

Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History : a View from the Other Side

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Perhaps most disturbing is that [Windschuttle's] position demonstrates a great ignorance about Indigenous people, society and culture, past and present, and the basis on which contemporary Indigenous people are asserting their rights. His appeal is to a constituency that shares such ignorance: he positions himself within populist racist ideologies rather than within the ongoing intellectual debate.

The responsibility attached to the writing of Indigenous Australians' histories is immense: no other history has the potential to impact on the present and the future and excite contention and debate to such a high degree. For myself, I approach the task with some misgiving as the fallout can be resounding – my research interest, Indigenous family history with the reality of mixed race marriages and liaisons, is a potential minefield ...

Why is the history of Indigenous Australians so difficult? As a people Australians have not yet come to terms with the past: the settler colonial society has not yet developed an interpretation of history that will wash the blood off their hands. Indigenous Australian individuals and groups are still overcoming the shock of colonialism and developing approaches to deal with the present and the past while trying to put in place strategies for the future. Moreover, Australians as a people have not yet come to terms with the dynamics of race in our society and how racism and colonialist attitudes manifest: they are so ingrained as to be a 'natural' response and an intrinsic part of culture. The 'great Australian silence', in Indigenous history until the last three decades, is testimony to the fact that Australian settler colonialism is overwhelmingly characterised by denial.

Windschuttle's interpretation of Tasmanian history from 1803-47 brings nothing new to the historiography of Indigenous Australian history: he has not written history as such but is attempting to critique the existing histories. This writing is a polemic, blatantly written from an ideological position, in order to prove a political point: that a conspiracy has existed amongst historians and others to prove excessive violence and brutality by the British in the colonial conquest of Australia and establish a case for Indigenous Australian reparations. It is a moot point, whether Windschuttle's argument with Indigenous Tasmanians is incidental to his argument with those he perceives as left-wing historians. The attack on historians is part of his well-documented political agenda, publicised on his web-site www.sydneyle.com¹ where the term 'left-wing' is synonymous with idealistic, subjective and over-theorised. Windschuttle positions himself as the opposite: a realistic, objective, logical empiricist, *who rejects rhetoric* (my emphasis).² Perhaps more disturbing is that Windschuttle, now recognised as a warrior of the 'neo-conservative right', once embraced political certainties of the far 'left' and has developed into an anti-*Jacobinist* for subjective rather than intellectual reasons.³ There is for Windschuttle, it seems, no middle ground.

Deeply concerning is that an Australian of Windschuttle's position, firmly within the intelligentsia, has a misapprehension about the basis of Indigenous claims for 'rights'.⁴ While there may be individual and group anger expressed over the violence and brutality of the past, I am not aware of any political campaign of the twentieth century that actually based claims for rights on knowledge of massacres. The site of the Myall Creek massacre in NSW, for example, has become a monument to contemporary reconciliation with the descendants of those on both sides of the incident meeting on an annual basis.⁵ From the earliest times of colonisation Indigenous people have expressed concerns about the theft of land and the lack of recognition for them and succeeding generations in rights to land.⁶

Windschuttle's approach would have us believe that Indigenous Tasmanians, and, by implication, all Indigenous people of Australia, out in the netherworld of the little understood but apprehended 'other', are apparently accidental targets, caught in the cross-fire of the political factions in Australian politics and society. The really disturbing aspect of this scenario is that Windschuttle would have us believe this about our past: that Indigenous people were not the intentional targets of the colonisers but accidental targets, mostly through their inability to be realistic, objective, logical and moral. He argues that within the psyche and culture of Indigenous Australians lay the seeds of their own destruction.

While firing well-aimed broadsides at various historians who have interpreted Tasmania's Indigenous history, Windschuttle ignores the essential humanity of Indigenous Tasmanians. Indigenous deaths become incidental to his argument against historical observers who voiced concerns about the brutality shown towards Indigenous Tasmanians. For example, he glosses over the 'fact' of Alexander McKay's murder of four Tasmanians when denouncing George Augustus Robinson for comparing the situation in Tasmania with that of the Spanish conquest of South America.⁷ For Windschuttle, colonial crimes don't matter if Indigenous deaths are not *large* enough or *brutal* enough.

