facilities for this 'invaluable' collection.[27] Notwithstanding their pleas, the collection fell into disrepair by the 1960s, with one observer referring to it as 'an obsolete, antique museum which no one has visited for a long time'.[28] The decreasing interest in the institution's museum hints at shifting norms regarding the collection and display of bodily remains and the importance – or lack thereof – that Derome's successors ascribed to them. By the 1960s, Brown's tattoos would have had little research use to doctors, but, over time and alongside dozens of other remains, they acquired historical importance as objects of institutional memory.

In 1969, Quebec's Ministère de la Sécurité publique opened a fifteen-floor complex for its departments. The Wilfrid Derome Building created space for and renewed interest in the museum collection. Acknowledging its historical, educational and research value, by the early 1970s plans were developed for a public institution named the Quebec Provincial Crime Museum. Around the same period, and perhaps to generate interest and secure finances and a location for the proposed museum, the Ministère admitted several journalists to the collection. One noted that proprietors 'recognize its value as part of the province's history' but were 'aware that some of the exhibits may lead to controversies and protests'.[29] By conceding that the collection raised ethical issues due to holdings of human remains, which needed acknowledgement if the collection was made publicly

available, its caretakers faced an impasse. How could they – or would they – explain, for example, how five pieces of tattooed human skin ended up mounted to a wooden plaque? In the end, they did not have to. The Quebec Provincial Crime Museum never came to fruition and the collection remained with the Ministère de la Sécurité publique for the time being.

Finally recognising its importance to Quebec's history, during 1997 the Ministère transferred the entire collection, including the plaque with Brown's tattooed skin, to Quebec's provincially mandated public history museum, the Musée de la civilization in Quebec City, on a twenty-five-year loan. Human remains from murders Derome investigated appeared in exhibitions such as *Autopsie d'un meurte* (2005) and *Copyright humain* (2009). In early 2018, the Museum opened *Sortir de sa réserve: 400 objets d'émotion*, a permanent collection show with a breadth of objects spanning centuries and representing a cross-section of Quebec society. As a text panel stated, 'Objects tell us about the living environments, daily lives, work, knowledge and know-how, leisure activities, aspirations, accomplishments and mindsets of the people living in Quebec'. The exhibition included several remains Derome collected: the disinterred skull of Raoul Delorme, who was murdered in 1922 – his half-brother, a priest named Adélard Delorme, was tried for the crime but acquitted[30]; and pieces of sawed bone that belonged to Louis-Philippe Lafontaine, a teenager killed and dismembered in 1930.[31] The latter was displayed above the wooden plaque that includes Mildred Brown's tattooed skin, which was presented next to a single piece of unprofessionally tattooed skin encased in a plastic block. Despite the text indicating what objects in the show revealed about Quebec's citizens, more telling is how the Museum soon attempted to hide what the tattoos could divulge: namely, information about their wearers' identities – specifically Brown's – and their collection by one of the province's preeminent physicians.

After visiting the show in the spring of 2018, I contacted the institution about the tattoo objects and coinciding text panels, wanting to know more about their provenance and the sources from which the information in the text was gleaned. The response was obstructive. Emails obtained through Quebec's *Act respecting access to documents held by public bodies and the protection of personal information* reveal how, within days of my inquiry, the Museum removed both tattoo objects from exhibition to thwart attention adverse to the institution and the provincial medicolegal laboratory, which operates under the auspices of the Ministère de la Sécurité publique. The collection's loan agreement specifies that the laboratory retains ownership of the collection and therefore the ability to dictate how, when and why it is – or is not – displayed or accessed.[32] Yet, there is no indication that it ever intervened in the Museum's handling of the collection until this instance. Dany Brown, the Museum's Director of Collections, wrote to curator Valérie Laforge, 'It will be necessary to remove the works from *Sortir de sa réserve* that can reveal a person's identity (for example, Mrs. Brown's tattoo). We will need to validate how things stand in regard to pieces classified as "anatomical"'.[33] Days later, Laforge told the Museum's exhibition manager, 'I've been told that we should take out the tattoos from the section *Se perdre* for reasons linked to the possibility of identifying people. It's a question of ethics and legality.

FIGURE 5.1 Installation view of *Sortir de sa réserve: 400 objets d'émotion* (2018). Photograph by Jamie Jelinski.

