

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: *Forensic Approaches to Death, Disaster and Abuse*

REFERENCE: Oxenham M. Forensic approaches to death, disaster and abuse. Bowen Hills, Qld: Australian Academic Press, 2008, 324 pp.

Interest in the various forensic disciplines has grown exponentially in the past decade in part because of tremendous media coverage or the “CSI” effect. Data show a concomitant increase in demand for such courses all across the country. Because of this demand, new majors in forensic science are being introduced at numerous higher learning institutions around the globe. This edited volume sets out to compile various forensic subdisciplines under one cover, which is primarily geared towards the general public and academics (p. 4).

Chapter 1, which reads like a prologue, lists Australian institutions of higher learning that offer a degree in forensic disciplines and follows with an overview of the succeeding chapters. The volume is divided into the following four sections: Forensic Archaeology; Techniques of Human Identification; Determining Time, Manner and Cause of Death; and Legal, Ethical and Procedural Issues. The book is further divided into 20 chapters. One thing that stands out is that many of the chapters throughout the book fall under the category of forensic anthropology, such as Chapter 5—“The Role of the Biological Anthropologist in Mass Grave Investigations,” Chapter 6—“Human, Sheep or Kangaroo: A Practical Guide to Identifying Human Skeletal Remains in Australia,” Chapter 7—“Forensic Anthropology in Australia. A Brief History and Review of Casework,” Chapter 8—“Detection of Likely Ancestry Using CRANID,” Chapter 9—“Identifying Child Abuse in Skeletonized Subadult Remains,” Chapter 11—“Ancestry, Age, Sex, and Stature: Identification in a Diverse Space,” and Chapter 16—“Forensic Identification in Fatal Crocodile Attacks,” yet forensic anthropology does not make up a separate section.

Chapter 9 is a comprehensive overview on the identification of physical abuse in young children from skeletal remains. Buckley and Whittle also provide a useful summary in table format including injury, age of victim, injury mechanism, skeletal manifestation, peri- and antemortem appearance.

Chapter 10 by Stephan et al. describes methods of facial approximation and skull–face superimposition. This chapter gives an overview of the general principles of facial approximation and skull–face superimposition and then discusses the history, developments, and contributions to the field in Australia.

Chapter 11 by Littleton and Kinaston addresses four aspects of the basic biological profile (ancestry, age, sex, and stature) in the Asia-Pacific region and the difficulties of utilizing inappropriate standards and reference populations. It is an interesting treatment on the ongoing debate of establishing population specific identification criteria.

Chapter 12 by Pate is a timely discussion of the potential contribution of isotopic chemical analysis to forensic science, specifically in terms of providing information on short- and long-term residence in geographic regions.

Chapters 13–16, in Section 3 “Determining Time, Manner, and Cause of Death,” are a perfunctory treatment of the Coroner system, forensic entomology, forensic chemistry, and a case report on crocodile attacks. While the topics individually may be of interest to a reader, the lack of a common thread among them is problematic. The same can be said of Chapters 2 and 5 which deal with Iraq. Despite the topical nature of forensic approaches in Iraq, the chapters are somewhat cursory and appear out of place from the rest of the book.

The final section of the book, Chapters 17–20, is a collection of dissimilar topics ranging from the role of an international law enforcement agency (Australian Federal Police or AFP) in human identification, medical professionals and bioterrorist investigations, health of prisoners and detainees, to expert witness in the Australian courtroom.

Overall, this book offers several new perspectives on forensic approaches. However, the preponderance of the book focuses on the Asia-Pacific region, more specifically Australia. As such, some readers may find that the book lacks cohesiveness and the title to be somewhat misleading. Nonetheless, individuals with a passing interest in Australian jurisdictional procedure and history and development of Australian forensic anthropology and other forensic disciplines may find this text beneficial.

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