Hiding the bodies: the myth of the humane colonisation of Aboriginal Australia

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How many Aboriginal people died as a result of European colonisation of Australia? In this decade of historic milestones both imaginary and real — the new millennium, the series of bicentenaries of white settlement in various parts of Australia and the centenary of Federation — it is a curious fact that one of the most heated Australian debates surrounds the question of the extent of Aboriginal deaths, particularly violent deaths, in colonial Australia. It is being alleged that Australian historians of Aboriginal affairs consciously distort history for political or ideological purposes or, if they don't, that they have been 'duped' by those who do. Yet the question that must be asked is whether these critics are themselves doing exactly that — distorting history for ideological purposes with the intention of influencing the direction of historical scholarship and, ultimately, policy-making on Aboriginal issues.

This debate was intensified with the publication in *Quadrant* of a series of three articles by Keith Windschuttle entitled 'The myths of frontier massacre in Aboriginal history'[1] a major revisionist attack on almost every contemporary Australian historian who writes about Aboriginal history. His major claim is that 19th century missionaries and modern Australian historians have greatly exaggerated the number of Aboriginal people killed during the white settlement of Australia. Windschuttle's purpose in exposing what he considers fraudulent claims about Aboriginal deaths goes something like this:

- current policies of Aboriginal self-determination are not working since they are based on the false notion that separate development is best for Aboriginal communities;
- early missionaries lied about the extent of Aboriginal deaths to promote their own ambitions for the control of protected Aboriginal mission stations;
- these false views influenced subsequent government protectionist policies, keeping Aboriginal people isolated from mainstream Australia and preventing their assimilation right up to today;
- historians continue to fabricate massacre stories to underpin a system of Aboriginal policy-making based on the rights of supposedly mistreated people

1. Windschuttle 2000a, 2000b, 2000c.

to autonomy when in fact they would prefer to be assimilated into the wider Australian society;

- policies therefore need to be changed and we must begin by demolishing the 'massacre myths' which have misled us for the past two centuries.

No one denies, least of all myself, the immense social crisis in many Aboriginal communities, and that in them the original inhabitants of this continent continue to die at a horrifying rate, often by their own hands.[2] Urgent action is needed to stem the human disasters, which, arguably, may have as much claim to be labelled 'genocide' as anything done in the past. Getting history right will not provide an immediate means of preventing family violence or stemming substance abuse but this does not render history irrelevant. Getting history wrong will, in the long term, mean that lasting solutions will be sought in the wrong places. While the only effective strategies must come from Aboriginal people themselves, a final solution cannot exist outside a recognition of the true nature of the past treatment of Aboriginal people. This historic truth cannot be found by consciously rewriting history to whitewash the reality of dispossession — including in many places violent dispossession — and by denying the scale of the tragedy which befell the original inhabitants of this continent as a result of colonisation by a European power.

A number of unwarranted claims and illogical connections in Windschuttle's own writings weaken his allegations of a long-standing conspiracy to manipulate Aboriginal affairs by deception. This single paper, however, cannot begin to deal adequately with all the questions raised in the *Quadrant* articles and with the comprehensive responses on this and related issues by Robert Manne,[3] Bob Gould,[4] Roger Sandall,[5] Peter Howson,[6] Deborah Cassrels,[7] Robert Murray,[8] and the many newspaper columnists who further discussed them, let alone treat the insightful analyses of the real crisis which exists in many Aboriginal communities by Noel Pearson,[9] Peter Sutton,[10] and others. I will therefore deal only with the main subject of Windschuttle's 'Myths' series: the facts surrounding the death and depopulation of Aboriginal Australia from whatever cause. In attempting to place this issue in its proper historical context, let me say that my overall view is similar to that being expressed today by many thoughtful people on all sides of Australian politics: that we must first understand and acknowledge the past and then we must try to move on, dealing where necessary with immediate problems through immediate strategies. This is very different indeed from denying the past and then trying to move on. As George Orwell said in *1984*, those who control the past also control the future.

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2. Trudgen 2000: 59.
3. Manne 2001a, 2001b, 2001c. Manne's recent (2003) comprehensive and important collection of responses deals almost exclusively with Windschuttle's volume on Tasmania (2002). The collection was not available prior to this paper's submission to *Aboriginal History*. This paper deals only with Windschuttle's *Quadrant* papers.
4. Gould 2001.
5. Sandall 2001.
6. Howson 2001.
7. Cassrels 2001.
8. Murray 2001.
9. Pearson 2001.
10. Sutton 2000; see also Trudgen 2000.

The deaths of Aboriginal people

The awful but surely undeniable fact of Aboriginal history, the one fact which transcends all other facts and all other estimates, reconstructions, analyses, guesses, misrepresentations, truths, half-truths and lies, is the fact of the immense and appalling reduction in the Aboriginal population during the first 150 years of European settlement. This must be the starting point of any morally responsible discussion of the past treatment of Aboriginal people and therefore must precede any discussion of death by violence.

Estimates of Australia's Aboriginal population in 1788 range from 300,000 to well over one million. The lower estimate, proposed by the English anthropologist Arthur Radcliffe-Brown, used to be generally accepted[11] but many now regard it as far too low. Based on census statistics and reports gathered several decades after European settlements, it failed to take into account the rapid decline in Aboriginal numbers within the first 10 years of the arrival of European settlers anywhere in Australia. The works of Australian statistical economist, Noel Butlin, point to a much higher original population.[12] Butlin estimates a population of 250,000 for Victoria and NSW alone, noting that his model could suggest 'significantly higher figures'.[13] He also estimates a population decline in south-eastern Australia from 250,000 in 1788 to 10,000 or 15,000 in 1850.[14] By the 1920s, census figures indicate that only about 58,000 'full-blood' Aboriginal people survived in Australia. Butlin's figures therefore suggest a 96% decline in the Aboriginal population. Not everyone agrees with Butlin's calculations, and it must be emphasised that this paper does not rest upon the acceptance of Butlin's figures. The lower (Radcliffe-Brown) population estimate still demands that we deal with a decline from 300,000 to 58,000, indicating that European settlement of Australia removed well over 80% of the original inhabitants. While there are arguments about whether or not this reduction constitutes 'genocide', such an impact on the Indigenous inhabitants resembles the fate of many oppressed ethnic groups elsewhere in the world whose mistreatment or annihilation we deplore.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, few could deny the evidence of their own eyes that the Aboriginal population seemed to be rapidly declining. A constantly reappearing explanation was that their disappearance was inevitable. There was no shortage of euphemisms to label the apparent demise of the Aboriginal race. They were 'fading away', 'decaying', 'slipping away', 'melting away', and so on.[15] In the first century of colonisation and beyond, it was a convenient and widespread assumption that their extinction was irreversible. Appeal could be made to biology – 'We cannot fail to recognise in their extinction a decided widening of the chasm by which mankind is now cut off from its animal progenitors';[16] to history – 'This is the history of all new countries ... The Australian blacks are moving rapidly on into the eternal darkness';[17] and even to God – 'It seems, indeed, to be a general appointment of Divine Providence that

11. Eg Elkin 1938: 25; Rowley 1972: 385.
12. Butlin 1983; 1993.
13. Butlin 1983: 146.
14. Butlin 1983: 147.
15. There is detailed discussion of this in Reynolds 1987: 122.
16. McAllister 1878: 157.
17. Meston 1889: 1213.