You must have already heard about this'.[34] Curator Sylvie Toupin confirmed to staff that the request to remove the items came from Yves Bob Dufour, Director of the laboratory. Outlining concerns raised by the coroner's office, who were also privy to these conversations, Toupin specified that the issue was that people the skin formerly belonged to could be identified because of the tattoos. She indicated that future access to objects from this collection should only be permitted for 'serious (and historical) studies' – implying that mine were neither – and that staff should 'be careful of voyeurism, and unhealthy curiosity',[35] descriptors that reveal how the Museum and government agencies comprehend such remains and perceive research that does not fit their institutional agendas. Curiously, although the institution removed the tattooed skin fragments from the exhibition, Raoul Delorme's skull and Louis-Philippe Lafontaine's bones remained, implying that *my* research on Brown's tattoos was understood to be contentious, rather than an institution-wide ethical stance on human remains more generally.

FIGURE 5.2 Installation view of *Sortir de sa réserve: 400 objets d'émotion* (2018) after removal of tattoo objects from exhibition. Photograph by Jamie Jelinski.

The removal of these objects from display echoes a similar pattern in New Zealand when, beginning in the 1980s and coinciding with Maori decolonisation efforts, many museums removed Maori remains from view to preempt protest.[36] The difference between these instances is telling: whereas New Zealand museums later conceded authority over remains to Maori communities and permitted research into their history,[37] the Musée de la civilization and government stakeholders have solidified their position and continue to restrict access to these objects and coinciding archival material. As his namesake building attests, the Ministère de la Sécurité publique has carefully cultivated Derome's legacy. Recent publications the Ministère and its laboratory have supported to valorise him as a trailblazer but fail to discuss the museum he created and or acknowledge how he retained remains from the bodies of people like Mildred Brown that he attended to.[38] Rina Knoeff and Robert Zwijnenberg argue that despite provocative histories, anatomical

collections must be understood as fluid, 'their purpose, appearance and meaning continuously change according to the cultural and scientific ideas of their keepers'.[39] While I agree that the meaning of such collections should be in constant flux, I disagree that this process should be restricted to 'their keepers' because, as Brown's skin demonstrates, such keepers have ideological, institutionally driven motivations. The Wellcome Collection in London holds three hundred pieces of tattooed skin – many of unknown origin – and has taken a drastically different approach by supporting scholarship on the collection.[40] From this perspective, the Musée de la civilization believed that the tattooed skin fragments are displayable when nameless, yet unfit for viewing when the identity of those it belonged to, in this case Mildred Brown, and the questionable circumstances surrounding its acquisition become potentially knowable.

The Canadian Museums Association, an organisation the Musée de la civilisation is a member of, maintain *Ethics Guidelines* (1999) that provide direction for the treatment of 'culturally sensitive objects and human remains' by museums in the country. The recommendations suggest that museums consult 'appropriate cultural groups' before using such objects and that all presentations and research be 'accomplished in a manner acceptable to the originating community'.[41] These suggestions appear to guide how museums deal with human remains from Indigenous groups – many of which are held by museums across Canada – but provide no advice on how to approach human remains from other social or cultural contexts, such working-class crime victims like Mildred Brown. This framework, though, could easily be adapted for other instances, for example, by seeking out Brown's surviving relatives. Yet, the Musée de la civilisation's liaising with the Ministère de la Sécurité publique's divisions demonstrates that this government body is the only 'originating community' – a direct institutional lineage from Wilfrid Derome – the Museum feels accountable to when displaying remains he collected.

Conclusion

What does Mildred Brown's tattooed skin tell us now that it has been relegated to storage once more? The response that its display created may prove to be its most enduring legacy, counteracting the otherwise dubious circumstances of its removal. Viv Golding and Jen Walklate have suggested that museums need to think less negatively about conflict because 'transformation does not arise without some form of agitation and disruption: acknowledging the conflict zone might be a way to effect real and lasting change' by giving voice to those oppressed by these institutions and their partners.[42] Brown's tattooed remains cannot speak for themselves, nor is there any indication that surviving relatives of the hundreds of people whose body parts are held at the Museum are aware of this situation. However, human remains amassed from the deceased bodies of victims of crime, such as Brown's tattooed skin, expand and provide nuance to the institutionally told history of Derome, his laboratory and its museum. As *the* museum for Quebec history, the Musée de la civilisation has taken it upon itself – with help from the Ministère de

la Sécurité publique – to portray the province's history, including Derome's part in it, favourably. When preserved tattooed skin is presented as part of medicolegal advancement, it contributes to this narrative. When such remains shed insight into the circumstances through which bodily pieces were systematically acquired and displayed in a purpose-built museum, this narrative shifts significantly and, as their efforts reveal, becomes one that government mandataries have worked to suppress. Mildred Brown may not have a headstone marking her final resting place in Hawthorne-Dale Cemetery, but her preserved tattooed skin has drawn post-humous attention to her in a way that no grave marker could and to a degree that members of the working class are rarely afforded in their afterlives.

