

KEITH WINDSCHUTTLE AND ABORIGINAL HISTORY

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“Bring me my liar.” (Remark attributed to Frederick the Great, when wishing to have history read to him). Precious few authors ever produce a book which can be legitimately called “life-changing”, so that readers’ minds would be differently furnished if it had stayed unwritten. Still fewer authors manage to produce two such books. In the exalted company of those who have achieved this latter feat is Keith Windschuttle.

Nine years ago Mr. Windschuttle gave us *The Killing of History*,¹ a terse yet profoundly detailed guide to historiographical corruption’s most fashionable forms, which saw off the pretensions to trustworthiness of half a dozen much-touted gurus. Whether his target was Paul Carter (an Australian nullity whose main distinction resided in citing French pseudo-philosophical verbiage as a justification for

factual slovenliness), or Michel Foucault (whose allegedly path-breaking insights into the history of prisons and madhouses remained untroubled by the slightest attempt to provide evidence for his grand theoretical speculations), or Simon Schama (now a solemnly vaunted television star, presumably on the basis of his self-confessed taste for interlarding his ostensible reportage with pieces of pure fiction), or Francis Fukuyama (enough said), or pundits more misguided than even these, Mr. Windschuttle adopted the same technique, and a very effective one too. Quote the guru in question so extensively, and so fairly, that he convicts himself from his own mouth; then, and only then, pass sentence. As a result, Mr. Windschuttle never marred his narrative with the faintest hint of cheap cunning. He backed up — with

1. Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing Of History: How a Discipline is Being Murdered by Literary Critics and Social Theorists* (Macleay Press, Paddington, New South Wales, 1994).

the proper scholarly apparatus — every assertion he made, so that his approach became far more effective than any number of hasty and vituperative newspaper columns would have been.

Anyone capable of writing *The Killing of History* would have had every reason for supposing that, after so signal a public service, he could relax. Such relaxation has never been Mr. Windschuttle's style. We now possess the first in a planned trilogy, the overall title of which speaks for itself: *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*. Volume One, covering Van Diemen's Land up to 1847,² has already been a scarifying embarrassment to panjandrums of official Aboriginal history: chief of them Henry Reynolds and the younger, less widely celebrated Lyndall Ryan. It does for such panjandrums what *The Black Book of Communism* did for all Communists not clinically deranged. In particular, it has finally ended (at least in the field of Aboriginal affairs) the situation which Max Teichmann bemoaned in a recent *News Weekly*:³

“We can all make a list of books about Australian society which never seem to appear; whereas, the equivalents can be found regularly

turning up, selling well, and, quite often, sparking important debates, in Europe, Britain and most especially the United States. All we seem to get are pamphlets and slim monographs, coming out of some institute or think-tank, sparsely reported, finding limited distribution, and soon forgotten.”

Touché: except that the situation has grown worse even than Mr. Teichmann implies, given that these “pamphlets and slim monographs” tend to come from outfits which no longer maintain the most basic criteria of intellectual integrity.⁴ Mr. Windschuttle is therefore a bold man. He has ploughed ahead in the knowledge that he will be expected to endure calumny and outright threats from those whose jerry-built scholarship he has deplored, and who made it quite clear during the Geoffrey Blainey affair of 1984-85 what value they place on civilised argument. (At that time, Reynolds positively boasted to *The Weekend Australian's* Helen Trinca of his planned treatment for Professor Blainey: “What you've got to expect if you engage in that sort of public controversy is that you are going to be shot at . . . you have got to expect to be clobbered and people will really

2. Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History: Volume One, Van Diemen's Land, 1803-1847* (Macleay Press, Paddington, New South Wales, 2002).

3. Max Teichmann, “Physician heal thyself”, *News Weekly*, 14 December 2002.

4. A particularly extreme example of modern think-tanks' fact-free, historically-illiterate, and self-congratulatory polemics is John Hyde, *Dry: In Defence of Economic Freedom* (Institute of Public Affairs, Melbourne, 2002).

jump on you.”⁵)

Still more galling to Mr. Windschuttle must be the realisation that he need anticipate no help from the intellectual and moral bankrupts of mainstream Australian “conservatism”, who are always readier to impose new taxes or to steal old guns than to give the feral Left any punishment more severe than a tiny tap on the wrist. Professor Blainey’s fate revealed — if it needed revealing — what the defining characteristic of such a “conservative” always is in a crisis: so prominent a yellow streak that he could readily pass as an understudy for the Bananas in Pyjamas.