the miserable Aborigines of New Holland should be utterly swept away by the flood-tide of European civilisation'.[18] This view that 'backward', 'stone-age' Aboriginal people were incapable of surviving is still encountered in the speeches of conservative politicians like Marshal Perron and Ross Lightfoot. Ex-Prime Minister Gorton publicly but erroneously claimed that Aboriginal people had not even invented tools and 'would not know what another tribe was doing'.[19] The same views are often expressed by some of the critics of Aboriginal land rights such as Hugh Morgan when executive director of Western Mining: 'Aboriginal culture was so much less powerful than the culture of the Europeans that there was never any possibility of its survival'.[20]

Yet during the whole of the white settlement of Australia there were always those who questioned the inevitability of the death of Aboriginal people and the motives of those people who most stridently asserted their imminent extinction. Many of these were Christian missionaries but many were not. According to the perceptive visitor, Count Strzelecki, in 1845, these statements were 'an inquest of one race on the corpse of another', which usually ended in the verdict 'dead by visitation of God'.[21] Another who forthrightly challenged the inevitability of Aboriginal deaths was Edward Wilson, editor of the Melbourne *Argus*:

> There is too great a readiness in recognising, as 'the hand of Providence', that which is directly traceable to our own notorious neglect and wickedness. ... We have nearly swept them off the face of the earth. We have shot them down like dogs. In the guise of friendship we have issued corrosive sublimate in their damper and consigned whole tribes to the agonies of an excruciating death.[22]

Inevitability, to Bishop Matthew Gibney in 1893, was simply a convenient euphemism for genocide:

> The Aboriginal races are doomed to disappear before the advances of the white man' ... 'Doomed to disappear!' ... Over how many bloody outrages, over what an amount of greed on the part of some, weakness on the part of government and apathy on the part of the public does this convenient euphemism throw a thin but decent disguise?[23]

There were multiple and complex causes of the deaths and population decline of Aboriginal people. Yet from the earliest days, those who were distressed by the suffering of Aboriginal people were in close agreement about its causes. Catholic Archbishop John Bede Polding described the main reasons when giving evidence before Governor Gipps' Enquiry in 1845:

> The aggressive mode of taking possession of their country, which necessarily involves a great loss to the natives.
>
> The horrible extent to which sensual indulgence is carried by the whites, in the abuse of females in an early period of life – mere children – who are thus made incapable of becoming mothers of healthy offspring.
>
> The introduction of diseases for which they have no proper remedy.[24]

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18. Bull 1884: 72.
19. *Canberra Times* 13 Nov 1997.
20. *Sydney Morning Herald* 21 June 1993.
21. Strzelecki 1845: 344; see also Stokes 1846: 2.
22. *Argus* 17 March 1856.
23. *West Australian Record* 5 October 1893.

Here are listed the three major causes of Aboriginal depopulation: massacre, sexual abuse, and disease. In a powerful substantiation of Polding's list, missionaries from different Christian churches and widespread locations, observing first-hand the decline of the Aboriginal population, independently came up with similar lists: 'The musket's deadly aim ... fatal diseases ... licentious Europeans' (Wesleyan missionary Benjamin Hurst, Geelong);[25] 'The private revenge of injured Europeans ... ill-treatment of the black women ... measles, whooping cough and influenza' (Congregational missionary Lancelot Threlkeld, Lake Macquarie).[26] These deaths led in turn to secondary causes of death, including despair and alcoholism, but violence, sexual abuse, and disease were behind them all. This is the immense tragedy that the High Court in the Mabo judgement went so far as to call 'the legacy of unutterable shame', the consequence of the white settlement of Australia which must be named in any attempt to treat Aboriginal people with justice today.

Of all the ways in which colonisation led to the deaths of Aboriginal people, violent death at the hands of Europeans was always the most obvious and the most dramatic. It has now also become the most publicised and the most controversial. This is an unfortunate and unbalanced development which has the potential to distract us from the deeper issues. The tragically huge depopulation of Aboriginal Australia, by whatever means, is far more important an issue than arguments about how the victims actually died. More Aboriginal people died of venereal diseases, hunger, and smallpox than by violence. But the debate about the extent of violent death has lately assumed considerable significance and become a kind of battle for how history is interpreted.

Death by violence

A common view among writers on Aboriginal history today is that about 2,000 non-Aboriginal people, mostly Europeans, were killed by Aboriginal people and that about 10 times this number – 20,000 Aboriginal people – were killed by Europeans.[27] In his Quadrant articles Windschuttle disputes the figure of 20,000 Aboriginal deaths, claiming that the total is much smaller, that of these, most were killed in small numbers, rarely on such a scale as to constitute a massacre. Windschuttle's major argument in his 'Myths' series is that accounts of massacres have been fabricated or exaggerated, initially by neurotic or self-interested 19th-century Christian missionaries and much later by 20th-century leftist historians[28] who deny the legitimacy of British settlement of Australia.

Windschuttle attempts to demonstrate his claims by examining the four alleged massacres of Aboriginal people which journalist Phillip Knightley chose to treat, in *Australia: biography of a nation*, the killings at Pinjarra (WA, 1834), Waterloo Creek

24. Report from the Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines, *NSW Legislative Council Votes and Proceedings* 1845: 10–11.
25. Hurst, cited in Young 1858: 188–190.
26. Threlkeld 1837.
27. The best-known estimate is that of Reynolds (1982:122) although Broome (1988) and Murray (1996) come to similar conclusions using differing approaches. Many later authors such as Blainey (1993) and Day (1996) no doubt accepted Reynolds' figures as reasonable, although it should be noted that Reynolds stated clearly from the outset that some would regard his estimates as too low and some as too high.
28. Windschuttle 2000a: 9, 17.

(NSW, 1837), Forrest River (WA, 1926) and Coniston Station (NT, 1928).[29] Dismissing the first three of these as fabrications, Windschuttle then proceeds to deny the generally accepted but conservative estimate of 20,000 deaths. In doing so he not only seeks to devalue the work of people like Henry Reynolds, Noel Loos, and Richard Broome, whom he considers 'politically motivated' left-wing historians, but also the opinion of much more conservative writers like Robert Murray.[30] He ignores right-wing historian Geoffrey Blainey's acceptance that there were 20,000 killings of Aboriginal people on the colonial frontier.[31]

Windschuttle demands what most historians would regard as impossibly rigid and unrealistically restrictive methods of determining historical truth. I am indebted to Bob Gould for his insightful description of Windschuttle's technique as 'forensic'.[32] A reading of his three papers shows that he regards historical research as one would a criminal investigation. Historians, he says, should only accept claims of violent deaths where there is 'direct evidence'. His minimum requirements include eyewitness reports, subsequent body counts, independent corroboration by other witnesses, and confessions by the guilty.[33]

To restrict historical investigation to the exacting requirements of the criminal court is unrealistic. For a start, after one generation no witnesses are available. All serious historical enquiry must from time to time determine the truth about the past by gathering and evaluating the widest possible range of information and then weigh the 'balance of probabilities'.[34] To apply Windschuttle's rigid criteria would limit historical enquiry to those events for which there are contemporary written records. Even more importantly, the 'forensic' approach, applied after the event, is restricted to what is actually stated in the written records. To Windschuttle, undocumented deaths are not deaths. This is a most serious flaw in Windschuttle's methodology because restricting the truth to what has been written must by definition be biased in favour of the victors, the richer and more powerful.

