

# BONES



*“Good friend, for Jesus’ sake forbear  
To dig the dust enclosed here;  
Blest be the man that spares these stones,  
And cursed be he that moves my bones.”  
— epitaph of William Shakespeare*

In the family of Man, strictures against the disturbing of human bones are nearly universal. The culture of Micronesia is no exception. Recent TIGHAR research in London has helped bring into focus events surrounding the discovery of bones by the early settlers of the Phoenix Islands — bones which may be those of Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan — and increased the probability that Gilbertese observance of this age-old taboo means that those bones today repose somewhere in the sands of Nikumaroro.

The bones’ discovery first became public on July 21, 1960 when retired Coast Guardsman Floyd Kilts told a reporter at the San Diego Tribune of a story he heard from a Gilbertese colonist on the island in March of 1946:

A native tried to tell me about it, but I couldn’t understand all of it so I got an interpreter. It seems that in the latter part of 1938 there were 23 island people, all men, and an Irish magistrate planting coconut trees on Gardner for the government of New Zealand.

They were about through and the native was walking along one end of the island. There in the brush about five feet from the shoreline he saw a skeleton.

What attracted him to it was the shoes. Women’s shoes, American kind. No native wears shoes. Couldn’t if they wanted to — feet too spread out and flat. The shoes were size nine narrow. Beside the skeleton was a cognac bottle with fresh water in it for drinking.

The island doctor said the skeleton was that of a woman. And there were no native women on the island then. Farther down the beach he found a man’s skull but nothing else.

The magistrate was a young Irishman who got excited when he saw the bones. He thought of Amelia Earhart right away. He put the bones in a gunnysack and with the native doctor, and three other natives in a 22-foot, four-oared boat started for Suva, Fiji, 887 nautical miles away.

The magistrate was anxious to get the news to the world. But on the way the Irishman came down with pneumonia. When only 24 hours

out of Suva he died.

The natives are superstitious as the devil and the next night after the young fellow died they threw the gunnysack full of bones overboard, scared of the spirits. And that was that.

An abbreviated version of the story appeared as an Associated Press release in 1961. Noted by KCBS reporter Fred Goerner, he included a brief mention of it in his 1966 book *The Search for Amelia Earhart*. Goerner dismissed the story as “weird” because he felt the alleged journey to Fiji was incredible. Subsequent research into Earhart’s fate caused Goerner to look further into the bone story. In a letter to TIGHAR member Rob Gerth, dated April 9, 1989, he wrote:

... I did considerable additional research on the Floyd Kilts story.

... The human remains on Gardner were of a man, not a woman. There were only the remains of one person, and that person was a Polynesian man. There was no attempt to take the remains to Suva. The “white planter” in the story was a New Zealander who died on the island of peritonitis. He is buried in a marked grave on Gardner. Floyd Kilts was a part of the U.S. Coast Guard personnel constructing the Loran station on Gardner during WWII. He had been taken to Gardner Island aboard the Coast Guard vessel U.S.S. PLANETREE.

Both Kilts’ original telling of the story and Goerner’s resolution of it are interesting for the mix of fact and fancy they contain. Both are under the mistaken impression that the island was under New Zealand administration. Nikumaroro was, in fact, part of the Gilbert & Ellice Islands Colony of the West Pacific High Commission headquartered in Suva, Fiji, answering directly to London. This error also appears in U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence reports about the island, leading us to speculate that Goerner’s information may have come from such a source (he has not responded to our requests for him to cite his sources). Kilts’ “young Irishman” and Goerner’s “New Zealander” is Gerald B. Gallagher, the Irish-born, Cambridge-educated Officer-in-Charge of the Phoenix Island Settlement Scheme. The most

*Gerald B. Gallagher*

intriguing aspect of both versions is that each ends in such a way as to preclude the exhumation of bones on the island. The people of Micronesia believe that the ghosts of the dead roam abroad among the living so long as their earthly remains are unburied. A careful chronicling of activity on Nikumaroro, made possible by records on file in London, reveals a sequence of events which tracks closely with the bone story.

Kilts' "latter part of 1938" is when the first settlers came ashore (20 December 1938) to "plant coconut trees" and, just as he says, the first work party was all male. The bones were supposedly found when "[t]hey were about through." The coconut planting was not completed until the summer of 1941. Gallagher, who had established a colonial headquarters on the island in September 1940, left on leave in May of '41. Returning in September, he developed appendicitis while en-route aboard the S.S. *Viti*. Although the High Commission's Chief Pathologist, Dr. D. C. M. MacPherson, was along for a medical inspection of the colony, a shipboard operation was deemed too risky. They arrived at Nikumaroro on September 24 and three days later Gallagher died of peritonitis after an unsuccessful operation. From these facts it is possible to construct a scenario which explains both the Kilts and Goerner versions of the bone story.



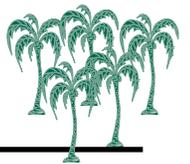
The bones are discovered sometime during the summer of 1941. They are shown to Gallagher and MacPherson upon their arrival at the island September 21 (this is the only time that both the "young Irishman" and the "island doctor" are present on Nikumaroro). Gallagher's appendix has burst shortly before their arrival and his discomfort abates for a couple of days until the resulting peritonitis takes hold. During this time MacPherson identifies the bones as being those of a woman and Gallagher speculates that they might be Earhart's. Then Gallagher rapidly sickens and MacPherson operates, but the 29 year-old colonial officer dies. The tragedy overshadows any speculation about the bones — except for the Gilbertese, who have seen the man who has led them for two and a half years suddenly die after handling the bones. The deadly relics are immediately buried. Five years later

an American Coast Guardsman asks about Amelia Earhart and the bones are mentioned. When he shows great interest the story is given an ending which guarantees the bones will not be disturbed. Later, Kilts tells his story to Naval Intelligence and inquiries are made. The story is not denied but is changed, again to insure that the lethal spirits are not set loose on the island. The new explanation is recorded in Naval Intelligence files where Goerner later finds it.



"Bones" is excerpted from *The Earhart Project*, Fifth Edition.

## RETURN TO NIKUMARORO



Analysis of artifacts and information gathered during TIGHAR's 1989 expedition to Nikumaroro has been so encouraging that the decision has been made to return to the island. Slated for the summer of 1991, this expedition will include technology capable of searching the deep water immediately adjacent to the island's reef. If, as TIGHAR's research has indicated, the aircraft was landed on the dry reef flat at low tide and then, within days, washed over the reef's edge into several thousand feet of water, the Lockheed should survive relatively intact. As with last year's expedition, this effort will be carried out by highly qualified TIGHAR volunteers. No selection of team members has yet been made. This will be a Category III expedition. Members interested in applying for a slot on the team should write to Expedition Director Patricia Thrasher for information.

Meanwhile, the need for funding to continue the research and plan the expedition is critical. All TIGHAR members are urged to do what they can to support the work. In appreciation for your tax-deductible contribution, TIGHAR is pleased to offer:

Earhart Project Patch & T-Shirt	\$25.00
Earhart Project Certificate of Appreciation and Lapel Pin	\$50.00
The Earhart Project, Fifth Edition	\$100.00

Those who receive the Project Book will be eligible to receive subsequent editions for a contribution of \$25.00

