

'Many deeds of terror': Windschuttle and Musquito

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Keith Windschuttle has presented *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* as 'the most exhaustive study that's ever been done'.¹ Yet within its pages are many examples of errors and misrepresentations that cast doubt on his management of colonial source material. One conspicuous blunder is in his treatment of the Risdon Cove massacre of May 1804.² The shooting was certainly mass murder – even Windschuttle concedes three Aborigines were killed. An eyewitness, Edward White, informed the 1830s Aborigines Committee that 'a great many' Aborigines were killed, and the attack was unprovoked. Windschuttle discredits White, saying the man was working at a creek below the settlement and could not have seen the shootings. Either Windschuttle did not read White's statement properly or he misleads his readers, for White's account continues: 'the soldiers came down from their own camp to the creek to attack the Natives'.³ White also claimed that Surgeon Mountgarret packed bones in barrels and sent them to Port Jackson, which Windschuttle disputes, saying that White, a convict, could not have had any direct knowledge of the behaviour of a member of the colonial elite. This is laughable. Risdon Cove was a tiny outpost that relied on convict labourers who were perfectly placed to observe the activities of their masters. There is no reason to doubt White's recollection or to pour scorn on those who tell the story today.

This article challenges Windschuttle's self image as a purveyor of 'truth', by forensically examining another of his misrepresentations – that the Black War of 1824-31 is a misnomer. Windschuttle claims it was not a war but a 'crime spree' begun by Musquito, the Sydney Aborigine who joined ranks with the Oyster Bay people of Tasmania. Windschuttle's depiction of Musquito reveals the shallowness of his research. The notion that Musquito led the Tasmanians into aggression, and consequent denial of their agency in the conflict, dates from Governor Arthur's time. In replicating this narrative Windschuttle obscures significant information to present Musquito as a criminal antagonist because he sees the Tasmanian people as primitive degenerates who were incapable of political organisation, and who were not fighting for their land, but engaging in 'senseless violence'.⁴ This essay will present the known details of Musquito's life in a more complex light. While Musquito was a skilled fighter, his involvement in Tasmanian hostilities lasted only seven months, and only a few of the attacks that occurred within that period can possibly be associated with Musquito.

'The guerrilla warfare thesis' is the name given by Windschuttle to the view, shared by most contemporary historians, that the Aboriginal violence that broke out in 1824 and continued into the 1830s was a concerted campaign against the colonists. In chapters three and four Windschuttle attributes the outbreak of hostilities to the work of a band of 'detrified' or 'Europeanised' Aborigines, who were 'simply outlaws', engaged in a 'minor crime wave'. At the head of this band of

'black bushrangers', according to Windschuttle, was Musquito, assisted by his longer-lived 'accomplice', Black Tom.⁵

Windschuttle glosses over Musquito's life in the following terms: he was sent to Tasmania in 1813 as a blacktracker where he lived among whites in Hobart, becoming so 'integrated' that he went on a cattle-buying expedition to Mauritius with Edward Lord in 1818. When Musquito captured the bushranger Michael Howe the convicts shunned him so he asked to be sent to Sydney. The passage was not approved, so Musquito fell in with one of the 'tame mobs' near Hobart. When he later joined the Oyster Bay Tribe he recruited the Tasmanian Aborigine, Black Jack, as his 'chief accomplice', and lured away Black Tom (Kickerterpoller), a Tasmanian raised in a Hobart household. In 1823 the gang murdered two stock-keepers at Grindstone Bay. Of the seven attacks recorded in 1824, all but one were supposedly the work of this band. In August 1824 Musquito was apprehended. He was hanged in February 1825 for the Grindstone Bay murders, with Black Jack, who was guilty of another killing. Their actions were not 'nationalistic', says Windschuttle, but were simply 'crimes' for which execution was just punishment.

So Windschuttle's story goes. Yet, of these 'facts' the only 'truths' are that Musquito tracked Howe, joined the Tasmanian Aborigines, and died on the gallows with Black Jack. The rest are serious errors. To find the real story it is necessary to look beyond Tasmania to Musquito's origins in Sydney. I was shocked that Windschuttle does not appear to have done any research on Musquito's background in Sydney. For Musquito features in the NSW Colonial Secretary's Correspondence, Historical Records of Australia, Norfolk Island Convict Musters and the *Sydney Gazette*. The reason for this plethora of documentation is that Musquito was not simply a blacktracker. He was actually a formidable resistance fighter – someone with a very strong sense of 'nationalism', if that word is useful in this context. A Gai-Mariagal man, by 1805 Musquito had become notorious for leading 'outrages' against settlers in the lower Hawkesbury River area, and was named in Government Orders.⁶ After Musquito and another man, Bulldog, were apprehended, Governor King pondered what to do with them. Noting that the conflict had taken more Aboriginal than white lives, and believing that he could not charge them under British law, King decided to set an example and exiled them, without conviction, to Norfolk Island.⁷

