THE FABRICATION OF A BENIGN COLONISATION? KEITH WINDSCHUTTLE ON HISTORY

PATRICIA GRIMSHAW

Keith Windschuttle has reiterated here this evening his vehement attack on the findings of historians across a thirty-year period on the circumstances of the British occupation of this island continent. Up until the 1970s there had been a polite sliding over the cruel and gruesome acts entailed in this misappropriation. Since 1970 revisionist historians, many of them academics, but some of them independent scholars, have revealed the conflicts and killings on the frontiers that took place from the late eighteenth century in New South Wales to mid twentieth century Western Australia. Keith Windschuttle has launched a somewhat remarkable attempt to demolish the validity of this work, primarily focusing on Henry Reynolds as the originator of the frontier thesis, but also on books by many other respected non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal writers. His attack first appeared in a series of articles in the right-wing journal Quadrant, and now in a full-length book, The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, focused on Tasmania, the first of a planned three volumes. He has launched an onslaught on the quality of their scholarship, employing his forensic skills to examine their footnotes in great detail, claiming to detect outright errors here, the tendency to ignore contrary evidence there: the word ‘fabrication’ in the title tells it all. He alleges that these historians of settlement have constructed narratives that have little or no apparent basis in fact, because they have been unconsciously, or even consciously, constrained in their research by political goals of furthering Aboriginal causes of the present. They also share an apparently unaccountable desire, he says, to denigrate their white forebears: to quote, the corruption of the story of early settlement had ‘been accomplished by historians under the cloak of academic respectability’.

Keith Windschuttle cannot deny that once Aborigines lived securely on their lands, that they were displaced by British colonists in a process involving violence, and that most were rendered landless as the outcome. Why is this dispute so serious? If history is the pursuit of the truth about the past, the path to discovering that truth is a difficult one. Historians have not just an empirical, but also a hermeneutic or interpretive obligation. Our searches of archives can seldom be exhaustive, our sources – whether literary, material or oral – range from the overwhelming in extent to the nearly non-existent. From imperfect tools historians craft interpretations of the past that can differ from individual to individual and from generation to generation. We recognise, then, that debates between historians are nothing new. In terms of this particular body of work, Henry Reynolds’ ideas have been already criticised, though admittedly his critics have not attained the same high profile.

THE CHALLENGE

But what is at stake in Windschuttle’s challenge is not merely a minor skirmish. Keith Windschuttle once expressed the fear, in his book *The Killing of History*, published in 1994, that history had succumbed to the baleful influence of post-modernism. Now he fears that so-called ‘political correctness’ keeps historians in intellectual bondage. He asserts that the scholarship of historians in the field of frontier conflict is demonstrably poor, untrustworthy, and distorted, and he tries to convince us of this at considerable length. He then promotes a startling alternative version of events. There have always been Australians reluctant to abandon the former comforting version of colonial settlement, with its brave pioneers, valorised for their hard work, persistence and courage in overcoming such obstacles to progress as drought, floods, hostile Aborigines and harsh terrain. But these ideas continue to have power with protagonists on the right in politics. Recently the right has issued counterblasts against the left-wing, chardonnay-drinking chattering classes. And we note that certain right-wing public figures including John Howard, have voiced dissatisfaction with displays portraying frontier conflict in the new National Museum in Canberra. Keith Windschuttle’s ideas have commanded acclaim from many quarters, considerable space in journals, and the book has received generally favourable reviews. He has providentially provided a grounding for their historical beliefs. (We may note that as a member of the left in 1981, he co-edited a collection called *Fixing the News: Critical Perspectives on the Australian Media.*)

How do we answer him? Keith Windschuttle wrote in the *Australian* on 12 February 2003:

> The debate over my thesis suggests something is seriously wrong with academic history in this country. A small group of university teachers with overt left-wing commitments believe they can decide among themselves what happened in this country’s past. When challenged, they resort not to debating the substantive issues but to demonising their critic and mocking his concern for facts.

On the contrary I suggest we take Keith Windschuttle’s historical assertions seriously, and take the opportunity he offers for an open debate on contentious historical matters of methodology and substance.

To look at the methodological questions he raises in the same detail as in a book of over 470 pages is not possible tonight, but I can begin to evaluate his case and the strategies he uses to support it. I have not been asked to speak because I have any specific expertise in the Tasmanian archives and I leave those scholars whom he accuses of making specific errors to answer these allegations themselves. I speak here as an historian, born in another settler colony, New Zealand, who has interests in comparative colonialism, including the activities of humanitarians and the issue of indigenous rights in Australia and the Pacific.
THE REFUTATION OF ‘GENOCIDE’

Keith Windschuttle focuses his historical energies on refuting the extent of white people’s killing of indigenous people on colonial frontiers, and in particular the notion popularly discussed – not one incidentally that Henry Reynolds has subscribed to – that this amounted to genocide. In modern definitions the word ‘genocide’ indicates intentional and systematic killing of a group of people, and also the intention to wipe out a people culturally, through forbidding the use of languages, the removal of children, control of interracial marriage, and so on. Keith Windschuttle concentrates on the narrower meaning and finds it untenable in the Australian colonial context. He introduces several lines of attack.