Aboriginal people did not keep written records of the dead and wounded. Unwittingly perhaps, Windschuttle makes this point very dramatically by listing the numbers of European dead in several of the most publicised killings of European people.[35] I agree with Windschuttle that these non-Aboriginal victims should indeed be listed. Almost all can be individually named. European deaths on the frontier are powerful evidence that many parts of Australia were forcibly invaded and that Aboriginal people resisted the invasion of their lands. But we know few of the names of the Aboriginal dead, even in the more notorious events which by scope or fame somehow merit the title of massacre, let alone the unrecorded names of those who were killed singly or in small numbers or unofficially. There are some records in Aboriginal oral histories but Windschuttle rejects such information. In the years when Aboriginal evidence was

29. Knightley 1999.
30. Murray 1996.
31. Blainey 1993.
32. Gould 2001: 8.
33. Windschuttle 2000a: 12.
34. Gould 2000: 5.
35. Windschuttle 2000b: 21.

inadmissible in court, their accounts of events were seldom heard and are absent from the written record. The tenacity of devout Catholic John Plunkett, the NSW Attorney General, brought the Myall Creek killers to justice in 1838, although not their northern pastoralist employers who armed and encouraged them. But he could not bring charges against other alleged killers because the only witnesses were Aboriginal people, 'heathens' who could not swear an oath on a Bible.[36]

I do not rate violent death as more unjust or more tragic than slower death from the inhumane treatment of dispossessed and despairing human beings. Windschuttle's papers oblige us to single out violent death, thus giving this one aspect of Aboriginal death an undue prominence – but this is clearly Windschuttle's intention. From my own research, I consider that the figure of 20,000 Aboriginal people violently killed is a cautious estimate and that the probable figure is closer to 30,000. Indeed a figure of 20,000 deaths was initially proposed for Queensland alone and used by Butlin in his estimate of 400 violent deaths per annum in Queensland over a 50 year period.[37] While it is my view that there is no ultimate significance in the question of whether the figure was 16,000 or 30,000, being only one part of a far bigger picture of dispossession, neglect, and death, it must be acknowledged that violent deaths are psychologically different from other deaths. It is deceptively easy for the reality of violent death to be masked by the magnitude of death from disease and neglect. Violent deaths are directly done to people by other people and the effect on the psyche of the survivors differs significantly from the effect of slower death. While I find squabbling about the number who died by violence distasteful, I will nevertheless comment on the three killing events which Windschuttle denies or downplays in order to illustrate that historical truth – that is, what really occurred in these events – may not necessarily be as he portrays it.

Pinjarra, WA, 1834

In Western Australia in October 1834, a mixed force of soldiers of the 21st Regiment, police, and civilian settlers, led by the Governor, Captain James Stirling, surrounded the Murray River people near Perth and shot many of them. Windschuttle accepts the lowest estimate that between 10 and 20 Aboriginal people were killed, which he regards as 'lawful and morally justifiable' because he claims that the sole intent of the expedition was to find a murder suspect and also that they only shot in self-defence.[38] While Windschuttle, 170 years later, may judge the actions of this mixed gang of soldiers, police, and settlers as moral and just, not everyone in Perth did, not even in 1834. It was, according to one settler, Joseph Hardey, 'a shocking slaughter'.[39] Would Windschuttle regard such an expedition as 'lawful and morally justifiable' today if an armed force killed 10 or 20 Australians while searching for a murder suspect and, if not, at what point in Australian history did it suddenly cease to be acceptable behaviour?

The motives for the expedition, however, were much less straightforward. Prior to October 1834, a number of Europeans and many more Aboriginal people had been killed in and around Perth and one Aboriginal man executed. Frustrated that the Mur-

36. See full discussion in Rowley 1972: 127–8.
37. Butlin 1983: 111.
38. Windschuttle 2000a: 18–19.
39. Burton 1929: 26.

ray River people were hindering southern pastoral expansion, Stirling had been looking for an opportunity for a show of force for some time. He found his excuse when Private Hugh Nesbitt was killed on the southern property of Thomas Peel ('Peel Town'), allegedly by Aboriginal people who had escaped from custody following their theft of flour from Shenton's Flour Mill. It is misleading of Windschuttle to allege that a search for Nesbitt's killer was the sole or even major purpose of Stirling's expedition. In his official report to the Colonial Office in London, Stirling made no secret of the fact that he had set out to punish the whole tribe and that his overriding intention was to instil fear of the white settlers into them and thus break their resistance.[40] Long before the modern historians whom Windschuttle dismisses, Paul Hasluck in *Black Australians* (1942) judged that there was no purpose for the battle 'except punishment', noting the Governor's own words that the only way to deal with Aboriginal people was to 'reduce their tribe to weakness' by inflicting 'such acts of decisive severity as will appal them as people'.[41] The *Perth Gazette* recorded Stirling's stern warning to the survivors that if there were any more trouble 'four times the present number of men would proceed amongst them and destroy every man woman and child'.[42] Just how many Aboriginal people were killed at Pinjarra may never be known, but the reported figure of 'between 15 and 20' refers only to men and only to those killed in the initial confrontation at the river, during which superintendent of Police, Captain Ellis, was fatally wounded. The Murray River people were pursued for at least another hour during which women and children were also killed. Later reports describe mass graves as well as single graves.[43] A few days later, Thomas Peel, who had taken part in the battle, was given title to a large tract of Murray River lands. He sold 100,000 acres for a huge profit in December of the same year.[44]

Waterloo Creek, NSW, 1837

Another alleged massacre which Windschuttle disputes was at Waterloo Creek. A massacre is generally understood as a slaughter of a large number of innocent people, but the question of whether a given event constitutes a massacre is mostly an argument about words, about what is a large number, and about whether the killings happened at the same time and place. The killings at Waterloo Creek are a prime case: they were not a single event but an extended campaign designed to break the will of the Kamilaroi people in north-western NSW early in 1838. When Lt-Col Kenneth Snodgrass was appointed Acting Governor of NSW, he immediately despatched Major James Nunn and his mounted police to the Namoi and Gwyder rivers to curb the spearing of sheep and cattle and to investigate the deaths of several stockmen. Snodgrass, a northern landowner himself, told Nunn, 'you are to act according to your own judgement and use your utmost exertion to suppress these outrages'.[45] As Windschuttle admits, the whole truth may never be known about what became labelled 'Major Nunn's Cam-

40. Stirling to Stanley, Secretary of State for Colonies, 1/11/1834, CO. 18.14. Australian Joint Copying Project: 299-300. See also Lord Glenelg to Stirling, loc cit. and John S Roe, Registered Field Book, 3, 1834–1838, Department of Land Management, Perth.
41. Hasluck 1942: 48–49.
42. *Perth Gazette* 1/11/1834.
43. eg *Perth Gazette* 22/11/1834.
44. Fletcher 1984: 1–5.
45. Rowley 1972: 232. Windschuttle himself uses this quote (2000: 14).

paign'. The most serious confrontation took place near Waterloo Creek (or Snodgrass Lagoon). Afterwards, rumours and gossip were rife. Returned troopers bragged about their exploits. Northern squatters, rejoicing in the decimation of the Aboriginal people, boasted of the numbers killed.