When Norfolk Island was evacuated in 1813 Musquito was sent to Port Dalrymple (Launceston) with other evacuees. The following year Musquito's brother Phillip applied for his return to Port Jackson, which was approved by Governor Macquarie, but did not take place. The records suggest that Musquito tracked bushrangers to secure his passage home. In October 1817, Lieutenant Governor Sorell advised Macquarie that he was sending Musquito, Black Mary and a convict named Gill (McGill) to Port Jackson because their assistance in hunting bushrangers had made them 'odious' to the convicts at Port Dalrymple. Yet the three stayed behind. In February 1818 Edward Lord advertised his intention to take Musquito, his servant, to Mauritius but perhaps Musquito was too valuable for Sorell to release, as Lord left without him. Just over six months later McGill and Musquito found and killed Howe.⁸ The promised passage never eventuated and Musquito, who had literally placed his life at risk while living under the norms of white society, must have felt profoundly betrayed.

It seems Musquito decided to live again with Aboriginal people. He travelled south and joined one of the 'tame gangs' around the Pitt Water, which is a lagoon at Sorell, near the current site of Hobart Airport. This group of men, women and children was visited by Reverend William Horton in winter 1823. Horton was horrified by their manner of living naked in the open air and eating meat 'without salt and without vegetables' but described Musquito as possessing good English and 'superior skill and muscular strength'. Horton opined they could be used to open communication with tribes in the interior.⁹ However, this 'tame gang' lived in the country of the Oyster Bay people, who had faced white gunfire at Risdon Cove on 3 May 1804. By the 1820s, the south-eastern territories of the Oyster Bay people were under serious pressure from white settlement.¹⁰ Although Windschuttle disputes this, it does not take much effort to understand that the Aborigines had reason to prevent the further expansion of white settlement by attacking outposts, guerrilla style. Musquito was stranded in strange country, but he probably recognised the patterns of dispossession he had seen in the Hawkesbury district. Perhaps, after the Governor's betrayal, he felt he had nothing left to lose by joining the Oyster Bay people on their journey to war.

In November 1823, a few months after Horton met the 'tame gang', the Grindstone Bay killings took place. The sole survivor, Radford, gave a vivid account of the attack at Musquito's trial in Hobart's Supreme Court.¹¹ The stock-keepers hut was a remote outpost, newly established in kangaroo and emu hunting grounds.¹² The band of 60 who arrived at the hut was not a war party, as it included women and children,¹³ so the Aborigines had probably not expected company. The Aborigines camped, hunted, and played while Musquito spoke with the uneasy men, ate their food, and brought women to the hut. After three days, for some reason which Radford was either unable or unwilling to explain, the mood soured. The Aborigines approached the hut and the stock-keepers realised their firearms had been removed. Musquito wordlessly took the sheepdogs while the Aborigines stood about the men with their spears raised. Radford said 'we accordingly did run'. He was speared, but his hapless companions, William Hollyoak and Mammaoa, a Tahitian, were killed. Radford did not see who struck the mortal blows, and though he heard poor Hollyoak scream, he was unable to say what happened to Mammaoa.

This attack was only the beginning. Windschuttle uses the meticulous notes of N.J.B. Plomley to calculate that eleven attacks, including ten killings, occurred in 1824.¹⁴ Windschuttle attributes six of these to Musquito and Black Tom, describing a killing in March (actually the firing of a hut) and a spearing in April. However there is no evidence that Musquito or Tom were involved in either attack, although the *Hobart Town Gazette* supposed they had been, 'from the circumstances of the Natives having been with one or two instances only excepted, entirely harmless until these two blacks have lately appeared among them'¹⁵ – remarks which hardly constitute proof. Similarly, a letter from the Magistrate Charles Rowcroft, which Windschuttle quotes, should be viewed sceptically. Rowcroft wrote to Lieutenant Governor Arthur on 16 July 1824 pleading for armed assistance and alleging Musquito had committed six attacks, including four murders. Many of these attacks occurred in the neighbouring territories of the Big River people, yet Windschuttle lays them at the feet of the 'detrified black bushrangers'.¹⁶ He takes at face value Rowcroft's allegation that Musquito was involved in Matthew Osborne's murder, and that his