This cursory attitude to Indigenous deaths is also evident in his attacks on historians over statistical minutiae. For example, he says that 'of the above atrocities claimed by Jones, *only three* were mentioned to the 1830 committee',⁸ and that 'in ... Plomley's 1992 survey of all archival and published reports of clashes between Aborigines and settlers, he reported *only ten* Aborigines killed between 1804 and 1818'.⁹

Leaving aside his argument with Ryan, Jones et al, surely three and ten atrocities are too many in any context. Given that the injustice of colonial acquisition of lands and associated Indigenous deaths still resounds with contemporary Indigenous Australians, the deaths were all the more immediate, inflammatory and terrifying at the time. The pre-contact Indigenous Tasmanian population was less than 2,000 people by Windschuttle's reckoning and, as Finnane has argued:

The death rate during the seven years of the Tasmanian Black War, based on Windschuttle's own figures of plausible deaths, is more than three times the mortality risk of the Australian population in the First World War when over 60,000 soldiers died.¹⁰

While any loss would be felt keenly, those of young strong men, often the targets, would deplete the capacity of the people to survive.

It is reasonable to suggest too, given the tenor of the times, that figures in the written records that exist may be only indicative of the extent of atrocities. The Committee for the Affairs of Aborigines in 1830 could not expect to have members of the new colonial society voluntarily report the full extent of atrocity and Indigenous informants were not sought out. As Denholm argued in 1979 from the cusp of the wave of new histories of Indigenous Australians, 'that brutality, (of the Georgian English) was simply to occupy Australia'. Each small band of Aboriginal people facing the forces of colonisation on their ground was actually facing the organised might of ten million people.¹¹ Any colonial Australian inclined to go to the 'other' side and report on the activities of their compatriots was brave indeed.

Though Windschuttle poses as the 'value free', 'objective' and 'thorough' historian, he ignores any evidence that contradicts his argument. There are several telling instances of this. Evidence given by an Irish ex-convict, Edward White, to the 1830 Select Committee about the incident at Risdon Cove has been ignored, while the testimonies of Moore and Mountgarret, military men and participants, have been carefully edited. White testified to the peaceable intentions of the Indigenous Tasmanians and described a massacre of 'a great many of the natives'.¹² Whatever else Windschuttle's omission can be described as, it is not the methodology of an historian.

To be caught in Australian political crossfire is symptomatic of the position of Indigenous Australians in Australian society over the past four decades at least. While the perception is that we are willing captives of the left, then we are often the targets of warriors of the right, such as Windschuttle. His argument with us may, or may not, be incidental (is the jury still out on this one?). It is extremely damaging generally, as it reiterates the colonialist, racist attitudes we have been chipping away at for some time, in order to develop a society that has put the past to rest.

Perhaps most disturbing is that his position demonstrates a great ignorance about Indigenous people, society and culture, past and present, and the basis on which contemporary Indigenous people are asserting their rights. His appeal is to a constituency that shares such ignorance: he positions himself within populist racist ideologies rather than within the ongoing intellectual debate.

Windschuttle's thesis underlines his predilection for the 'old' interpretations of Australian colonial history, together with all the attendant bias and attitudes to the role of Aboriginal people, society and culture in their own decline. Denholm identified the 'old' explanations for the colonial conquest of Australia:

[These explanations] were simple. The Aborigines could not fight. They were cowardly and would not fight. They could fight but they were helpless against European technology. Their minds were too primitive to cope with the European intellect. No matter how one tried to help them, they just seemed to vanish from the earth. Confronted with European might, they lost the will to live. The whites were naturally superior to the blacks and so the disappearance of the blacks was entirely within the natural law.¹³

Windschuttle also takes on the 'old', social Darwinist attitudes to Indigenous people that have survived in Australian popular culture, arguing that the culture and society of the Tasmanians was the most 'primitive' ever known. Breen has argued convincingly that in doing this Windschuttle is again taking on the values of early

Australian colonial society and disproved scientific racism.¹⁴ For Windschuttle it is as if nothing has happened in between: he ignores the breadth and depth of historical and anthropological scholarship over the last three decades. Breen, who has taught Indigenous Australian Studies at the University of Hobart for 20 years, identifies Windschuttle's claims about Indigenous Tasmanians as 'not supported with evidence or which demonstrate a broad ignorance or a deliberate misunderstanding of the scholarly work in Tasmanian Aboriginal Studies'.¹⁵ Blainey, doyen of Australian historians of the 'right', while agreeing with the dominating theme of the book, 'that the evidence for 'genocide' or deliberate 'extirpation' appears frail or false', also disagrees with Windschuttle's assessment of the Indigenous Tasmanians:

My own view is that the original Tasmanians were not as backward, mentally and culturally, as Windschuttle portrays them. I think too that they were often ingenious as fighters and raiders on their home terrain.¹⁶

Windschuttle, hardly a person with credentials in Indigenous culture, uses his outdated and wrong assertion of Indigenous 'primitivism' as a springboard to take his explanations of the colonial conquest of Tasmania to another level. He characterises the Tasmanian Indigenous people as murderers (there is, he says, no basis for a guerrilla warfare thesis),¹⁷ thieves (he recounts the European artefacts abandoned by Aboriginal groups on the run),¹⁸ and as pimps (they sold their women and their sexual favours to the British).¹⁹ Thus he argues that the Indigenous Tasmanians are essentially responsible for their own decline. This is the tired old formula for history written by the colonial victors, over again.

Windschuttle has a very different position on 'white' casualties in the colonial war in Tasmania to his attitude to 'black' deaths outlined earlier. He classes 'white' deaths as a result of wanton murder and his scant knowledge of Indigenous culture and indeed reluctance to admit our humanity prevents him from discerning any other motive. Consider any people, recently robbed of land and sources of sustenance, dealing with a transported society desperately short of women. From their behaviour at the time, as reported by Windschuttle, Indigenous Tasmanians were certainly a people in a state of war. As much as Windschuttle may quote reports of a preponderance of kangaroo,²⁰ he accepts that colonists also hunted them in competition with Indigenous groups.²¹ Food was most certainly an issue, since as much as 80 per cent of the usual diet was not meat, but food gathered from territory specific to defined groups. Thus the better land occupied by the colonists would have supported the denser populations, principally with vegetable foodstuffs. Moreover, the hunting of game is no easy matter, depending on sufficient strong young men in good health to hunt and then only in the territory defined for their group. Incursions into other peoples' territories for hunting or gathering would result in further conflict.

Similarly, Windschuttle assumes that because Tasmanian Indigenous groups were found carrying European goods they were thieves. He extrapolates from this, asserting that this was often the motive for the murder of colonists. There is no evidence to support his idea that these goods were always stolen: there is not always evidence of how these goods were obtained in the records. Since the British were taking so much from these people, their land, food and women, there was a case for reciprocity in line with their cultural traditions. There is evidence of trade, though

Windschuttle concentrates solely on the trade involving women, no doubt other forms of trade existed too, as a way of procuring British artefacts and food. He ridicules, in a most unconvincing way, historians Reynolds, Morgan and Plomley, who see the adoption of British foodstuffs as a convenience when in a state of war.²² It follows that the less perishable nature of flour, sugar and tea would be attractive to groups that have to be ready to move at a moment's notice in a situation where gathering is more difficult or impossible.

Windschuttle's treatment of the situation of Tasmanian Indigenous women is so flawed that it almost defies explanation. His is a tirade of point-scoring in which he does not stop to question the motives of his sources.²³ Neither does he consider that the motives of the Tasmanians may be culturally based, for example to incorporate the British into their society by the offering of women as 'wives'. He does not consider the impacts of being in a state of war and socially, culturally, economically dislocated and with their backs to the wall. Perhaps this is why women were traded for so little goods;²⁴ it was all the receiver was willing to give, from a position of greater, even ultimate power. He appeals to a sense of moral outrage at the trading of a 14-year-old girl.²⁵ It is useful to remember that the age of consent in Britain was only 12 years until 1885 and remained at 14 years until 1910 in NSW.²⁶ When the gaze is turned on the culture and society of the coloniser, the situation for 'white' women is less than optimal in this period.²⁷

History, by its very nature, is an ongoing discourse. The sources that inform us of our past have to be trawled over again and again, in the light of new understandings, and layer upon layer of interpretations developed over time. Deeper understandings of the complexities of our histories will enable us to chart an optimal future for this country. That is, a future free of the colonial yoke, informed by new understandings of our humanity and the need for social justice, reflected by the intelligentsia and in popular culture. Windschuttle has been exposed by the academy as being more of a journalist in his methodology and essentially a pretender to the profession of history.²⁸ Our understanding of the past emerges not only from the interpretation of the written source material as Windschuttle argues, but also from those layers of scholarship over time that are the province of the historian. Reynolds' history of the Tasmanian Indigenous people was not the definitive history, nor is Ryan's – were they ever meant to be? The ultimate gain for all of us is that Windschuttle's fabrication of history has served to galvanise historians into a defence of their craft and of the scholarship to date. Hopefully this will lead to a greater motivation to make every piece of history we write somehow count for the just resolution of ongoing colonial conflict in this country.