Mr. Windschuttle’s agenda in this book, and its future successors, is a simple one. There exists, he demonstrates, not the slightest justification for loose talk about “genocide” and “holocaust” in connection with Australian Aborigines’ post-1788 history. He expounds his own conclusion after having recounted public expressions of remorse by Sir William Deane over a massacre which, despite the slight handicap of not being carried out by whites (but by Aborigines against Aborigines), called forth Deane’s most flatulent rhetoric. “If the factual details”, Mr. Windschuttle complains,⁶

“are not taken seriously, then people can invent any atrocity and believe anything they like. Truth becomes a lost cause. . . . As even the narrow focus of this first volume alone is enough to make clear, the Aborigines were not the victims of a holocaust. To compare the intentions of Governor [Arthur] Phillip or Lieutenant-Governor [George] Arthur, or any of their successors, to those of Adolf Hitler, is not only conceptually odious but wildly anachronistic. There were no gas chambers in Australia or anything remotely equivalent. The colonial authorities wanted to civilise and modernise the Aborigines, not exterminate them. Their intentions were not to foster violence towards Aborigines but to prevent it.”

A similar passage crops up near the end of Mr. Windschuttle’s study: “To compare these figures [of Aborigines who died at whites’ hands] to the millions deliberately put to death in Pol Pot’s Cambodia, Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany is bizarre and offensive. It trivialises the experience of those peoples who have suffered genuine attempts at extermination.”⁷

As to how many Tasmanian Aborigines did die during Mr. Windschuttle’s time-frame, he finds that 118 Aborigines were killed by

5. Helen Trinca, “Historians Tackle the Legend of Blainey Head On in New Book”, *The Weekend Australian*, 16-17 February 1985.

6. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, page 9.

7. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, page 398.

British settlers between 1803 and 1834. Seventy-two of these killings took place during the warfare of 1824-31, in which Aborigines themselves slew 187 whites, including women and children.⁸

Aware that everything he writes will be checked and double-checked by those seeking to belittle it — former *Quadrant* editor Robert Manne even, recklessly and defamatorily enough, accused him of plagiarism⁹ — Mr. Windschuttle has faithfully supplied footnotes for every quote and factual statement. He revives, and defends,¹⁰ an admirable nineteenth-century tradition which should never have been allowed to perish: that of printing these footnotes where they belong, at the bottom of the page to which they are related, rather than burying them up the back of the book, or (worse still) dispensing with them altogether in the interests of “accessibility”.

His method throughout has been, as he himself admits, the approach summarised by the late Sir Keith Hancock: “It is wrong — in every sense of that word — to measure the thoughts and actions of people in the past by a measuring rod of knowledge and experience which did not come into existence until after these people

were dead.”¹¹ Hancock here rephrases the principle articulated back in 1824 by Leopold von Ranke, concerning the historian’s function: to show, as far as he is able, “what actually happened.” Not what should have happened, nor what (if only for the purposes of obtaining sycophantic *Eureka Street* coverage) you would like to think happened; merely, and boringly, what actually happened.

Especially fascinating is Mr. Windschuttle’s description¹² of the off-stage role played by Spanish colonialism and its reputation among the early-nineteenth-century British. “The Black Legend” (La Leyenda Negra) of endless Spanish cruelty — a myth disseminated and believed partly through 1542 propaganda by an actual Spaniard, the priest Bartolomé de Las Casas — made British administrators terrified of the Spanish imperial system, which to them represented everything that colonial rule should avoid becoming. (Exemplifying the law of unintended consequences, British humanitarian Evangelicals borrowed from the dreaded Spain’s homiletic literature not only their concepts of universal brotherhood, but even their preferred phraseology.) That Mr. Windschuttle should have noted this,

8. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, page 398.

9. Robert Manne, “Pale Grey View of a Genocide”, *The Age*, 16 December 2002.

10. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, pages 132-134.

11. W. R. Hancock, *Professing History* (Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1976), p. 61; Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, page 405.

12. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, pages 32-40.

indeed should have explained it in detail, is one more reason why his work transcends most of his rivals'. It would not readily occur to a Reynolds or a Ryan that intellectual developments occurring in foreign parts could have left any impact whatsoever — let alone a beneficial one — on a cosmos so gloriously self-sufficient and majestically autarkic as the Australian mind.

