

The Right Book for the Right Time?

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Windschuttle is driven by an ethnocentric belief that the British colonists were so determined to uphold the rule of law on the colonial frontier that they were incapable of exterminating Aborigines. Rather the Aborigines in their anti-social behaviour were the problem. This indicates a serious lack of understanding of colonial history in general and of the colonial frontier in particular.

The publication of Keith Windschuttle's book, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One: Van Diemen's Land 1803-1847* (2002) has attracted the most astonishing media attention for a work of Australian history since the appearance of Manning Clark's *A History of Australia Volume I* in 1962.¹ Then, M.H. Ellis, a journalist on the *Bulletin* and author of biographies of John Macarthur and Lachlan Macquarie, dismissed Clark's work as 'history without facts' and cited some twenty specific cases of inaccuracy as evidence. Ellis concluded that Clark was more interested in 'little things of the mind and spirit'.²

This review revealed the mighty struggle then taking place for the ownership of Australia's past. Ellis, a rabid anti-Communist and upholder of the British Protestant ascendancy, was critical of the new kind of intellectual history that was emerging from Australia's universities and saw Clark's work as a prime example of 'left wing history' that sought to undermine the 'Australian way of life'.³

Now, over 40 years later, the struggle has been renewed, this time in the field of Aboriginal history. In his book, Windschuttle sets out two aims: to examine the footnotes, citations and archival references of historians of the Tasmanian Aborigines in order to show that 'the story they have constructed does not have the empirical foundations they claim'; and to provide 'a counter-history of race relations' in Tasmania which argues that the British colonisation of Tasmania

did not meet any organized resistance. Conflict was sporadic rather than systematic. Some mass killings were committed by both sides but they were rare and isolated events where the numbers of dead were in the tens rather than the hundreds. The notion of sustained "frontier warfare" is fictional.⁴

To promote his claim, Windschuttle targets my book, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, as a key text for scrutiny of footnotes.⁵ He does so in such a way to claim that I have fabricated my version of the past and that, as a consequence, his version of the past must be correct.

In this short essay I will review the main arguments of both books. Then I will show how Windschuttle claims that minor errors in my book can be constituted as 'fabrication'. I will conclude that Windschuttle's book is more the work of an opportunist than of a serious historian re-assessing a critical period in Australian history.

First published in 1981 with a second edition in 1996, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* has four key points. First, I estimated that the pre-contact number of the Tasmanian

Aborigines was between 4,000 and 5,000. They were organised into nine tribes with a social and political organisation comparable to hunter/gatherer communities on mainland Australia and they had a clear understanding of 'country'. Between 1803 and 1823, there were two phases of conflict between the Aborigines and the British colonists. The first took place between 1803 and 1808 over the need for common food resources like kangaroos, and the second between 1808 and 1823, when the low white female/male ratio among small farmers, sealers and whalers, led to their abduction of Aboriginal women as sexual partners and Aboriginal children as labourers. These practices also increased conflict over women among Aboriginal tribes. This in turn led to a decline in the Aboriginal population. European disease, however, does not appear to have become a serious factor until after 1829.

Secondly, rapid pastoral expansion and a colonial population increase in 1823 was the trigger for Aboriginal resistance. Whereas settlers and stock keepers had previously provided rations to the Aborigines during their seasonal movements across the settled districts, and recognised this practice as some form of payment for trespass, the new settlers and stock keepers were unwilling to maintain these arrangements. So the Aborigines began to raid settlers' huts for food. This resistance first took shape in 1824 when I estimated that 1,000 Aborigines remained in the settled districts. Between 1826 and 1831 a pattern of guerrilla warfare by the Aborigines was identified by the colonists, some of whom openly claimed that the former were fighting for their country. The colonial government responded with a series of measures to contain the conflict until the declaration of martial law in 1828.

Third, from the declaration of martial law in the settled districts on 1 November 1828 to its revocation in January 1832, I recorded that 89 colonists were killed by the Aborigines and more than twice that number injured. I recorded about 60 Aborigines killed, and estimated that twice that number lost their lives through unrecorded killings by the colonists and by intertribal conflict. After the Black Line of 1830, I estimated that about 300 Aborigines surrendered throughout the entire island of Tasmania and around 230 were transported to Flinders Island Aboriginal Establishment in Bass Strait. From this conflict I estimated that the European/Aboriginal death ratio was 1:4. This was considerably less than the 1:10 ratio recorded in other parts of mainland Australia.

Finally, I argued that despite the loss of Aboriginal lives on the colonial frontier, the Tasmanian Aborigines did not cease to exist in 1876 and that a modern Tasmanian Aboriginal community had survived into the late twentieth century, thus providing a clear link between the past and the present.