Concerned by what he heard, London Missionary Society missionary Lancelot Threlkeld reported that 'two or three hundred' Aboriginal people were killed by Major Nunn's party.[46] Threlkeld later admitted he did not know the precise number and that his figures could have been based on claims which may have been exaggerated. Windschuttle tries to make much of this but his handling of this later admission by Threlkeld is as misleading a case of selective quotation as any he accuses other historians of making. Threlkeld was not in fact retracting his claim about a large number of dead, as Windschuttle implies, but acknowledging that he could not put an exact figure on the dead, which is a different thing altogether. Threlkeld had many contacts in the Namoi/Gwyder region, including his own son, and he stressed that the numbers of dead were still great. Threlkeld's exact words were:

> Nunn ... should have abstained from the vain boasting which may have exaggerated the numbers slain but when the tribe was driven into a swamp, surrounded and fired at until destroyed and where it is said the stench is intolerable from the carcases of the slain, the number must be considerable and but known to those engaged in the slaughter.[47]

Windschuttle rejects all this on the grounds that Threlkeld had a vested interest in proving the need for missions to protect Aboriginal people. This is a strange claim given that Threlkeld knew that reporting massacre details would only alienate the very people whom Windschuttle claims he was trying to impress, and would damage any vested interest he might have had. Missionaries were often the only people in pastoral districts to hear the Aboriginal version of events or to care about Aboriginal people's fate. Outspoken missionaries such as Threlkeld, Giustiniani, and the Gribbles saw it as their duty to 'bear witness', irrespective of the consequences to themselves.[48] I do not know of any 19th-century missionary who ever gained favour with colonial authorities by reporting the mistreatment of Aboriginal people. On the other hand, people with obviously vested interests in the success of Major Nunn's campaign were those who wanted to end Aboriginal opposition to pastoral expansion, including the land-owning Acting Governor, Snodgrass, who exploited the brief interregnum between Governors Bourke and Gipps to crush Aboriginal resistance to squatters taking over the Kamilaroi lands.

There was an official enquiry into Major Nunn's campaign, particularly the engagement at Waterloo Creek to which Threlkeld referred. Nunn's deputy, Lt George Cobban, who led that attack, said that 'four or five' were killed but his Sergeant, John Lee, said that 'forty or fifty' were killed.[49]

Windschuttle's 'forensic' approach to the incomplete records of Major Nunn's campaign is firstly to reject anything said by Threlkeld because he was not an eyewitness, and to malign his character and motives. It is strange to encounter such criticism

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46. Threlkeld 1838, reproduced in Gunson 1974 (I): 144–150.
47. Threlkeld to W.W Burton, 8 Feb 1839, reproduced in Gunson 1974 (II): 275.
48. See, for example, introduction to Gribble J, 1886.
49. A full account is Millis 1992. Windschuttle accepts that Nunn's and Lee's figures differ.

of someone for reporting rumours of killings of Aboriginal people. Surely anyone, missionary or otherwise, who heard such information should have reported it to the appropriate authorities.

All we are left with, according to Windschuttle's methodology, are the confessions of the perpetrators. His approach here is elitist, judging Lee to be mistaken about 'forty or fifty' being killed because he was the junior officer. Cobban's estimate of 'four or five' must be correct, according to Windschuttle, because he was the responsible senior officer.[50] Windschuttle believes that the police (or, more frequently, mixed troops of police and civilians) who engaged in these operations acted with care and integrity because they were British, holding 'civilised values' and respecting 'the principles of law on which the Colony of NSW had been founded'.[51] He portrays them carrying out textbook raids on Aboriginal camps: surrounding the camp, interrogating their captives through Aboriginal interpreters, inspecting the camp for incriminating evidence, and taking suspects into custody. Windschuttle makes a naive claim that, because the Waterloo Creek killings took place in desirable grazing lands, had there been a sizeable massacre the northern squatters who immediately took over the land would have reported any bodies they found![52] These were the same northern pastoralists whose interests Snodgrass and Nunn were protecting and who a few months later defended and supported the men tried for the Myall Creek killings. Indeed, a question which must be asked about events at Myall Creek is why settlers in the north-west of NSW thought they could kill Aboriginal people with impunity. In this era, some settlers thought that all that was needed to remove troublesome Aboriginal people was to seek official approval to shoot them.[53] As statements by the accused in the Myall Creek case clearly showed, others thought they could simply kill them anyway without fear of the law. Could the Myall Creek killings have had anything to do with the official precedent set by Major Nunn and his party? The only person with the courage to publicise these northern NSW deaths was Lancelot Threlkeld.

Someone who also knew much about the various killings in NSW was Catholic Archbishop John Bede Polding, who frequently spoke out against the wanton slaying of Aboriginal people. He described the manner in which settlers took possession of the country in his evidence before the Legislative Council's 1845 Select Committee as 'occupation by force, accompanied by murders, ill-treatment, ravishment of their women ...'[54] Windschuttle dismisses such evidence of clergy and missionaries, lumping them together as a group with vested interests and ulterior motives in fabricating and exaggerating massacres. Anyone who has read my writings on Christian missions would know that I do not consider clergy incapable of racist attitudes or improper motives and that I do not always condone their actions.[55] But I find unacceptable Windschuttle's position that missionaries all over Australia of all denominations should be cast in the same mould as unreliable witnesses when in fact they are often our best and only

50. Windschuttle 2000a: 17.
51. Windschuttle 2000a: 13–14.
52. Windschuttle 2000a: 17.
53. See for example documents relating to William Morris in Organ 1990: 164–171.
54. Report from the Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines, *NSW LCVP* 1845: 8–9.
55. eg Harris 1994; 1998.

witnesses. Many missionaries were uniquely placed to know what was happening: they often lived in the vicinity, knew those involved including the Aboriginal people, and in many cases understood Aboriginal languages. A point missed by Windschuttle is that Polding was in a position to know a great deal about what went on in the pastoral frontier but, unlike Threlkeld, he was constrained from divulging details due to the sanctity of the confessional. Polding's itinerant priests heard confessions everywhere they travelled, particularly from Irish convicts employed by the squatters. Polding himself heard the confessions of several of the men convicted of the Myall Creek killings. It was widely believed in the colony that, had any of the convicted men turned King's evidence, many leading figures in the colony would have been implicated.

Windschuttle, following Knightley, makes a great leap from the 1830s to the 1920s as if all that had happened between was irrelevant. Not even in the case of the killings at Coniston Station in 1928, which Windschuttle acknowledges were a massacre, does he ask why Constable George Murray and his associates still believed they could get away with such actions. Windschuttle compliments missionary Athol McGregor for his part in making the Coniston massacre known and does not suggest he had a vested interest in inventing massacre stories to convince the authorities of the necessity for mission stations. Windschuttle correctly notes that Murray would have had difficulty communicating with the Warlbiri people in 1928[56] (although he considers that Major Nunn would have easily found Aboriginal interpreters from among the Kamilaroi people at Waterloo Creek in 1838).[57] He also accepts the accuracy of modern-day Aboriginal oral history of the killings at Coniston Station because different Aboriginal people told the same story over a 12-year interval between 1971 and 1983. This, of course, relies on the first person interviewed in 1971 having reported accurately. Does this not suggest that Aboriginal oral history may sometimes be more reliable than Windschuttle elsewhere allows?

I have also found reliable the remarkable and largely untapped knowledge of amateur local historians, who were often very well placed to know a great deal about unrecorded events and community memories. Windschuttle, however, dismisses the possibility that a knowledgeable local like the 'former operator of the local picture show' could provide valid information.[58] He appears not to have valued the rich source of information in the many published local histories, in which massacres are frequently reported as common knowledge and not requiring proof. These important writings often confirm the origins of colourful local placenames like Butchers Creek, Slaughterhouse Swamp, Mt Arsenic, Bony Point, and Skull Creek.