Endnotes

1. www.sydneyline.com; Windschuttle identifies himself with the anti-totalitarian philosophy of John Anderson and asserts that adherents to the Sydney Line have a low opinion of anything beginning with 'post' or ending with 'studies'. This includes, of course, Indigenous Australian Studies.
2. *Ibid.*
3. For a full discussion of Windschuttle's ideology and the context of its development see P. Norton, 'Explaining the Grumpy Old Men and Bettina' at www.onlineopinion.com.au/2002/Feb02/Norton.htm, accessed 24 July 2003, and B. Gould, 'Deconstructing the sixties and the seventies: an open letter to Keith and Liz Windschuttle' <http://members.optushome.com.au/spainter/Windschuttle.html>
4. K. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One: Van Diemen's Land 1803-1847*, Macleay Press, Paddington, NSW, 2002 pp. 41-42. Windschuttle claims that a particularly

disturbing account of brutality in the colonial takeover written by Rhys Jones has been reproduced in full by Lippmann (Lorna Lippmann, *Generations of Resistance: the Aboriginal Struggle for Justice*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1981, p. 21) and Harris (Stewart Harris, *It's Coming Yet ... An Aboriginal Treaty within Australia between Australians*, Aboriginal Treaty Committee, Canberra 1979, p. 35) and used 'as credible evidence of what the British did in Tasmania and why all Australian Aborigines deserve compensation, reparations and a treaty'. While this quote from Jones can be found in both publications, neither use it directly as an argument for Indigenous rights for Indigenous Tasmanians or anyone else.

5. For further information see the Myall Creek Memorial web site at www.myallcreekmemorial.com.au
6. Many sources can be quoted here, but for the most recent and comprehensive history of the Indigenous rights struggle see B. Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, 2003. There is no direct reference to any massacre as a basis for a claim to rights in this publication.
7. *Ibid.* p. 36.
8. *Ibid.* p. 43.
9. *Ibid.* p. 58.
10. M. Finnane, 'Just like a "nun's picnic"?' , www.mentalspace.ranters.net/stuff/docs/markfinnane.pdf, accessed 24 July 2003.
11. D. Denholm, *The Colonial Australians*, Allen Lane, Ringwood, Vic, 1979, pp 30-31.
12. P. Tardif, 'So who's fabricating the history of Aborigines?' *The Age*, 6 April 2003. www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/04/05/10494459857081.html accessed 24 July 2003.
13. Denholm, *The Colonial Australians*, p. 27.
14. S. Breen, 'Criminals and Pimps: Keith Windschuttle and Tasmanian Aborigines', www.mentalspace.ranters.net/stuff/docs/shaynebreen.pdf, accessed 7 August 2003.
15. *Ibid.*
16. G. Blainey, 'Native Fiction', www.newcriterion.com/archive/21/apr03/blainey.htm, accessed 24 July 2003.
17. Windschuttle, *Fabrication*, p. 128.
18. *Ibid.* pp. 122-29.
19. *Ibid.* pp. 383-85.
20. *Ibid.* p. 87-95; Windschuttle's analysis of 'The Starving Natives Thesis' is entirely without an Indigenous perspective of what may have been happening from the 'other' side.
21. *Ibid.* p. 48.
22. *Ibid.* p. 88.
23. *Ibid.* p. 384; just one example of many in the book of: 'a police constable reported...'
24. *Ibid.* p. 383.
25. *Ibid.*
26. J. Kociumbas, *Australian Childhood*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1997, pp. 143-44.
27. With reference to the treatment of 'white' women on the frontier: 'In those days most of the females were hardened and indifferent to what fate had in store for them ... it was a common occurrence for stockmen to exchange their wives with one another or sell them for a pound of tobacco or a keg of rum'. Mrs McMaugh, quoted in G. Blomfield, *Baal Belbora: the End of the Dancing*, Apcol, Chippendale, NSW, 1981, p. 42.
28. Including in this issue of *Labour History*. For other historians' views, see B. Attwood, 'Old news from a Tabloid Historian', *The Australian*, 6 January 2003, p. 13; Breen, 'Criminals and Pimps'; S. Macintyre, 'On "fabricating" history', www.evatt.labor.net.au/news/231.html, accessed 24 July 2003; D. Moses, 'Rendering the Past less Unpalatable', *The Australian*, 13 January 2003, p. 9; Tardif, 'So who's fabricating the history of Aborigines?'