First, he considers the nature of British colonial administration and claims that the British government and Colonial Office were motivated by benevolence towards native peoples. A colonial administrator like Lieutenant Governor George Arthur – in Tasmania from 1824 to 1836 – was an evangelical who kept the well-being of Aborigines constantly to the fore. Windschuttle places much emphasis on Arthur’s declarations of kindness and conciliatory intentions towards Aboriginal people. To quote: ‘The colonial authorities wanted to civilize and modernize the Aborigines not exterminate them. Their intentions were not to foster violence towards the Aborigines but to prevent it’.

Windschuttle tries to draw a circle in the sand and persuade his readers to think only within it. He avoids the key issue: by what right were the British taking over the lives and lands of Aborigines in the first place? Why on earth should the Aborigines have seen the British incursion on their terrain as benevolent? Are we in 2003 supposed to align ourselves with British imperialism to the extent that we accept their nineteenth century conviction that they deserved to rule the world, and that indigenous people should be grateful for the benefits of an imported civilisation? Where were the treaties, which through bitter experience, Arthur himself came to consider crucial to peaceful settlement? Where was the compensation? How strange it appears in hindsight for a few British officers to land on a beach, run up the Union Jack, claim a huge territory, declare British law supreme, and then punish the local people for not adhering to it.

The colonisation of Australia, and of Tasmania within it, cannot be viewed in splendid isolation. Let us be clear that the British took a quarter of the globe for their own sake, to enrich themselves and to gain strategic advantages over other European powers. In the nineteenth century indigenous and other peoples throughout the Empire bore the brunt of their expansionist energies. They preferred it if the locals agreed with their pre-emption – but if the locals did not, the British were quite willing to use troops to protect their compatriots against indigenous peoples, never the other way around. The colonial authorities talked of benevolence, but they killed indigenous peoples, or tolerated settlers taking measures into their own hands, if the advancement of colonisation was at stake.

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2 ibid, 9.
In New Zealand colonial authorities said some very kind things about Maori, as did not a few settlers, but when Maori in the early 1860s appeared bent on blocking further alienation of land, the British army fought until Maori were brought to their knees. Then the land of the so-called ‘rebels’ was swiftly confiscated. British empire builders didn’t intend to kill everyone. In some settler colonies the survivors’ cheap labour was critical, and too much killing gave the British a bad press internationally. The British used enough military force, or failed to prevent settlers from using arms, to terrorise the survivors into submission. Consider Tasmania, where in 1828 Lieutenant Governor Arthur declared martial law and authorised troops to kill on sight any Aborigine seen in the settled districts – some benevolence!

Second, Windschuttle takes issue with Reynolds on the notion that Aborigines in Tasmania – as on other frontiers – fought something akin to a guerilla war. A notable innovation on Reynolds’ part has been to offer a term readily understood elsewhere to describe Aborigines’ courageous fight against the odds across the colonies to defend their rightful heritage. With a rigidity we have by now become used to, Keith Windschuttle responds with ridicule. Aborigines, he says, were incapable of mounting a united attack that could be dignified by the name. Tasmanian Aborigines, he declares, had no knowledge of land as a possession, did not even have a name for land – so how could they be defending it? Here the Mabo judgement that *terra nullius* was a fiction seems to have passed him by.

Windschuttle discounts the number of deaths of Aborigines by whites’ gunshot while emphasising the numbers of settlers killed by Aborigines. To start considering the death toll, he estimates the numbers in the Tasmanian Aboriginal population at a low level. The figures for Aboriginal deaths have been greatly inflated, he says as he examines each grisly account to do an accurate count of bodies. The numbers add up to no more than 118 Aborigines dead. The settlers were in any case Christians. To quote: ‘Most colonists were Christians to whom the killing of the innocent would have been abhorrent’.

Moreover it was against the law that declared Aborigines as British subjects due the usual protection of life and limb.

I forbear to give instances of Christians in history behaving badly: We could mention Germany in the 1930s for a start. Windschuttle is right on the second count – it was indeed illegal to murder Aborigines and the punishment for murder was hanging. But how does he explore these killings? He will accept only eyewitness accounts as genuine testimony – how often would the perpetrators or white witnesses have reported these acts? Add to this the problem of the inadmissibility of Aboriginal testimony. Many settlers reported across the frontiers that murderers disguised their deeds, burning or removing bodies, intimidating possible informants and so on. Windschuttle’s intensive focus on the numbers killed can scarcely be held to have settled the issue. He finds, not surprisingly, better documentation on Aboriginal killings of settlers – he estimates 187 settler deaths. More, you observe.

