

## Human skeleton lying in scrub, c1900-10



### Description

This is a black-and-white photograph, measuring 12.7 cm x 10.2 cm, of the badly decomposed, skeletal remains of a man lying under a low tree in light scrub-covered land, typical of that of the eastern gold fields. His heavy work trousers still cover his legs. His boots lie near his feet. On the ground on the right of the skeleton is a clay tobacco pipe and what could be a container to hold matches and, on the left, an empty canvas waterbag.

### Educational value

- This asset indicates a lonely death in the bush, which was the fate of many prospectors who ventured into Western Australia's harsh interior in search of gold at the turn of the 20th century - they died of heat, hunger, thirst, accidents and disease, far from help and loved ones; in 1892, when gold was discovered at Coolgardie, the nearest European settlement for replenishing supplies and for medical attention was approximately 200 km away at Southern Cross; European prospectors were unable to live off the bush and did not know where to find water; with few distinguishing features in the flat, trackless landscape many were lost in the bush; prospectors and the newspapers called this type of death 'doing a perish'.
- It suggests the dangers of setting off unprepared to look for gold in Western Australia's inhospitable eastern gold fields - many 'new-chums', in particular, were unprepared, in terms of supplies and knowledge of the conditions, for both the harshness of the environment and for the time they would be spending in the outback regions; the 'Coolgardie Miner' reported in December 1895 that one man had set off for the finds with 'two buns and a bottle of brandy'; ten prospectors are thought to have perished in October 1893 when news of a find at Siberia, 120 km from Coolgardie, sent hundreds of men racing north through waterless country.



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- It suggests, from the empty waterbag alongside the skeleton, that this death was due to dehydration - dehydration was one of the dangers of searching for gold in a desert area with little or no fresh water supply; such deaths in the unforgiving bush were regularly reported in graphic detail; 'Clare's Weekly' of 23 April 1898 reported on the discovery of a body 'For yards around the ground was grubbed up, showing finger marks. Black blood marks on the fingers, and broken nails, showed the last frenzied struggles of the maniac to tear water from the parched earth itself; even the mouth was black with dirt and blood'.
- It depicts the remains of one of the many unidentified men who died in the eastern gold fields - men came from Australia and all over the world to the gold fields, sometimes dying far from home, and being buried unnamed; major newspapers ran 'Missing friends' columns in which the friends and relatives of missing men would advertise for news; Yvonne and Kevin Coates, who have compiled two books listing lonely graves in Western Australia, suggest this is the body of a Mr Henderson, who was lost in the Leonora district several years prior to the skeleton being found in 1902.
- It is an intact example of human remains - the completeness of this skeleton makes this find unusual because scavenging dingoes often removed the limbs of those who had died; human remains were regularly stumbled upon by other prospectors, or found by dedicated search parties if someone was known to be missing; some of the missing were found too late for help, while others were driven mad by thirst, even to the point of taking their own lives.
- It suggests that men who were travelling by themselves on the gold fields were particularly vulnerable to the elements and lack of resources - many who died prospecting alone were never found, so they were not buried and their bodies were left to rot where they died; some historians believe it was on the gold fields that the Australian tradition of mateship was born, because of the need for a partner for support; in Western Australia's arid gold fields often one partner obtained water while the other looked for gold.

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