
Fabrication fury but the rest is history

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Although I find much to admire in Windschuttle's important book, I also think it has serious flaws. Keith Windschuttle spoilt Christmas for many historians.

His new book, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, sent them scrambling for material that might discredit him, just as he has discredited some of them.

Windschuttle argues that the conventional view of the destruction of Tasmania's Aborigines not only is incorrect but that scholars promoting a radical agenda have made up, or grossly misrepresented, crucial supporting evidence.

Instead of an island whose indigenous people were "victims of a conscious policy of genocide", as Professor Lyndall Ryan wrote in her highly acclaimed and influential book *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, Windschuttle sees Tasmania as probably the European colony "where the least indigenous blood of all was deliberately shed".

He cannot deny that full-blood Tasmanian Aborigines died out in the 19th century. But he contends this was largely due to their vulnerability to introduced European diseases, including venereal diseases so severe they lost the ability to reproduce.

Windschuttle shows that some of the most infamous massacres either did not happen or that the number of Aborigines killed was far less than scholars claim. He also has shown that Henry Reynolds altered words written by Tasmania's Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur to make it appear as though Arthur was prepared to take drastic action against Aborigines because he feared for the survival of the colony.

In fact, Arthur was expressing his fears about the survival of the Aborigines, as an embarrassed Reynolds has now conceded, thanking Windschuttle for pointing out the "bad mistake".

The Reynolds misquotation was merely one of what even Windschuttle's harshest critics admit were "powerful blows" delivered by the new book.

Certainly, my confidence that Windschuttle has exposed some very careless and ideologically motivated scholarship is enhanced by the way those he has attacked and their supporters have responded so far.

There have been blustering generalisations that Windschuttle has been selective in his use of sources, and wrong in his conclusions. But very little hard evidence has been offered.

For instance Ryan, who receives the heaviest battering in the book, wrote an article for *The Australian* which could be read as a collective suicide note for her profession. She did not contest Windschuttle's allegations of fact against her, and even admitted to a few "minor errors" in her footnotes.

But she had her "truth", Windschuttle had his, and history was a "complex terrain in which multiple stories and interpretations are represented".

Professor Robert Manne tried a different approach, circulating a document which identified similarities between a few passages in Windschuttle's volume and a book by the American anthropologist, Robert Edgerton. This accusation of "soft plagiarism" was an inspired attempt to damage Windschuttle.

Three other professors, Stephen Muecke, Heather Goodall and Marcia Langton, decided the best way to deal with the problem was to draw on the academic left's rich heritage of attempting to stifle uncomfortable views. After *The Australian* published an article by Windschuttle summarising the argument of his book, they wrote a letter stating "it was a tragedy for Australian society" that he had been "given space to attack the credibility of major Australian historians".

Nevertheless, although I find much to admire in Windschuttle's important book, I also think it has serious flaws.

I can't believe he discussed his research with any anthropologists.

Arguing against Henry Reynolds' claim that Tasmanian Aborigines fought a guerilla war to defend their country, he rejects the possibility that they had any concept of trespass or rights in land.

He makes the unjustified assertion that such concepts derive only from agricultural societies and that they are alien to hunter-gatherers.

Windschuttle says that none of the lists of words and phrases in Tasmanian languages collated by the 19th century scholar H. Ling Roth contain terms for "land", "own", "possess" or "property", or any of their derivatives. But this gets him into an awful mess because, as part of his argument about the conflict, he is forced to accept that the Tasmanian Aborigines believed "game and other fruits of the land belonged to them".

In other words, they did have the notion that they could "own" or "possess" things, without the specific terms appearing on Ling Roth's lists which, in any case, are almost certainly limited.

Even so, the evidence from these lists is more equivocal on the question of ownership than Windschuttle admits.

These are not the only reasons for dismissing Windschuttle's claims about Tasmanians' relations to land.

He also appears to have misunderstood the analysis that archeologist Rhys Jones made of Tasmanian tribal movements, as he is seemingly unaware of the circumstances and protocols under which mainland Aboriginal groups accessed each other's territories.

Windschuttle rightfully criticises the one-dimensional view of white settler attitudes that emerges from some historians' accounts. But he holds an equally crude view of Aboriginal motivations and capacities.

He derides the suggestion that Tasmanian Aborigines might act with "humanity and compassion" because such notions were "literally unthinkable" to them.

This baseless claim not only displays the cultural relativism that Windschuttle otherwise scorns, it also goes against significant evidence that was available to him.

Ling Roth, whom he praises as one of only two "genuinely scholarly" 19th century investigators, describes an unsuccessful attempt by Aboriginal women to rescue two unknown whites who were drowning, and their distress when the men were lost.

Certainly, there are strong grounds for reassessing the conventional wisdom about relations between Aborigines and whites in the Australian colonies.

Windschuttle has the intellectual ability and the research expertise to make a great contribution to this task.

But first he needs to recognise he can also be as blinkered as the historians he condemns.