Forrest River

Windschuttle gives much space to the alleged killings at Forrest River, predictably accepting the revisionist opinions of journalist Rod Moran in *Massacre Myth*[59] rather than historian Neville Green's *Forrest River Massacres*.[60] He claims, therefore, that there were no killings at Forrest River. For one who places so much credence on what is for-

56. Windschuttle 2000a: 19.
57. Windschuttle 2000a: 16.
58. Windschuttle 2000a: 15.
59. Moran 1999.
60. Green 1998.

mally recorded in courts, Windschuttle has surprisingly little hesitation in rejecting the findings of the Royal Commission into the alleged killings as well as modern-day Aboriginal oral history massacre accounts.

An important aspect of Windschuttle's approach to the events at Forrest River is the way in which he deals with missionary Ernest Gribble, the main source of the allegations of massacre. Windschuttle denies Gribble's reliability partly because, as a missionary, he had supposedly a vested interest in exaggerating atrocities committed against Aboriginal people but mostly because, according to Windschuttle, Gribble was a mentally disturbed, 'sexually tormented' man.[61] Windschuttle maligns the characters of Ernest Gribble and of his father John and his brother Bert.[62] He dismisses John Gribble's vehement denunciations of the slave-like, bonded labour system in the north-west of Western Australia at the turn of the 20th century as the falsifications of a man obsessed with keeping Aboriginal people completely segregated from white society and preventing their assimilation. Windschuttle ignores the fact that after Federation the new Commonwealth Government forced Western Australia to hold an enquiry into labour conditions for Aboriginal people in the north-west, and that the subsequent Roth Royal Commission (1904)[63] vindicated John Gribble's accusations.[64]

Trying to make something of the alleged sexual misdemeanours of Ernest's younger brother, Bert, is a cheap trick.[65] It has no bearing on Ernest's personal reliability as a witness. He, too, disapproved of his brother's actions in Queensland but this has nothing at all to do with whether a massacre occurred on the other side of the continent. Windschuttle writes as if he is revealing deep Gribble family secrets but he is not. We already know there are both black and white Gribble descendants and all those I have met are proud of their ancestry.

When it comes to Ernest himself, Windschuttle throws aside the strict 'forensic' standards he demands of others in dealing with evidence, reporting gossip and innuendo, no matter how insubstantial. He uncritically accepts claims made by Christine Halse,[66] disputed by descendants of Ernest Gribble, including statements attributed to them.[67] Halse's evidence for an alleged liaison with an Aboriginal girl at Yarrabah is based upon the recollections of an 84-year-old Aboriginal woman in 1984 of a conversation she recalled overhearing in 1908 between two other girls. I am not saying Ernest Gribble never had a sexual relationship with an Aboriginal woman and nor does his family today. I am saying that the standards Windschuttle demands of us in assessing, say, Lancelot Threlkeld's massacre allegations are far stricter than the standards he applies to himself in his evaluation of Ernest Gribble's character. Indeed, Windschuttle sets aside all pretence of objectivity when he writes of missionaries 'succumbing to the power of Eros during the steamy tropical nights'.[68]

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61. Windschuttle 2000c: 16–17.
62. Windschuttle 2000c: 12–17.
63. Royal Commission on the Condition of the Natives, *Western Australian Parliamentary Papers*, 1905 1(5).
64. Harris 1994: 426–427.
65. Windschuttle 2000c: 16.
66. Halse 1992.
67. Private correspondence in possession of the author.
68. Windschuttle 2000c: 16.

Ernest Gribble was a complex man and not without his problems. But Windschuttle's negative picture of him belies the warmth with which his descendants are still welcomed at Yarrabah. It also belies the fact that he continued until his death to be widely respected by many Aboriginal people and, in particular, by leading Aboriginal political activists who regularly sought his advice. One of them, William Cooper, wrote in 1938 that, if everyone in Australia had the same respect Gribble had for Aboriginal people, 'there would be no suffering for this race of people'.[69]

Having asserted my views about the large number of killings of Aboriginal people and that many of these went unrecorded, I feel obliged at least to provide examples of the kind of information that has led me to these conclusions. My most detailed investigations have been in the Northern Territory, where I lived for many years in several different places, but I have carried out research in all States and have read sufficiently widely to have a reasonable grasp of literature dealing with the rest of Australia. Settlers' memoirs constitutes one hugely important genre that Winschuttle disregards.

There is evidence that in different times and places a conspiracy of silence surrounded the killing of Aboriginal people. If such conspiracies are effective then their existence is difficult to prove, but many settlers who maintained silence as younger people often became more garrulous in old age when recording their personal reminiscences or narrating the tales of their forbears. From the 1950s, there were older 'pioneers' or descendants of pioneering families, like Mary Durack, who were prepared to speak plainly in their historical writings.[70] In the Northern Territory, where the 'killing years' are much more recent than elsewhere, members of several long-time and highly respected Territory families like Bill Linklater and Lynda Tapp have written honestly about the early cattle men and women:

> The white robbed the native of his tribal territories, denuded his hunting grounds, confiscated the water supplies and made native life generally impossible. The black retaliated by the only means known to him. But the spear and the nulla nulla could not match rifle and revolver, and the white man's chains were strong. There is no doubt that during the cattle migration and the gold rush to the Kimberleys, the whites shot down the blacks like crows all along the route.[71]

A Queensland example of this important genre is the writings of Sir Hudson Fysh, founder of Qantas. His book *Taming the north* is a biography of the notorious early Queensland settler Alexander Kennedy. Fysh was no tolerant, left-wing, pro-Aboriginal historian trying to invent or exaggerate atrocities. His distaste for Aboriginal people and their culture is obvious, yet he had no hesitation in reporting eight verbal descriptions of massacres involving Kennedy, the Native Police, and their senior officer, FC Urquart, who later became Queensland's Commissioner of Police. Fysh's book was endorsed by Kennedy and Urquart themselves and by Flynn of the Inland![72] This book alone destroys Windschuttle's model of the careful, mild, lawful, and humane manner in which police expeditions and other officially-sanctioned actions against Aboriginal

69. Gribble 1932: 112. See also comments on Palm Island in Cooper to Minister for the Interior, 19 Feb 1938, reproduced in Markus 1988: 82–85.
70. eg Durack 1981.
71. Linklater and Tapp 1968: 74.
72. Fysh 1935.

people were generally carried out in the 19th and early 20th centuries.[73] It also challenges his high-sounding claims about British civilisation and honour.[74] In fact, contemporary critics of the abuse of Aboriginal people often called settler attitudes 'un-British'. As Governor Davey said of Tasmania, 'I could not have believed that British subjects would have so ignominiously stained the honour of their country'.[75]

I am primarily a linguist and first started to take serious note of massacres while doing linguistic research in the Roper River region of the Northern Territory. While living at Bamyili (Barunga) in the 1960s, I first noticed the 'missing' languages of the Roper River Valley – Warndarang, Ngandi and Ngalakan. This puzzled me until I listened to the reminiscences of old Aboriginal stockmen, including Hickey Hood who had lived as a child on Elsey Station, the place immortalised in Jeannie Gunn's *We of the Never Never*.[76] In these reminiscences I learned of a different side to Elsey Station. During the era of the notorious Eastern and African Cold Storage Company, hunting gangs rode out regularly from Elsey to shoot Aboriginal people along the valley of the Roper River. I met survivors like Barnabas Roberts who, as a small boy, had seen his father shot. I met George Conway, an elderly white man, who had led one of the gangs, who told me he had shot 'dozens of Aborigines' in 1905 and 1906. I was doing linguistic research and was not especially interested in recording oral history at that time and I now deeply regret not having taken detailed notes from these people or taped their words. Fortunately, I was not the only person to meet George Conway. The geographer FH Bauer met him in 1957, noting his candid admission that Aboriginal people along the Roper had been 'systematically hunted'.[77] Hunting gangs rode out of Elsey Station following the north bank of the Roper River. Each foray took them through Ngalakan country and then into Warndarang country or north into Ngandi country. So it was that these were the tribes whose numbers were most tragically reduced. When I carried out linguistic research in the 1970s, there were no remaining speakers of Warndarang and only five living speakers of Ngandi. The language groups further away from the valley had fared better. There were 30 or 40 speakers remaining of neighbouring languages whose speakers lived slightly more distantly like Mara or Mangarayi. Of the next languages whose speakers were more distant again, such as Nunggubuyu or Rembarrnga, three or four hundred speakers remained.[78]

