

Reviewing the History Wars

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The Fabrication of Aboriginal History is a shocking book, shocking in its allegation of fabrication and also in its refusal of the interpretive framework that earlier historians employed.

Keith Windschuttle's book has two purposes: to examine the reliability of the historians who had written about race relations in colonial Van Diemen's Land and to propose a counter-history. It works by a loose reading of the work of those historians and a close reading of their treatment of massacres. Windschuttle treats the historians who have worked over the past 25 years on Aboriginal history as all implicated in the genocide thesis. He calls them 'the orthodox school' and he claims that they maintain the orthodoxy by covering up each other's mistakes and suppressing any contrary interpretation. He alleges that they were formed in the radicalism of the 1960s and accuses them of a deliberate politicisation of history.

This school comprises prominent historians such as Henry Reynolds, Lyndall Ryan and the late Lloyd Robson, archaeologists such as John Mulvaney and Rhys Jones, local historians such as the late Brian Plomley and younger researchers such as Sharon Morgan. The ages of these scholars range over several decades; they vary widely in views and sympathies. The idea that they colluded in a political project is as absurd as his allegation that they victimise dissidents is offensive.

He misreads those whom he castigates. Windschuttle repeatedly alleges that Reynolds and Ryan sought to depict the frontier as a place of indiscriminate white killing. Yet Reynolds was principally interested in the Aboriginal response to the newcomer, and consistently argued that it took a variety of forms, from co-operation and partnership to resistance and warfare. Ryan was concerned to relate the story of the dispossession and survival of Tasmanian Aboriginals, and frontier violence was only one part of her story. So far from them creating an 'orthodox school', other historians had long since challenged the emphasis on frontier violence and queried the idea of a frontier with Europeans on one side and Aboriginals on the other.

The greater part of Windschuttle's book is given over to a minute examination of the massacres. He scrutinises the historians' treatment of these events, tracks their references back to the archives and compares their versions against the original source. This is by far the most damaging of his criticisms, as he finds some of the sources do not support what the historians reported while others do not even exist. He pays careful attention to chronology and topography, consistency and plausibility – when and where did the incident occur? who was there and can we trust their version of what happened? – to reduce the number of casualties. He imposes stringent standards of evidence – from reputable eyewitnesses and preferably corroborated – to rule out higher numbers.

While Windschuttle applies these forensic techniques to prosecute historians, he also acts as the counsel for the defence for the colonial authorities. They were engaged in the peaceful settlement of a new colony, and encountered 'senseless violence' from its primitive inhabitants, yet they endeavoured to preserve the rule

of law to protect both peoples. They were in any case 'Christians to whom the killing of the innocent would have been abhorrent'. So far from practising genocide, they ensured that this 'was the least violent of all Europe's encounters with the New World'.

So how had the allegations of massacres arisen and lodged so firmly in the early histories of Tasmania? Windschuttle attributes the allegations to liberal critics of the administration who employed the charge of imperial brutality as a rhetorical tactic, and to Evangelical Christians who wanted to justify their own missionary activities. That these Christians were appalled by the actions of their murderous compatriots and co-religionists is a contradiction that escapes him.

The 'orthodox' school of early Tasmanian history told a story of sporadic conflict in the early years of colonial settlement, usually over food resources and the abduction of Aboriginal women and children as sexual partners and servants, escalating in the 1820s with the spread of pastoralism. The governor declared martial law in the settled districts in 1828 and by 1834 a few hundred survivors were confined to settlements. Both Ryan and Reynolds dwelt on the strength of the resistance during this 'Black War' and the challenge that these outnumbered defenders, with their guerrilla tactics, posed to the invaders.

Windschuttle's counter-history portrays the Aborigines as incapable of fighting a war since they had no government and no notion of territory or even land; incapable of guerrilla war since they did not know the word. A warrior named Musquito was not a freedom fighter but a violent criminal.

This is not so much a counter-history of the Aboriginal response as an exercise in incomprehension. If the Aborigines had no government, then how did they regulate their affairs? If they had no notion of territory, why did they object to whites hunting their game?

To drive home his denial of massacres Windschuttle made a count of all inter-racial homicide in the first 30 years of settlement. He used a book by Brian Plomley that listed clashes from 1803 to 1831, added some of his own, took out others, and then estimated the number of Aboriginal casualties (allowing just one in most cases and giving ten as the highest toll from any clash) to come up with a total of 118. Since the European death toll for the 'Black War' of 1824 to 1831 came to 187, he concluded there was 'nothing that resembled genocide or any attempt at it'. As a method it is extremely flimsy (the figures he allocates to each incident are no more reliable than those used earlier by Reynolds and Broome for a national estimate, which he had dismissed as guesswork). In any case it rested on a misconception: Plomley made no count of Aboriginal deaths since he was recording only those incidents that the settlers reported.

Even so, Windschuttle's finding that the 'orthodox school' had grossly exaggerated the number of Aborigines killed placed considerable pressure on his own 'counter-history'. How could an island of Aborigines have plummeted with the advent of the Europeans to the point that after 30 years there were only a few hundred survivors? Windschuttle fell back on several sketchy arguments.

First, he revised downwards the size of the Aboriginal population prior to European settlement to as few as 2,000; this again was a guesstimate that made no reference to the work of demographic historians. Second, he used a particularly tendentious American anthropologist to claim that the Tasmanian Aborigines were

primitive, dysfunctional and on the verge of collapse, principally because the brutal treatment of women threatened their reproduction. Hence, he argued, with the introduction of disease and the attachment of Aboriginal women to European men, the numbers fell rapidly. In a final insult he suggests the Tasmanian Aboriginals owed their survival up to that time 'more to good fortune than good management'. *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* is a shocking book, shocking in its allegation of fabrication and also in its refusal of the interpretive framework that earlier historians employed. Its most challenging argument is that the colonisation of Australia was carried out under the rule of law, with restraint and a minimum of bloodshed. Yet Windschuttle is so intent on reducing the body count that he fails to register the tragedy of this fatal encounter. Taxed with his lack of compassion, he replied: 'You can't really be serious about feeling sympathy for someone who died 200 years ago'.

Windschuttle has professed to be astonished by the hostile reception of his book. Robert Manne made an early and cogent criticism of its method, and also drew attention to the plagiarism of the American anthropologist, Robert Edgerton. Windschuttle rejected the charge angrily. 'I won't cop that', he was reported as saying, 'I'll sue the bastard'. He also claimed 'it is a measure of how desperate my critics are that they have to resort to character assassination'. But that was precisely what he had done in his own depiction of the 'orthodox school' and subsequent reference to 'university teachers with overt left-wing commitments'.

A similar exchange took place in a scholarly forum held at the National Museum in 2001. There, Tim Rowse noted the limitation of arguing over precisely how many Aboriginals died at the hands of European settlers: even if it could be shown that not one person was killed in the act of conquest, we would still be left with the fact that ownership and sovereignty of this country passed from the original owners and sovereigns, without their consent, to uninvited newcomers. Such a transformation would remain a traumatic story. It is the absence of any sense of this tragedy, the complete lack of compassion for its victims, that is surely the most disturbing quality of Windschuttle's rewriting of Aboriginal history.

* This essay has been extracted from Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 2003. Full referencing available in the book.