Among the very few overtly censorious passages in Mr. Windschuttle's whole tome is his rebuke of the Tasmanian Aborigines' Superintendent, George Augustus Robinson (1791-1866): "the founder of a long tradition of those who have made a lot of money out of the Aboriginal predicament while watching their charges die before their eyes."¹³ Quintessentially Australian despite his London birth, Robinson realised at an early stage of his Tasmanian career the sole path, then as now, to Australian worldly success: you do not build a better mousetrap; instead, you fool and browbeat the government into providing interminable subsidies for the tenth-rate mousetrap you built years ago. It is depressing to learn from Mr. Windschuttle how Robinson's official exaggerations and recounting of second-hand gossip regarding Aboriginal conflicts have been treated as sacred writ by the likes of Reynolds.

This undue trust in Robinson's inaccurate accounts derives as much from bone-idleness as from any nobler motive is indicated by Reynolds' 1999 diatribe *Why Weren't We Told?*,¹⁴ which posits the peculiar notion that Aboriginal history was terra incognita — a "Great Australian Silence" — until Reynolds graced us with his arrival. Mr. Windschuttle cites¹⁵ Melbourne historian Robert Murray, who, when discussing *Why Weren't We Told?* in *Quadrant*, observed that he could find counter-example after counter-example to Reynolds' allegation of the Great Australian Silence "without leaving the room where this review is being typed."¹⁶

As for Aborigines themselves, whether they lived in Tasmania or on the mainland, the evidence is in: while lacking such refinements as the atom bomb and (before 1788) gunpowder, they still performed efficiently when it came to formalised mayhem. In 1983 Professor Blainey pointed out¹⁷ that mainland inter-tribal warfare among Aborigines killed off one person in every 270 each year: an impressive per capita death-toll in any culture. A cause for repeated astonishment is Mr. Windschuttle's account of how much the standard figures for Tasmania's whole Aboriginal population vary, and how little they depend on any

13. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, page 201.

14. Henry Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told? A Personal Search for the Truth About Our History* (Viking, Ringwood, Victoria, 1999).

15. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, page 410.

data except the whim of Reynolds or some other magus. This statistical manipulation can be found among non-Australian authors also, as Mr. Windschuttle notes.¹⁸ Kirkpatrick Sale and Sherburne Cook are but two of those Americans whose distortions — and sometimes, to be honest, outright lies — concerning European conquest's damage to North American natives' population levels have attained in ill-informed media circles the status of revealed religion.¹⁹ But that Reynolds, Ryan, the economic historian Noel Butlin, and the anthropologist David Davies should have had their guesswork (for that is all it ever was) accepted, often for decades, without being forced to substantiate their figures by publicly accessible sources, is alarming.

So, frankly, is Mr. Windschuttle on Tasmanian Aborigines' Hobbesian lives in general: poor, nasty and short, though they can be called "brutish" only at the cost of wantonly insulting many brutes. Among such folk, almost anything could happen, and usually did, particularly if it involved a chance for males to kick, stab, impale, gang-rape, break the spine of, prostitute, or simply abduct the nearest female. By

a process baffling to evolutionists, but all too plausible to realists, these natives actually became less competent and less enterprising than their ancestors had been, especially in the matter of tool manufacture. Selling of Aboriginal girls to European settlers — especially sealers and stockmen — in exchange for food, often sugar, became commonplace by the 1820s: with predictable outcomes in terms of venereal disease, depopulation, and widespread infertility among otherwise robust women. Some of today's fiercest Aboriginal separatists turn out to have been descended from these irregular unions with white men, a fact that must prompt speculation as to whether the entire anti-white grievance industry of modern Australia amounts to much more than an exercise in self-hatred.

Reproaching one rash commentator who speaks of the "humanity and compassion" which Tasmania's native population showed, Mr. Windschuttle is emphatic: "To talk about the Tasmanian Aborigines acting with 'humanity and compassion' is to invoke concepts they would have regarded with complete incomprehension. These terms come not from Aboriginal but

16. Robert Murray, "Who Wasn't Told?", *Quadrant*, November 1999.

17. Geoffrey Blainey, *The Triumph of the Nomads: A History of Ancient Australia* (Sun Books, Melbourne, 1983), pp. 108-110.

18. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, page. 365.

19. The sharp practices inherent in such Europhobic agitprop are revealed and debunked in D. P. Henige, *Numbers From Nowhere: The American Indian Contact Population Debate* (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma, 1998).

from European culture . . . for [hunter-gatherer tribes] the idea of loyalties owed and sentiments shared beyond the boundary of kinship was literally unthinkable."²⁰ And not, of course, for hunter-gatherer tribes alone. World history — outside that numerically infinitesimal sector of it where White Anglo-Saxon Protestant liberal middle-class squeamishness has prevailed — is very largely the tale of what might be called ethical double-entry book-keeping, whereby a society has one set of obligations for its own members, and an entirely different set of obligations for outsiders. (Most of America's foreign-policy woes since 1945, to look no further, have arisen from a failure to comprehend this basic truth.)

