

# The Abacus of History

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Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark  
THE HISTORY WARS  
MUP, \$29.95pb, 284pp, 0 522 85091 X

Robert Manne (ed.)  
WHITEWASH: ON KEITH WINDSCHUTTLE'S  
FABRICATION OF ABORIGINAL HISTORY  
Black Inc., \$29.95pb, 385pp, 097 507 6906

TOWARDS THE END of his informative introduction, Robert Manne, the editor of *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, outlines the collective intention of the book's nineteen contributors. He refers to Windschuttle's *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (2002), a revisionist text dealing with early colonial history and violence in nineteenth-century Tasmania, as 'so ignorant, so polemical and so pitiless a book'. *Whitewash* proceeds to unpack Windschuttle's polemic with intellectual precision. Manne also links Windschuttle's work to a more general attack on indigenous peoples throughout Australia in the last decade. He cites a range of populist conservatives who have either aided Windschuttle's book or been 'so easily misled' by it. This group includes a cohort of commentators who regularly contribute to the conservative journal *Quadrant* and a number of print media journalists (a list of usual suspects too voluminous to record here).

*Whitewash* includes essays by major writers within the humanities in Australia. Unfortunately, only two indigenous writers, Peggy Patrick and Greg Lehman, are included in the collection. Given the number of indigenous writers and academics in Australia today, and given the strength of their critiques of colonisation, this small representation looks like an oversight. Not that some form of paternalistic tokenism should be applied to such texts. Some critics have labelled the 'Windschuttle debate' as little more than a 'sideshow'. We should move forward by listening to, and reading, more indigenous scholars. This would identify a wider intellectual voice within indigenous Australia, able and prepared to advance ideas within the mainstream intellectual community. Such an outcome would also mitigate the at times crude and deliberately anti-intellectual polemic being constructed by conservative ideologues.

What *Whitewash* does achieve is a necessary and articulate demolition of the 'thesis' presented in Windschuttle's *Fabrication*: that historians such as Henry Reynolds and Lyndall Ryan had exaggerated and 'fabricated' the number of indigenous people murdered by the invading British in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The first essay in *Whitewash*, 'Fantasy Island', by University of Tasmania historian James Boyce, is of such quality, in its detailed

research and intellectual scholarship. By the end, the title of Windschuttle's book begins to seem full of irony.

Boyce casts his eye over the same archival sources used by Windschuttle, and discusses other historical manuscripts that he has ignored. Boyce highlights not only the very selective research and quotation techniques used by Windschuttle, but also illustrates a lack of interpretative skills utilised in his work. The Boyce essay, written in an engaging and assertive voice, provides an invaluable lesson for history students within the academy and for the wider community. It illustrates what good history should be about: creative, ethical and rigorous scholarship that does not balk at strong and, where necessary, adversarial argument.

Reynolds's essay, 'Terra Nullius Reborn', is another impressive contribution to the collection. Reynolds places recent revisionist colonial history within the context of contemporary political and legal argument surrounding indigenous land rights and native title, which did not commence with, but increased in shrillness following the Mabo land rights decision of 1992. Reynolds argues that, since the High Court's ruling that the notion of terra nullius was part of white mythology, some conservatives have actively sought to re-establish a form of neo-colonial thought in Australia by presenting pre-European indigenous society as debased, lacking in cultural value and historical consciousness of its relationship to land tenure and ownership.

Windschuttle's brand of revisionism, as critiqued by Reynolds, is not unrelated to recent accounts of contemporary indigenous Australia, which irresponsibly label indigenous communities as entirely dysfunctional. The motivation behind such representations is often not to assist particular indigenous communities in clear need of greater assistance but to disenfranchise indigenous culture, identity and any recognisable claim to land. It is also noticeable in this essay that Reynolds is more feisty than elsewhere in his extensive body of scholarly work. Having been pricked by the forces on the right, who clearly appreciate the threat posed by a historian appealing to 'liberal-minded' white Australia, Reynolds has reacted — thankfully, not with undue defensiveness. Rather than simply defending the sanctity of his discipline — a conceit practised by others — he has done so both with confidence in his scholarship and an understanding of the political ramifications of the current debate.