widow's life was 'despaired of'. Yet Rowcroft did not know the Osbornes and was exaggerating. On the very day of Rowcroft's letter the *Gazette* reported that Widow Osborne had recovered from her injuries and published her account of the ordeal, in which she incriminated Black Tom but never mentioned Musquito. The only attack in which Musquito was definitely involved in 1824 was a non-fatal spearing at Pitt Water in August.¹⁷ This means Musquito and Black Tom committed only one each of the eleven-recorded attacks in that year. As Hobart newspaperman Henry Melville wrote: 'Many deeds of terror are laid to Musquito's charge, which it is impossible for him to have committed'.¹⁸ Given that Windschuttle demands a very high standard of proof for killings of Aborigines, it is bizarre that he so readily apports blame for attacks on settlers to just two people. Clearly, other Aborigines were launching attacks independently.

The trial of Musquito and Black Jack is also misrepresented by Windschuttle. The men were tried in December 1824 for 'aiding and abetting' the murder of Hollyoak. Windschuttle does not admit any sense of tragedy into his account of the trial or the executions that followed. He neglects to say that neither man was given counsel, nor allowed to testify in his own defence. As Musquito was a capable speaker of English it was most unfair to deny him the right to testify in his own defence. This trial took place at a time when other colonial authorities were questioning whether Aboriginal people should even be tried under the laws of the usurping power. Melville certainly felt the men were prisoners of war, and said they had committed no crime as they had acted in retaliation. Gilbert Robertson, a friend of Musquito, called the hangings murder, and said they led to further killings by Aborigines. The historian J.E. Calder, of whom Windschuttle approves when it is convenient, wrote in 1875 that the hangings were intended to terrify the Aborigines, and multiplied aggression tenfold. He also said: 'I don't believe that justice, or anything like it, was always done here'.¹⁹ Windschuttle silences these dissenting voices. Nor does he explain how Melville's sad observation that 'not one single individual was ever brought to a Court of Justice, for offences committed against these harmless creatures'²⁰ reflects on colonial justice during Arthur's tenure.

Musquito apparently told his gaoler: 'Hanging no good for black fellow ... very good for white fellow for *he* used to it', which Melville interpreted as meaning his execution was useless as it served no example to the 'savages'.²¹ Unfortunately the example was all too clear. Just before Musquito's trial a large group came into Hobart, and were provisioned at Kangaroo Point (Bellerive). When two more Aborigines were tried and hanged in September 1826, the people at Kangaroo Point left, never to return.²² Then the violence accelerated markedly. In fact the worst years, by Windschuttle's own admission, were 1828 and 1830, long after the death of Musquito and well after Black Tom's final surrender in 1827.²³ Hostilities continued into the 1830s. It is, therefore, simply ridiculous to argue that Musquito and Black Tom caused the Black War.

Windschuttle's critique of the 'guerrilla warfare thesis' becomes fatuous when he says that the Aborigines 'not only had no political objectives but [had] no sense of a collective interest'. He draws this conclusion because no statements survive from a 'tribal Aborigine' expressing a 'patriotic or nationalistic sentiment', and because no 'political approaches' were made.²⁴ It is not right to privilege the words and documents of colonists over black actions. Those white words were not to be

trusted – as Calder put it, Arthur’s proclamations about amelioration were ‘silly advertisements’ best condemned ‘to the waste basket of the colony’.²⁵ Killings held meaning, and each murder, whether committed by Aborigines, settlers or the hangman, conveyed a fearful warning, understood on both sides of the frontier. The actual number of killings was irrelevant in that atmosphere of anxiety.

I have spent much of the last year mulling over the reasons why this contorted book was written. The last three chapters are simply abhorrent. Windschuttle picks out the most negative accounts to present the Tasmanians as ‘maladapted’, ‘internally dysfunctional’ and ‘incompatible with the looming presence of the rest of the world’. He goes so far as to argue that the Tasmanians were ‘active agents in their own demise’ because the men ‘held their women cheaply’.²⁶ His thesis that Musquito led the Tasmanians into aggression is just another way of dehumanising the Tasmanian people. The purpose of this dehumanisation becomes clear in the epilogue, in which Windschuttle attempts to discredit contemporary Aboriginal Tasmanians by questioning their genealogies, and attacking their attempts to regain control over their cultural heritage. And all this from a writer who claims to be ‘apolitical’.

This essay shows that Windschuttle has twisted source material to suit his own bitter interpretations. Now is the time for a new generation of historians to mine the rich vein of colonial source material in Tasmania. I hope these new voices will not be afraid to convey the drama and tragedy of the Tasmanian frontier, and to express the compassion that is so lacking in this book.