Postscript

As this book was going to press, the author discovered that the Musée de la civilisation had quietly transferred Mildred Brown's tattooed skin, alongside all other human remains that Derome collected, back to the Ministère de la Sécurité publique in December 2020.

Notes

1 Young, *Respectable Burial*, 117.
2 MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*; Palmer, *Working-Class Experience*, 218.
3 Bradbury, *Working Families*, 13–14.
4 Kealy, *Workers and Canadian History*, 337–38; Copp, *The Anatomy of Poverty*, 44.
5 Baillargeon, *A Brief History of Women in Quebec*, 103–28; Lévesque, *Making and Breaking the Rules*, 11–22.
6 "Woman Held for Murder of Friend," 3 and 12.
7 "Woman is Guilty of Manslaughter," 4.
8 "Woman Sentenced for Manslaughter," 4; Saint-Vincent-de-Paul Penitentiary inmate ledger.
9 DeMello, "The Carnivalesque Body"; Braunberger, "Revolting Bodies"; Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*; O'Neill, *London*, 27–50; Gilbert, *Victorian Skin*, 318–49; Caplan, "'Educating the Eye'."
10 Kent, "Decorative Bodies"; Maxwell-Stewart and Bradley, "'Behold the Man"; Maxwell-Stewart and Bradley, "Convict Tattoos"; Breathnach and Farrell, "'Indelible Characters'"; Rogers, "'A Very Fair Statement of His Past Life'"; Burg, "Sailors and Tattoos in the Early American Steam Navy"; Burg, "Tattoo Designs and Locations in the Old U.S. Navy"; Dye, "The Tattoos of Early American Seafarers, 1796–1818"; Newman, "Reading the Bodies of Early American Seafarers"; Newman, "Wearing Their Hearts on Their Sleeves."
11 Derome, "Le lieu du crime," 278–81.
12 Derome, *Le Precis de Medecine Legale*, 251. Translated from French.
13 On the formal properties of preserved tattoos, see Angel, "Recovering the Nineteenth-Century European Tattoo."
14 Inconnu ("Windmill Point").
15 "Still Unidentified," 7.
16 *Album des causes célèbres*.
17 *An Act Respecting Coroners*, section 3479g.
18 *Rapport annuel du Service de la police 1929–30*, 22 and 29.
19 Derome, "The Laboratory of Legal Medicine and Technical Police of Montreal," 220.

20 Regener, "Criminological Museums and the Visualization of Evil"; Ystehede, "Contested Spaces"; Montaldo, "The Lombroso Museum from Its Origins to the Present Day."
21 Horn, *The Criminal Body*, 48–51.
22 Angel, "In the Skin," 136; Caplan, "'Speaking Scars'"; Angel, "The Tattoo Collectors"; Gilbert, *Victorian Skin*, 318–49.
23 MacDonald, *Human Remains*.
24 Abbott, *Curator's Report of Donations Received in the Museums of the Medical Faculty of McGill University*, 21 and 25; Accession Logbook, 43 and 139; Reception Book, 98.
25 "Presentation de Piece," 22.
26 "Plans for New Morgue Discussed; Would House Medico-Legal Work," 11.
27 Thomson, "Better Facilities Planned for Coroners, City Morgue," 12.
28 Guérin, "Le carnet," 17. Translated from French.
29 Dubois, "Crime Museum Not for the Squeamish," 37.
30 Monet, *The Cassock and the Crown*.
31 "Police Clear Up Brutal Murder," 3.
32 *Convention de prêt à usage*.
33 Dany Brown, email to Valérie Laforge, 24 May 2018. Translated from French.
34 Valérie Laforge, email to Anouk Gingras, 28 May 2018. Translated from French.
35 Sylvie Toupin, email to Valérie Laforge and Anouk Gingras, 31 May 2018. Translated from French.
36 Tapsell, "Taonga."
37 Tapsell, "Out of Sight, Out of Mind."
38 Côté, *Wilfrid Derome*; Cimon et al., "One Hundred Years of Forensic Sciences in Quebec."
39 Knoeff and Zwijnenberg, "Setting the Stage," 5.
40 Angel, "In the Skin."
41 Canadian Museums Association, *Ethics Guidelines*, 11.
42 Golding and Walklate, "Introduction," 11.

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