The final essay, 'Revisionism and Denial', by A. Dirk Moses, places Windschuttle's *Fabrication* within the wider frame of global revisionist history. If nothing else, this should encourage us to gaze beyond our nationalistic navel. Moses is a good scholar. Recently, the political commentator Christopher Pearson, writing in *The Weekend Australian*, described his essay as 'a disgusting exercise in character assassination'. Clearly, Moses is doing something right.

Simply but instructively, Greg Lehman's essay, 'Telling Us True', reminds us that 'there are many types of historians'. If we are to understand more fully our contested and shared past, we will have to do more than argue over body counts, which can be the crudest form of empiricism. There are

more varied and vital ways to understand the past. Many of the essays in *Whitewash* engage at the level of philosophy, morality and the absence of an ethic within political leadership in Australia, rather than presenting an abacus-lead construction of the past.

*The History Wars* is a very different book, though it does range across similar territory, including Windschuttle's entry into the history of 'Frontier Conflict'. Melbourne University's Stuart Macintyre is joined by the young historian Anna Clark, whose sole essay, 'What Do They Teach Our Children', is a timely contribution given the lack of understanding about indigenous history in Australia. Macintyre provides a lively summary of a series of 'controversies' that have influenced and threatened to destabilise the practice of history within the academy and the discipline's relationship to wider cultural and political forces. Their impact was felt during 'celebrations' such as the 1988 Bicentenary, the 'black armband' debates of the 1990s and recent criticisms of the National Museum of Australia.

Macintyre also discusses the work and contested status of Manning Clark and Geoffrey Blainey, who, with Reynolds, are regarded as having exerted as much influence outside the walls of the academy as within. The early chapters of *The History Wars* read like a family drama as well as a survey of the role and contestations of Australian history. With Macintyre himself commenting on the incestuous nature of the profession, it becomes clear what a small world academia can be in Australia.

Since the release of *The History Wars*, Macintyre has been criticised for his alleged attack on Blainey in the book. Greg Melleuish, a professor of history and politics at the University of Wollongong, not only referred to him as 'the most powerful man in the history profession in Australia' but labelled him 'the godfather of Australian history'. If Macintyre's subdued discussion of Blainey's comments on Asian immigration is anything to go by, he doesn't qualify as the Tony Soprano of the humanities. In his analysis of

the fallout from Blainey's 1984 Warrnambool speech, in which the 'eminent historian' spoke about his concerns about the levels of Asian immigration to Australia, Macintyre quotes from Blainey's *All for Australia* (1984), where he warned of 'the pavements now spotted with phlegm and spit' and skies 'filled with greasy smoke and the smell of goat's meat'. Macintyre states that Blainey 'is not a racist and he was understandably indignant when accused of racial prejudice'. Testimony is adduced to support this view, including from Blainey himself, who had apparently 'made it clear that "all peoples, all races, are worthy of respect"'.

One senses in Macintyre's discussion of Blainey an unease with the subject matter, a restraint possibly informed by the turbulence of the history of history-making in Australia. Blainey's views on migration policy in Australia, which were followed in the 1990s by stridently anti-indigenous statements (such as 'the average Aborigine owns twelve times more land than the average white Australian'), have continued to impact negatively on those communities. In the last two decades, a 'history war' has been waged against marginalised communities in Australia. Macintyre's discussion of Blainey's writing would have been more informative if it had paid more attention to this impact and less to the effect this 'crisis' had on Blainey's peers.

Both *Whitewash* and *The History Wars* suggest that the discipline of history in Australia is a battlefield for the nation's hearts and minds. But, more explicitly, it is a plaything for particular ideological forces. At present, we have a group of populist conservatives waging not a history war but a propaganda one — and a cultural and political struggle. It is an issue for all of us, not just historians.

Scholars within the humanities, but outside the history departments, have complained with some justification that historians make all the running in terms of public discourse. This is true to a degree, in part because it is widely accepted that it is through the production of history that we discover truths about our past. Sometimes we do. And sometimes the opposite of truth is produced.