Endnotes

1. ‘Historian dismisses Tasmanian Aboriginal genocide “myth”’, *PM*, ABC Radio, 12 December 2002.
2. Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume 1: Van Diemen’s Land 1803-1847*, Macleay Press, Paddington, NSW, 2002, pp. 22-26.
3. *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia, 4, Correspondence and Papers Relevant to the Government and Affairs of the Australian Colonies 1830-1836*, vol. XIX, Irish University Press, Shannon, 1970 (hereafter *BPP*), p. 225.
4. *Hobart Town Gazette*, 2 April 1824; Arthur to Goderich, 10 January 1829, in *BPP*, p. 175; Musquito’s deeds were dramatically embellished by early Tasmanian historians. See John West (ed. A.G.L. Shaw), *The History of Tasmania*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1852 [1970], pp. 267-69; Charles Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians*, Johnson Reprint Corp., Baltimore, 1872 [1970], pp. 92-104; Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, pp. 130, 377-86.
5. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, pp. 65-75, 130, 399.
6. Descendants of Musquito’s family believe he was Gai-Mariagal from Sydney’s Northern Beaches, with important connections to Hawkesbury sites. Personal communication from Dennis Foley, a descendant, 17 April 2003; Governor King to Camden, 30 April 1805, *Historical Records of Australia* (hereafter *HRA*), series 1, vol. 5, pp. 306-307; *Sydney Gazette*, 19 May 1805, 2c; 9 June 1805, 4a; 30 June 1805, 2a; 7 July 1805, 2b; 4 August 1805, 2b.
7. King to Camden, 20 July 1805, *HRA* series 1, vol. 5, pp. 497 and 502-5; King to Piper, 18 August 1805, NSW State Records Colonial Secretary’s Correspondence 1788-1825 (hereafter NSW SR Col. Sec.), Reel 6040, ML Safe 1/51, p. 41; The absence of a charge is confirmed in Carol J Baxter (ed.) *General Musters of NSW, Norfolk Island and Van Diemen’s Land 1811*, Sydney, 1987, pp. 94 and 152.
8. Archives Office of Tasmania (hereafter AOT), CSO 1/177/4306; NSW Colonial Secretary to Lt Gov Davey, 17 August 1814, NSW SR Col. Sec., Reel 6004, 4/3493, p. 251; Sorell to Macquarie, 13 October 1817, *Historical Records of Australia*, series 3, vol. 2, pp. 283-84; Lord advertised his intention to sail with his servants Muskitoo and James Brown in *Hobart Town Gazette*, 14 February 1818; AOT Departures Index, ref. Crowther, *Port Certificates*, Book L, p. 33 states two other servants accompanied Lord; Howe’s capture is reported by Sorell to Macquarie, 20 October 1818, AOT CY1096, p. 91.
9. Mitchell Library, Bonwick Transcripts, 52, vol. 4, Wesleyan Mission Papers, Rev Horton to Wesleyan Mission Society, 3 June 1823, pp. 1269-74.
10. Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, 2nd ed., Allen and Unwin, St. Leonards, 1996, pp. 83-88.
11. *Hobart Town Gazette*, 3 December 1824.

12. James Erskine Calder, *Some Account of the Wars, Extirpation, Habits &c of the Native Tribes of Tasmania*, Henn & Co, Hobart, 1875. Although Calder wrote 50 years after the event, he knew Radford, who still lived at Grindstone Bay.
13. AOT CBE1/1, Gilbert Robertson to Committee for the Care and Treatment of Captured Aborigines, pp. 16-17.
14. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, p. 85.
15. *Ibid.* p. 68 and 68 nn.; *Hobart Town Gazette*, 26 March 1824 and 2 April 1824.
16. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, p. 69.
17. *Hobart Town Gazette*, 16 July 1824 and 6 August 1824.
18. Henry Melville (ed. G. Mackaness), *The History of Van Diemen's Land from the year 1824 to 1835, Inclusive During the Administration of Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur*, Horwitz-Grahame, Sydney 1836 [1965], p. 32.
19. AOT CBE 1/1, p. 17; Calder, *Some Account of the Wars*, pp. 13 and 54.
20. Melville, *The History of Van Diemen's Land*, p. 59.
21. *Ibid.* p. 39 n., pp. 56-59.
22. *BPP*, p. 211.
23. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, pp. 84-85.
24. *Ibid.* pp. 99-101.
25. Calder, *Some Account of the Wars*, p. 16.
26. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, pp. 377-386.