What is Keith Windschuttle's 'counter history' to my argument? First, he claims that there were only 2,000 Aborigines in Tasmania at the moment of colonisation, that they had an internally dysfunctional society with no clear tribal organisation or connection to the land and were politically incapable of conducting a guerrilla war with the settlers. Rather they were more like 'black bushrangers' who attacked settlers' huts for plunder and were led by 'educated black terrorists' disaffected from white society. They were more successful in killing the colonists than the reverse: two colonists were killed for every Aborigine and there was only one massacre of Aborigines, an incident that he alone has found in the archival sources.

Second, he claims that the name, 'Black War' 1824-31, was a myth invented after the end of hostilities in 1835 by a journalist, Henry Melville, who was disaffected

from the colonial government at the time; and it has been sustained since by all other historians and particularly those in the post 1960s era, like myself, who sought to gain political and financial recognition for the present day Tasmanian Aboriginal community as well as personal fame. Finally, he claims that the Tasmanian Aborigines, by prostituting their women to sealers and stock-keepers, by catching European diseases and through intertribal warfare, were responsible for their own demise. As a consequence governments today do not owe the present-day Tasmanian Aboriginal community any form of reparation or apology for their dispossession.

This argument sounds suspiciously like David Irving's claim that the number of Jews killed by the Nazis was far less than six million; that it really amounted to 'only' a few hundred thousand; and was thus similar to, or less than, the number of German civilians killed in Allied bombing raids. 'The Holocaust' was a myth invented by Allied propaganda during the war and sustained since by Jews who wished to use it to gain political and financial support for the state of Israel or for themselves. The supposed evidence for the Nazis' wartime mass murder of millions of Jews by gassing and other means was fabricated after the war.⁶ But in an antipodean reverse twist, Windschuttle implies that I, not he, have adopted David Irving's tactics – deliberately using incorrect footnotes, inventing atrocities, falsifying historical statistics, consciously using unreliable or discredited sources and applying one standard of criticism to sources which undermine my views and applying another to those which support them – in order to make my case.

While I am prepared to acknowledge, as any historian would, that my work may contain minor errors, I have certainly not engaged in any act of fabrication which is a deliberate act of falsification. Could it be that Windschuttle does not understand the difference between a minor error and a fabrication? Let us examine what is possibly the worst case of minor errors in my book and see what Windschuttle has made of it.

The Pittwater Massacre and the Abyssinian Dispersal

On pages 134-39 of his book, Windschuttle discusses my account of what he calls the 'Pittwater Massacre and the Abyssinian Dispersal' in late 1826. I recorded both incidents in two sentences on page 92 of my book. It reads:

The entry of the military and field police led to an immediate affray with forty Oyster Bay Aborigines at Pittwater in which fourteen Aborigines were killed and ten captured. Another group of Big River people were dispersed from the Abyssinia area and two were shot.

I provided three references to these incidents: Gordon to Col Sec, 9 December 1826 CSO 1/331, the *Hobart Town Courier*, 15 November 1826 and the *Colonial Times*, 1 December 1826.

Windschuttle claims that he could not find the first reference in the Archives Office of Tasmania (AOT) Colonial Secretary's Office (CSO) volume I cited or in volumes CSO 1/316 nor CSO 1/310. So convinced is he that I have simply fabricated it that he concludes: 'Indeed, there is no document anywhere in the Archives Office of Tasmania written by Gordon either on this date or about this incident...' (p. 135).

Yet the reference is where I cited it, in CSO 1/331 on pp. 194-95. It reads in part:

I beg to report to Your Excellency that Information being received by the Police at Sorell yesterday evening of a Number of the black Natives being in the Neighbourhood of the Little Plains; the Constables accompanied by the Military proceeded to the Place where they succeeded in surprizing a Party of Nine – viz, 6 men and 3 women, one of whom has an infant, and amongst the men, Black Tom is of that number.

To be sure, the reference to the 14 Aborigines killed is missing from this particular source. It can be readily found, however, in the evidence of Gilbert Robertson to the Aborigines Committee on 3 March 1830, where he said:

The Richmond police, three years ago, killed 14 of the Natives, who had got upon a hill, and threw stones down upon them; the police expended all their ammunition, and being afraid to run away, at length charged with the bayonet, and the Natives fled.⁷

The second reference, to the *Hobart Town Courier*, is certainly incorrect in both book and PhD thesis but in the latter it is supported by a reference to a letter from the settler Thomas Wells, who reported the encounter at Abyssinia.⁸ The incident is actually reported in the *Hobart Town Gazette* for 24 November 1826. In this case Windschuttle located the reference.

The third reference, the *Colonial Times*, for 1 December 1826 is also incorrect. It should read 15 December 1826. Again Windschuttle located this reference.