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1 ibid, 360.
So if Aborigines did not fight a war, why was there violence? Keith Windschuttle now enters into a highly surprising argument. Contrary to Colonial Office Correspondence, which gives fulsome acknowledgement that throughout the Empire whites were commonly the original aggressors, he places the blame squarely on Aboriginal shoulders. They were incapable of compassion: Aborigines like all hunter-gatherer societies were incapable of ‘loyalties owed and sentiments shared beyond the boundaries of kinship’. Aborigines engaged in the ‘senseless violence’ of robbery, assault and murder. They owed their survival till the 1800s ‘more to good fortune than good management’. Aborigines were responsible for ‘the killing of little children and babies’ and ‘unarmed settlers, stock keepers and their families in isolated locations’. The settlers were victims of ‘revenge’, ‘plunder’, and ‘senseless Aboriginal violence’. ‘Far from generating black resentment’, Windschuttle writes, ‘the expansion of settlements instead gave the Aborigines more opportunity to engage in robbery and murder, two customs they had come to relish’.

Third, Keith Windschuttle points to diseases and indigenous cultural disorder as the simple explanation for the decline in number of Aborigines. First, most Aborigines died of European diseases innocently introduced. It is as though European diseases could flourish without European colonists; or that semi-starvation and social dislocation did not play a part in their severity. But secondly, he has an explanation – with which he begins to play his trump card – that Tasmanian Aboriginal society was in itself dysfunctional, had been before the colonists appeared, and subsequent events just hastened its demise.

The real tragedy of the Aborigines was not British colonization per se but that their society was, on the one hand, so internally dysfunctional and, on the other hand, so incompatible with the looming presence of the rest of the world … this small, precarious society quickly collapsed under the dual weight of the susceptibility of its members to disease and the abuse and neglect of its women.

How, you may ask, can Windschuttle possibly claim to know this? We need hardly note that Aboriginal people at this time left no written documents, and he is scathing of Aboriginal oral history. He uses some studies that suggest that the Tasmanians had a simple technology, and combines this with the work of an American anthropologist of little fame. He details some settlers’ denigratory comments on gender relations among Aborigines. He alludes to Aboriginal men’s brutal treatment of women, in ways that echo countless nineteenth century travellers’ accounts of gender everywhere in the Empire. He claims Aboriginal men forced women into prostitution with Europeans, but makes scant reference to the incidence of European men’s rape of indigenous women in the colonial period.

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4 ibid, 406.
5 ibid, 386.
6 ibid, 129.
7 ibid, 386.
It is startling indeed to see such stereotypes of outdated ethnography and colonial literature reiterated with such vehemence.

Fourth, Keith Windschuttle mounts an unprecedented attack on the chief sources for much revisionist history, the humanitarians and the missionaries. How could anyone have ever in the past, or now, blame settlers for the violence? It was the false testimony of humanitarians. They too must be discredited. They are too Christian, mad zealots, liars and frauds who put about untrue accounts of settler atrocities to get jobs as protectors and educators of Aborigines. The worse they could make the situation seem, the more their salaries would keep pouring in. Humanitarians from George Augustus Robinson onwards exaggerated atrocities because they wanted to justify the isolation of Aborigines into their care. They thus can be blamed for the plight today of Aborigines because they kept them from assimilation.

There may be many charges we might level against humanitarians, including cultural imperialism and later collusion in settler regimes of control, but to designate humanitarians and missionaries as untrustworthy witnesses in frontier conditions is an amazing allegation. It sounds very much like an echo of the settlers’ perspectives. The Aborigines’ Protection Society in London, the nineteenth century equivalent of Amnesty International, which monitored atrocities across the Empire, was swamped with settler expressions of wounded pride. Windschuttle tries to persuade us by selecting a few humanitarians who made some errors and damning the rest by association. It just won’t work.

CONCLUSION
Windschuttle accuses historians of frontier conflict of political bias as though his account is value-free, empirical history, true to the sources. Are we really to believe there is no political agenda here? Towards the end of The Fabrication he shows his hand with a strong attack on present day Aboriginal activists in Tasmania. Let me illustrate: he points out that Michael Mansell, if really from the island community, must be descended from the sealer named Mansell. So his forebear was a white man who George Augustus Robinson named as cruel to Aborigines. How does Mansell feel about that? I would ask another question – why would Keith Windschuttle wish to use his talents at this stage of his life to attempt to wound people in this way? Indigenous peoples throughout the old empire are making claims for justice and restitution for past wrongs – why should they not do so, and why should Australia not join New Zealand, Canada and South Africa in this endeavour?

Keith Windschuttle speculates at one point that the historians whose work he examines were perhaps seeking exciting narratives: ‘the history of the country has been so uneventful. There were no revolutions, civil wars or struggles for independence’, he says. There is a grand narrative of Australian history looking Windschuttle right in the face if he cared to see it. It starts with colonial invasion and indigenous resistance, and it is also about Aboriginal cultural survival and the people who helped to sustain it. Talented Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians are telling this story.
I doubt that they will be stopped in their tracks by Windschuttle’s exertions.

*University of Melbourne*