Languages decline for various reasons but sudden and catastrophic loss of languages as seen throughout Australia is typically related to aggression. Tasmanian is the most obvious but there are many others which diminished or disappeared very suddenly – Kwaimbal (NSW), Kurnai (Vic) and Yeeman (Queensland) to name a few. Some took a little longer to go, languages like Wakay (NT), whose speakers fought an extended and tragic guerrilla warfare with the intruding Europeans. Although they won many of the battles, eventually, by slow attrition, they lost the war and their languages died with them.

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73. Windschuttle 2000a: 16.
74. Windschuttle 2000a: 13–17.
75. Davey, cited in Bonwick 1870: 59.
76. Gunn 1908.
77. Bauer 1964: 157.
78. Harris 1986: 225–233.

The killings by hunting gangs in the Roper River valley were never reported because of a conspiracy of silence in the Northern Territory. When the first Church Missionary Society mission was established on the Roper River in 1908, the survivors gathered there for safety. Rex Joynt, one of the founding missionaries, wrote that the 'the natives have been shot down like game and hundreds killed in a spirit of revenge'.[79] 'They just regarded us Aboriginal people as animals', Dinah Garadji told me when recounting her memories of the dangerous years before the coming of the mission. This particular conspiracy of silence — and there were many — can be precisely dated to 1884. In this year, four white miners were killed at the Daly River Copper Mine. During the next year or so, several police expeditions and official settler posses were sent out 'in pursuit of the Daly River murderers'.[80] The extent of the indiscriminate and arbitrary reprisals was made known through the courage of ex-policeman James Smith and ex-Protector of Aborigines Robert Morice, who wrote, 'It is difficult to say how many natives have been killed for the Daly River outrage but from all I have heard from different sources, I should say not less than 150, a great part of these women and children'.[81] One of the police officers, Corporal George Montagu, wrote a report which admitted too much, estimating that his party alone had killed 20 or 30 men:

> What the other parties have done I do not know but I believe the natives have received such a lesson this time as will exercise a salutary effect over the survivors in the time to come. One result of this expedition has been to convince me of the superiority of the Martini-Henry rifle, both for accuracy of aim and quickness of action.[82]

Northern Territory newspapers exulted: 'Corporal Montagu and his party are entitled to the hearty thanks of the whole community';[83] 'As to the shooting of blacks we uphold it defiantly'.[84] Forced to be seen to act, the Minister for the NT set up an enquiry chaired by a member of one of the punitive parties. They determined behind closed doors that Corporal Montagu was mistaken about having killed anybody, that the natives had been treated with leniency and had escaped, and that there was 'no evidence to prove that any natives were killed'.[85] This whitewashing of Montagu's actions by a sham enquiry, contributed to an open license to kill in the NT from 1885 until 1908. The *NT Times* openly promoted silence on the subject of killing Aborigines in 1886:

> If a hundred of the offending tribe had bitten the dust for each one of the poor fellows who were so brutally attacked, we at least would consider that no more than simple justice had been done ... We trust that when occasion again arises, there will be no necessity to argue about the tally of killed or wounded. Private parties will be sent out and the natives will probably disperse. Beyond that statement, the southern press will have little to fill its sensational columns with.[86]

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79. Joynt 1918: 7.
80. For detailed discussion, see Harris 1986: 217–229.
81. *South Australian Register* 4 June 1885.
82. *South Australian Parliamentary Papers* (HA), 170/1885: 3.
83. *Northern Territory Times* 26 Dec 1885.
84. *North Australian* 8 Jan 1886.
85. *South Australian Register* 18 Jan 1886.
86. *Northern Territory Times* 20 Feb 1886.

In 1885, NT Police Inspector Paul Foelsche went so far as to define the word 'disperse' as 'shooting them'.[87] Writing his memoirs, Mounted Constable Willshire did not bother with euphemisms:

> We came upon a large mob of natives camped amongst rocks of enormous magnitude ... It's no use mincing matters – the Martini-Henry carbines at this critical moment were talking English ...[88]
>
> Whilst tracking some natives who had been killing cattle ... we came upon them camped in a gorge. When we had finished with the male portion we brought the black gins and their offspring out ...[89]

Willshire declared that most policemen who accompanied him on such an attack 'would need a clean pair of pants'.[90]

The more I learn of incidents such as these and the more I learn of how frequent and widespread they were, the more convinced I am that these Aboriginal deaths by violence have been underestimated. What, for example, of the 50 years of officially-sanctioned killings by the Queensland Native Police and at other times by the other 'foreign' Native Police units? In Alice Springs recently, simply because I mentioned I was writing this paper, I learned from local Aboriginal people of yet another massacre at Epenarra and some more about the missing people of Whistleduck Creek, who had disappeared between the decision to open a mission there and the arrival of the missionaries. Food or drink laced with poison was provided to Aboriginal people in Alice Springs as recently as 1980. The whole subject of poisoning is one that Windschuttle ignores. It was a widespread practice but no longer provable by Windschuttle's forensic demands. Some monuments remain, as in Australia's Mt Arsenics and Poison Water Hole near Narrandera, but most poisonings have not even left behind such mute testimony as a revealing colonial place-name.

The exact number of Aboriginal deaths in this frontier battle will never be known. Yet tragic as they were, these 20 or 30,000 Aboriginal deaths by violence are a small number compared to those to whom the colonial settlement of Australia brought a slower and more ignominious death. It is to these we now turn.

Death from sexual abuse

The least discussed, most hidden, and most sinister cause of death and depopulation was sexual abuse of women and children. At times deaths of Aboriginal females from venereal diseases and sexually-related violence outnumbered all other causes of Aboriginal death. The official census figures from the mid-19th century are appalling in their stark and horrifying objectivity. For example, the return from Lake Macquarie District in 1837 was '28 men, 2 women, 2 boys, no girls'.[91]

There have always been those who blamed Aboriginal women for their own deaths. Some Aboriginal women willingly gave themselves to white men or engaged in prostitution but while these women may have been accessories in their own deaths it

87. South Australian Archives 790/1885/174.
88. Willshire 1896: 40–41.
89. Willshire 1896: 43.
90. Willshire 1896: 90.
91. Threlkeld 1837.

does not justify the abuse of the weak by the strong. But, in any case, they represent only a small proportion of those Aboriginal women and girls who were taken advantage of by what Lancelet Threlkeld called 'force, fraud or bribery'.[92]

The abuse of Aboriginal women was rife across the whole continent. Whalers, sealers, and other seafarers abducted coastal women who were never seen again. Constable TC Thorpe of the Northern Territory Police wrote in 1898 that Aboriginal women on the cattle stations 'were run down by station blackguards on horseback and taken to the stations for licentious purposes and there kept more like slaves than anything else'.[93] Renowned north Australian author, Xavier Herbert, said that 'they had to be there; without available women men would refuse to work on remote stations'.[94] Another NT author, Ernestine Hill, could write as recently as 1938 that black women were available, white men had the right of the conqueror and, in any case, black women were devoid of morality.[95] Willshire believed that God meant Aboriginal women to be used by white men 'as he had placed them wherever the pioneers go'.[96] Well known bushman-author Bill Harney wrote in 1958 that 'the pioneer makes the country by using the gifts within it to his needs'.[97] Indeed, the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women was so widely accepted that a distinctive vocabulary developed: 'gin hunts', 'black velvet', 'gin sprees', and so on.