Further to the Abyssinia incident, Windschuttle chastises me for not realising that there were two separate encounters with the Aborigines over two separate days in this area and that four Aborigines were killed, rather than two, and that they occurred before rather than after Lieutenant Governor Arthur's proclamation of 29 November 1826. Yet, in knowing this, Windschuttle fails to acknowledge that he has had the retrospective benefit of reading the chronology of incidents on the Tasmanian frontier, by N.J.B. Plomley, published in 1992, several years after the publication of the first edition of my book.⁹

Windschuttle also accuses me of misusing the term 'dispersal' in relation to the Abyssinia encounter. I certainly consider a hot pursuit of the Aborigines that ends in at least one death, to be 'dispersal'. This same term was used by a correspondent to the *Colonial Times* on 5 May 1827 to describe a very similar 'encounter' at the Macquarie River.

Overall then, the reference that Windschuttle could not find can be found in the place where I cited it and is correct, another is missing but readily discovered and two others are incorrect in source but not in substance and are easily corrected. This does not constitute a fabrication. The only substantive alteration is that Plomley's later work shows that two more Aborigines were killed than I first estimated.

What does this example tell us about Windschuttle as a historian? First, that he lacks a familiarity with the process of footnote checking. In the case of what he calls the 'missing document', for example, he could not be bothered to read the entire volume cited, to find its location. This suggests that he lacks an understanding of the organisation of the archival sources.

Secondly, Windschuttle assumes from the outset that historians like myself are guilty of fabrication. It is not in his interests to find the correct sources. Indeed, he invariably adopts the most malicious of intellectual interpretations, in a manner almost unprecedented in historical scholarship.

Thirdly, he writes of the past in Tasmania as if it were one-dimensional – there can only be one true account and he has found it. Therefore, historians like myself must be wrong.

Finally, Windschuttle is driven by an ethnocentric belief that the British colonists were so determined to uphold the rule of law on the colonial frontier that they were incapable of exterminating Aborigines. Rather the Aborigines in their anti-social behaviour were the problem. This indicates a serious lack of understanding of colonial history in general and of the colonial frontier in particular.

All this suggests that as a historian Windschuttle is either extraordinarily naïve or an opportunist peddling propaganda. If the former, then surely he would have been less belligerent in making accusations of false scholarship. If the latter, then Windschuttle has seized the moment of the ascendancy of a conservative federal government to cast doubt on the work of historians of the Tasmanian Aborigines as a way of undermining Aboriginal Reconciliation, the Mabo Judgement of 1992, the Native Title legislation of 1993, the Wik Decision of 1996, and the Stolen Children Report of 1997. If he can show that historians like me have invented the past, then all this falls apart.

All the evidence suggests that the latter is the case. As a work of propaganda, Windschuttle's book has been promoted by every right-wing media columnist in the nation as the new orthodoxy of the Howard government.¹⁰ However even the historian most supportive of Windschuttle, Geoffrey Blainey, has expressed concern about his lack of compassion about the fate of the Tasmanian Aborigines.¹¹ But like M.H. Ellis and the Howard government, Windschuttle is not interested in little things like the mind and the spirit. Footnotes are all that matter.

Endnotes

1. Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One: Van Diemen's Land 1803-1847*, Macleay Press, Paddington, NSW, 2002; C.M.H. Clark, *A History of Australia, Volume I: From the Earliest Times to the Age of Macquarie*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1962.
2. For an account of the Ellis review, see Stephen Holt, *Manning Clark & Australian History*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1982, pp. 180-82.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Windschuttle, *Fabrication*, p. 3.
5. Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, 2nd ed., Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1996. The page numbers cited in this essay are of this edition.
6. Richard J. Evans, *Telling Lies About Hitler, The Holocaust, History and the David Irving Trial*, Verso, London, 2002, pp.118-19.
7. *Van Diemen's Land. Copies of all Correspondence between Lieutenant-Governor Arthur and His Majesty's Secretary of State for the colonies, on the subject of the Military Operations carried on against the Aboriginal Inhabitants of Van Diemen's Land, with an introduction by A.G.L. Shaw*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1971, p. 49.
8. Lyndall Ryan, *The Aborigines in Tasmania 1800-1974 and their Problems with the Europeans*, PhD thesis, Macquarie University, 1975, p. 153, n. 97.
9. N.J.B. Plomley, *The Aboriginal/Settler Clash in Van Diemen's Land, 1803-1831*, Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery, Tasmania, Launceston, 1992, pp. 62-100.
10. See, for example, Bernard Lane, 'Orthodox history under the gun', *The Australian*, 28-29 December 2002, p. 16; and 'Historians at war about Tasmania's past', *Sunday program*, Channel 9, Sydney, 25 May 2003.
11. Geoffrey Blainey, 'Undermining a bloody myth', *The Australian*, 14 April 2003, p. 9.