At the same time, in one respect Mr. Windschuttle might be considered too severe towards indigenous Tasmanians. He writes: "Until the nineteenth century, their isolation had left them without comparisons with other cultures that might have helped them reform their ways. But nor did they produce any wise men of their own who might have foreseen the long-term consequences of their own behaviour and devised ways to curb it."²¹ Perfectly valid. Yet the question thence arises, which Mr. Windschuttle does not attempt to answer: can any

number of wise men curb the behaviour of a self-destructive society?

The post-Christian West's example gives no hope for believing that it can. Leave aside for the nonce such absurdities as the current antics of Australia's populate-or-perish brigade. After all, such antics are so obviously motivated by crude economic demands — the clergyman's need to fill his empty churches; the social worker's need to perpetuate her job; the tycoon's need to drive his workforce's wages down to lower levels — that they have little more intrinsic interest than does any other form of racketeering. Concentrate, instead, on a cultural death-wish as it now manifests itself in America. When the world's most powerful nation, after the 11 September terrorist horrors, still exhibits so fundamental an ignorance of the Third World mind and of multiculturalism's evil (an ignorance on which Patrick Buchanan's warnings have clearly had not the faintest impact) that its House of Representatives votes 245-138 to give several million illegal immigrants amnesty,²² it is not at all axiomatic that primitive peoples have a monopoly on suicidal mania, or even that Tasmanian Aborigines' form of it was outstandingly pernicious.

Mr. Windschuttle's explanation of how Reynolds and Ryan came to ex-

20. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, page 406.

21. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, page 386.

22. Derek Turner, "The Death of the West — Why Our Sun Is Setting", *Right Now!*, April-June 2002.

ude their nonsense could also be queried for possible incompleteness. He blames it primarily on what he calls “Sixties radical romanticism”:²³ above all, on fads of anti-colonialist “liberation” theory, popularised by Frantz Fanon, Herbert Marcuse, Che Guevara, and other even less scrupulous ideologues. Maybe; but were not other factors equally important even in the Sixties? And are not these other factors much more important nowadays, since in 2003 we are much farther distant in time from Che’s death than that event was from the Second World War?

Surely a good deal of the blame must lie with those who have condemned most Australians to the mental and spiritual prison of monolingualism. One reason for the plethoric upsurge of Australian history (or “history”) courses is the very fact that this subject makes, just as the equally fashionable subject of philosophy makes, no demands whatever upon a student’s general learning. Specifically, it nowhere presupposes — or rather, it is actively inimical to — competence in a foreign language.

This differentiates it from European historiography, and for that matter from most British historiography (given that England’s main post-1066 languages for government business were French until the mid-fourteenth century and Latin until the early sixteenth).

Even today, anyone in Paris, Berlin, Munich, Rome, Milan, Lisbon, or Madrid who seeks teaching work at a history department without knowing at least two languages other than his own will be laughed out of the interview room.²⁴ But American history presumes no such linguistic skills (save perhaps for those studying the early settlements of Texas, California, Florida, or Louisiana); and neither does Australian history. Hence the appeal of the latter, as to the former, to lazy, feeble, and petulant minds. Not to those minds alone, need one say, but to those minds in disproportionately high numbers.

Such passing reservations over specific sections of Mr. Windschuttle’s work do nothing to minimise its overall excellence. It demands to be read,

23. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, page 404.

24. As recently as the early 1980s, among those who taught on pre-French-Revolution Europe in Sydney University’s History Department during the present writer’s undergraduate years, the same situation prevailed. Every lecturer dealing with the subject regarded it as an elementary job qualification that he or she know at least enough French and German to read secondary sources in those languages (most literature on German Protestantism, for instance, has only ever appeared in German). Several knew Italian and Spanish also; at least one knew, in addition, Russian and Serbo-Croat. Students without any foreign tongues were not penalised, but were not encouraged either.

as Professor Blainey's finest output demands to be read, by every literate Australian. It will shape our outlook for as long as any literature can do so. Anyone who presumes to write in future on Aboriginal history will be labouring on foundations that Mr. Windschuttle has constructed, and will be expected to abide by standards that Mr. Windschuttle has set.