Fatal venereal diseases were unknown or very rare in Aboriginal Australia prior to European settlement.[98] Largely untreatable before modern antibiotics, the multiple, dehumanising symptoms of gonorrhoea, syphilis and granuloma include pain, disfigurement, sterility, blindness, insanity and death. The literature clearly demonstrates that white settlers and Aboriginal people both knew them to be European diseases. In 1873, a year after the founding of Darwin, William Wildey described the Larakia people in glowing terms: they were 'most happy' and 'contented.' The young girls were 'very pretty, symmetrically formed and walked majestically'.[99] Only nine years later, William Sowden described the same people as 'dirt-encrusted, nearly all syphilitic.'[100] Annie Baxter of Yambuck Station in south-western Victoria kept detailed diaries: 'the camp across the river', which she happily described in 1844, became the 'Camp Des Invalides' by 1847.[101] Whole pastoral leases were abandoned because everybody died, black and white both. In this same period, two-thirds of the Aboriginal people of the Port Phillip district died of venereal diseases, including almost all of the young women.[102]

More hidden and therefore more difficult to assess was death by sexually related violence. Niel Black, a young stockman in western Victorian in the 1840s, wrote that it

92. Threlkeld 1837.
93. Thorpe to Govt. Resident, NT, 5 March 1898, GRS 790/1898, SASA.
94. Herbert cited in McGrath 1984: 234.
95. Hill 1938: 231.
96. Willshire 1896: 18.
97. Harney 1958: 50.
98. For a fuller discussion, see Harris 1994: 241-5.
99. Wildey 1876: 118–119.
100. Sowden 1882: 145.
101. Dawbin, Annie Maria [Baxter], Diaries, MSQ 181, Dixson Library, Sydney. (See also Critchett 1984).
102. Reece 1974: 54.

was common for men 'to sleep all night with a lubra and if she poxes him or in any way offends him, perhaps shoot her before twelve next day'.[103] In 1824 in Tasmania, several men were sentenced for crimes towards Aboriginal women chillingly listed simply as 'indescribable brutality'.[104] Threlkeld referred to these violent deaths as 'the slaughter of the black women'.[105]

Worst of all was the sexual abuse of young girls. In ignoring the fact of missionary anger at what today would be called paedophilia, Windschuttle and many other critics of Christian missions seriously misjudge the motivation for establishing isolated mission stations, particularly in the 19th century. Many missionaries, appalled at the sexual exploitation of children, could think of no immediate solution other than setting up some kind of controlled environment to protect children from what they commonly called 'the unbridled passion of unprincipled white men'. Daniel Matthews regularly entered the timber-cutters' camps on the Murray to remove young Aboriginal girls.[106] His wife Janet cared for 11-year-old girls who were pregnant to white men. William and Mary Watson nursed children as young as eight who were dying of VD and reported stockmen having '3 or 4 such children'.[107] Angelina Noble, the wife of James Noble, the first Aboriginal man ordained to the Christian ministry, had herself escaped from a stockman who kept her as a 'drover's boy' – a captive girl with hair cut short and dressed in boy's clothes.[108]

Not only did many of these children die, those who survived were almost invariably rendered infertile, a hugely significant factor in Aboriginal depopulation. Polding spoke of the sexual abuse of 'mere children who are thus made incapable of becoming mothers'.[109] Hurst wrote that 'fatal disease, introduced by licentious Europeans' interfered with 'the natural source of supply and increase'.[110] Magistrates of the Dungog District, responding to an 1845 survey, recorded that 'the diminution in births was most remarkable', attributing the decline to 'sexual intercourse with the whites at a very tender age'.[111] In the Port Phillip District, only one Aboriginal child was born and survived between 1839 and 1845, while the group of Aboriginal people itself was reduced from 207 to 152. By 1859 that number had fallen to 56.[112]

Death from European diseases

Large numbers of Aboriginal people succumbed to contagious European diseases to which they had not yet developed immunity.[113] With his flair for colourful language, Threlkeld wrote in 1837 that measles, whooping cough, and influenza had 'stretched the black victims in hundreds on the earth'.[114] The serious question which must be

103. Niel Black, cited in Kiddle 1961: 121.
104. Plomley 1966: 38.
105. Threlkeld 1837.
106. Harris 1994: 219–228, for detailed accounts see Cato 1976.
107. Watson Diary, 5 Mar 1833, 18 Aug 1833 etc. Australian Joint Copying Project, M233.
108. Higgins 1981: 3–4.
109. Report from the Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines 1845: 10–11.
110. Hurst, recorded in Young 1858: 188–190.
111. Report from the Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines 1845: 55.
112. Report from the Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines 1845: 27.
113. Recent research such as Briscoe 2003; Campbell 2002 and Dowling 1997 are shedding light on this neglected topic.

asked is this: as the years passed, what proportion of these deaths were unavoidable and what proportion were due to what can only be called calculated neglect?

In the earliest years of British colonisation, it was beyond the power of the white colonists to stem the epidemics or cure the sick. In the third year of the settlement of Sydney, all but two of the Kadigal Aboriginal people of the local Sydney region died of a disease which settlers presumed to be smallpox.[115] They tried their best to save lives, mystified that no white people caught the disease. Recent research has shown that the epidemic may not have been smallpox but chicken pox, which the settlers failed to recognise as fatal.[116] Later epidemics (after the second and third fleets) were indeed smallpox and were responsible for widespread death. In Western Australia in the 1840s, children at John Smithies' Wesleyan Mission died from tuberculosis contracted from the milk of the school's herd of cows.[117]

Contagious diseases like measles, smallpox, and influenza spread outwards from areas of white settlement, moving gradually through the Aboriginal tribal groups. Early European explorers encountered the drastic effects at remote distances from European population centres. At Wellington, NSW, in the 1830s, missionaries William and Ann Watson found their small medical knowledge stretched to the limit. Desperately trying to heal the sick and comfort the dying, they were unable to cope with the numbers. They built a small hut as an 'infirmary' but it was always full. Then they filled their own cramped two-roomed home with sick Aboriginal people. They were a familiar sight around the district with their horse-drawn cart, picking up people too ill to help themselves.[118]

Such deaths, wrote Threlkeld, were 'beyond the power of mortal men'.[119] It was undoubtedly true in the first decades of contact that the spread of unfamiliar diseases was so rapid, the Aboriginal resistance to these strange diseases so low, and the death-rate from them so high, that there was little anyone could have done about it. But was that always to be so? Can we simply blame foreign pathogens for two centuries of continued deaths from preventable or curable diseases?

