
Aboriginal history triggers another war of words

Kate Legge
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THE war over Australian history flared last night when a sell-out crowd watched Melbourne scholar Robert Manne contest author Keith Windschuttle's claim that the story of our past was fabricated for political gain.

Armed with words, footnotes and primary source material, they argued over the true story of British colonisation and the extent of frontier violence against Tasmanian Aborigines at the beginning of the 19th century.

Mr Manne dismissed Mr Windschuttle's controversial book, *The Fabrication of Australian History*, as "one of the most implausible, ignorant and pitiless books ... written for many years", and mocked the author's tally of 118 Aboriginal deaths in Tasmania between 1803 and 1830.

Although Mr Windschuttle has revised this figure upwards to 120, he insisted last night "there was no genocide" and "nothing that deserved the label of frontier warfare".

However, he conceded in response to questions from the floor that the figure of 120 could conceivably be twice as high if it took account of those who died as a result of wounds.

Mr Manne said Mr Windschuttle's tally was based on research by Brian Plomley, who himself conceded; "It impossible to calculate the number of violent deaths." He drew from the collection of essays in his new book, *Whitewash*, to attack Mr Windschuttle's case that the conflict between colonists and Aborigines had been exaggerated.

It was the first face-to-face confrontation between two men who had savaged each other's methods and motives for many months.

Mr Windschuttle responded to Mr Manne's critique last night by insisting *Whitewash* had not laid a finger on his central thesis, which rejects the notion of genocide in Tasmania, denies accounts of frontier war, and alleges distortions of fact by historians Henry Reynolds and Lyndall Ryan.

"Indeed, my major claims are either studiously avoided or seriously misrepresented," he said. "The debate about Aboriginal history is not a moral debate but an empirical one. It is about what really happened in the past."

Mr Windschuttle defended his tally of Aboriginal deaths, arguing that "the unrecorded deaths thesis today assumes that a lack of evidence is itself evidence that many Aborigines were killed".

Both men laced their clinical dissection of each other with a few poisonous jabs. Mr Manne quoted essayist Dirk Moses's suggestion that Mr Windschuttle's response to criticism would reveal whether his book "is merely a failed effort at historical revisionism or the first instalment of an authentic Australian historical denialism" of Aboriginal dispossession.

Mr Windschuttle replied that Mr Manne's book did nothing to foster reconciliation. "It is not only historically untrue. It is also racially divisive and politically inept."

One thing uniting the adversaries is the belief that their dispute has aroused interest in our history and the battle of ideas, and awoken historians to the need for accurate quotation from primary sources.