As the 19th century ended and the 20th century began, the continued illness and death of Aboriginal people in the more settled parts of Australia had more to do with their unhealthy living conditions than the lethal effects of foreign diseases. This became extreme when Aboriginal people were forced to congregate in overcrowded and unsanitary shanty towns.[120] Unwelcome in their own lands and forcibly excluded from their own food and water sources, Aboriginal people congregated on the outskirts of country towns. People suffered malnutrition and overcrowding in makeshift shelters of hessian, cardboard, bark, and rusted iron. How many died in these and other circumstances will never be known. In 1902, the Queensland Registrar General informed the Chief Protector of Aborigines that Aboriginal deaths were not to be recorded.[121]

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114. Threlkeld 1937.
115. Gov Phillip to Lord Sydney, 13 Feb 1790, *Historical Records NSW* I(ii): 308.
116. Wright 1987.
117. Smithies' Letters, 26 Oct 1844, MN 172, Battye Library, Perth; McNair and Rumley 1981: 96.
118. Watson Diary, 12 Feb 1834, Australian Joint Copying Project, M233.
119. Threlkeld 1837.
120. An excellent recent study of this situation is Briscoe 2003.

Even after Federation, when state governments set up official Aboriginal reserves, conditions were rarely any better. Xavier Herbert managed Darwin's Kahlin Compound in the 1920s and '30s. In 1980, giving evidence before the Finniss River Land Claim, Herbert described the living conditions when he took over as 'hideous'. Worst of all was the plight of women suffering from leprosy and other incurable and contagious diseases, who were kept in an old building chained by the legs to their iron beds.[122] In 1936, Daisy Bates described Western Australia's infamous 'Lock Hospitals', the islands where Aboriginal people suffering contagious diseases were incarcerated:

> There is not in all my sad sojourn amongst the last sad people of the primitive Australian race, a memory of half so tragic or harrowing, or a name that conjures up such a deplorable picture of misery and horror unalleviated as these two grim and barren islands off the West Australian coast that for a period, mercifully brief, were the tombs of the living dead.[123]

Amidst a general acceptance of the high level of Aboriginal deaths, a few brave voices spoke out, asking why Australia should continue to accept that Aborigines died in large numbers 'like rotten sheep' as Bishop Frodsham expressed it in 1906.[124]

The causes of Aboriginal deaths were highly complex but mostly preventable. Shooting was preventable. Poisoning was preventable. Venereal diseases and malnutrition were certainly reducible. The total is far too great to be explained away by distracting and trivial arguments about a few apparent inconsistencies in some historians' handling of what is already an inadequate record, highly skewed towards justifying and excusing those whose action or inaction allowed the tragedy to continue unabated.

The rewriting of history

History tends to be written from the perspective of the powerful rather than the weak. Nowhere has this been better demonstrated than in the records of the struggle for the control of much of Australia between the original inhabitants and the colonisers. In this one-sided conflict, we know the names of almost every one of the 2,000 Europeans killed by Aboriginal people. I have not discovered more than a handful of the names of the 20,000 or more Aboriginal people killed by settlers. We know the name of every convict who died at Sydney Cove. We know at the most the names of only three or four of the dozens of Kadigal people who died in the Sydney epidemic in 1791. Once the Indigenous inhabitants had been vanquished and dispossessed they became irrelevant to the accepted, triumphalist story of the colonisation and development of Australia. They were simply written out of history. Australians my age learned almost nothing of them in school in the 1940s and 1950s.

In assessing the current debate we must bear in mind that Australian history has already been rewritten. Windschuttle and his associates write as if they are engaged in a moral campaign to correct the lies and misinformation of scheming Christian mission-

121. Roth 1902: 17.
122. Xavier Herbert, proceedings before His Honour Mr Justice Toohey, Aboriginal Land Commissioner, re Finniss River Land Claim, 25 Aug 1980: 542.
123. Bates 1936: 96.
124. Report on the Australian Church Congress 1906: 121.

aries and modern ideologically-driven historians who invent and exaggerate a tragic Aboriginal past for their own political ends. What those modern historians he criticises have been trying to do is to write back into history the story of Aboriginal Australians hidden for so long from our eyes.

Closer to the 19th and early 20th centuries, writers well knew what had been done to Aboriginal people and many consciously revised history to exclude the story. Anthropologists Spencer and Gillen thought that 'it is well to draw the veil over the past history of the relationship between the blackfellow and the whiteman'.[125] This phrase 'to draw the veil' or 'curtain' was very common in histories and settlers' reminiscences such as Thorne, Eden, and Hamilton.[126] As early as 1846, Stokes regretted that the facts of Australia's colonisation 'must reach the eyes of posterity'.[127] Knight refused to elaborate on the terrible Kilcoy poisoning lest it 'harm the honour of the white race'.[128] Crawford thought it best that much of what the Northern Territory police and cattlemen did was 'wisely left unexplained'.[129] Ferrara worried that details of frontier violence in the northwest could affect 'Western Australia's reputation abroad'.[130]

In 1960, the eminent Australian medical scientist Sir John Cleland could still regret that 'atrocities committed by unscrupulous white people on our natives are raked up and recounted'.[131] He was responding to the fact that a new generation of historians like Shaw, Crawford, Greenwood, Pyke, Clark, and Ward were acknowledging the better-documented past atrocities such as the Myall Creek and Coniston Station massacres. What Cleland and so many other non-Aboriginal commentators fail to understand is that it is only white Australians who 'rake up' past atrocities because it is only white Australians who have forgotten them. Ever since these atrocities occurred they have become part of Aboriginal people's experience and self-understanding: they never forgot or revised history, they never 'drew a curtain' over these events — they preserved them. They daily walk past the cairns where the bones of their dead lie, or, when out in the bush, they know the locations of massacre sites.

Recent historians like Rowley, Markus, Loos, Ryan, and Reynolds have been trying to redress the imbalance with their research into Aboriginal and European contact history. It is, of course, this latter group that Windschuttle and his associates accuse of bias and fabrication and of perpetuating a long line of historical inaccuracies going right back to missionaries in the 1830s. These early Christian missionaries did not distort or hide history — they were *part* of that history, although they did not know it at the time; they reported what they saw and what they heard; they publicised what they knew had happened and what they suspected had happened. We should honour them far more than their contemporary opponents, such as the editors of the Northern Territory newspapers who urged police and settlers to kill and not to bother reporting the dead. Of course a few

125. Spencer and Gillen 1912 vol I: 189.
126. eg Thorne 1867: 340; Eden 1872: 117; Hamilton 1912.
127. Stokes 1846 II: 462.
128. Knight 1895: 104.
129. Crawford's comments appended to Willshire, 1896: 101.
130. Letter of Peter Ferrara to *Western Australian*, reproduced in Reilly 1903: 346.
131. Cleland 1960: 29.

missionaries may have been misled or mistaken but many of them were well placed to know what was happening. It defies logic and sense to claim that many of them confided lies and exaggerations to their letters and private journals. There was a time, closer to those tragic years, when older Aboriginal people understood and acknowledged what the missionaries had done: 'If the missionaries hadn't come, my tribe would have been all shot down';[132] 'This mission saved people from getting killed ... The mission was put up just to save the people';[133] 'Only for the missionaries there wouldn't be so many Aborigines walking around today. They're the ones that saved the day for us. Our people were finished before the mission men came'.[134]

As for recent historians of Aboriginal history, none claim infallibility. Over many years of writing I know I have made some errors. I am grateful to people who help me by pointing them out so that I can amend them. That is how the writing of history works. But this is not at issue here. The question before us is not whether modern Australian historians have got every little detail right but whether they have been correct about the main direction and thrust of Aboriginal and European contact history. There is an immense amount of evidence that they are right. After years of reading countless newspapers, missionary journals, settlers' reminiscences, and local histories, and after conversations with hundreds of elderly Aboriginal people, I was overwhelmed by the evidence of massacre, death, dispossession, and despair. There is no need to fabricate or exaggerate, the record is tragic enough on its own.

Acknowledgements

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