

Keep It Honest

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Bain Attwood and S.G. Foster (eds)

FRONTIER CONFLICT:

THE AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE

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HOW VIOLENT WAS the Australian frontier? At the moment, this is the biggest debate in Australian history. As most would know, the question has gained national attention largely through the efforts of Keith Windschuttle who, in four *Quadrant* articles in 2000 and 2001, argued, among other things, that historians had inflated the numbers of Aborigines killed on the Australian frontier and that the National Museum of Australia's 'Contested Frontiers' exhibit contained factual errors. In December 2001 the National Museum organised a conference that brought together Windschuttle and many of the historians he had criticised. This book results from that conference and provides a useful introduction to the debate.

The editors, Bain Attwood and Stephen Foster, have structured the book so that it gently guides the reader through the issues and points of contention. They first set out the historical background, with chapters by Lyndall Ryan, John Mulvaney, Jan Critchett and Raymond Evans, which provide case studies of frontier conflict from New South Wales, the Northern Territory, Victoria and Queensland.

Windschuttle's central role in the debate is reflected in his chapter being placed in the middle of the book as part of a section on the different types of available evidence and how they should be interpreted. Windschuttle's argument that historians have fabricated written evidence and used unreliable oral evidence is challenged in chapters by Henry Reynolds on official, private and newspaper records of frontier conflict, Richard Broome on calculating casualty estimates for the Australian frontier, Alan Atkinson on the British use of language in colonial Australia, and Deborah Bird Rose on Aboriginal oral evidence and its use in frontier history.

The next two chapters look at how frontier conflict has been remembered. Tom Griffiths talks in broad terms, while David Roberts examines the conviction of residents of Sofala, north of Bathurst, that Aborigines were massacred at nearby Bells Falls. The veracity of this story cannot be verified, but an Aboriginal belief that there was a Bells Falls massacre led to its controversial inclusion in the 'Contested Frontiers' exhibit.

The book concludes with four chapters. Two focus on the specific issues that led to the conference. Attwood examines Windschuttle's critique of existing frontier history, while Graeme Davison analyses Windschuttle's criticisms of the National Museum and, especially, of the 'Contested Frontiers' exhibit. The other two chapters link the debate to wider

issues. Geoffrey Bolton calls for Australian historians to gain a greater understanding of the Australian frontier by looking at what happened in other settler societies, such as the USA and New Zealand. Ann Curthoys completes the collection with a discussion as to how the historical debate fits into a wider one about Australian national identity.

Frontier Conflict makes it clear that the controversy initiated by Windschuttle is as much about contemporary politics and the relative virtues of empirical and postmodern history as it is about the historical details of what happened on the Australian frontier. However, this review will limit its comments to the historical issue. Even if one entirely disagrees with Windschuttle's arguments, one cannot deny his right to present them, nor should one dismiss his ability to contribute to the debate. Windschuttle's view of the existing literature is too simplistic, but he has pointed out some previously unnoticed weaknesses in the historiography.

As this book is about frontier conflict, it is surprising that none of the authors examines the fighting between Aborigines and British settlers and soldiers from the viewpoint of military history. The work of military historians can assist our understanding of what happened on the Australian frontier. As long ago as 1990, Jeffrey Grey included a chapter on frontier warfare in his *A Military History of Australia* and used the Prussian military thinker Carl von Clausewitz's classic definition of 'war' — 'an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will' — to argue that wars were fought on the Australian frontier.

Windschuttle ignores Grey's work when he asserts that violence on the Australian frontier cannot be defined as 'war'. In his chapter, Windschuttle refers to Aboriginal raids on the Tasmanian frontier as being 'nothing more than robbery with violence' and elaborates this argument in his recent book, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (2002). Windschuttle's thesis that Aboriginal frontier raids are not warfare is hard to sustain. In his book, Windschuttle refers to Lawrence H. Keeley's seminal work *War Before Civilization* (1996) and correctly uses the term 'warfare' to describe raids for women carried out by Tasmanian Aboriginal groups on other groups. Women's food-gathering and childbearing abilities were economic resources for traditional Aboriginal groups, and raids for women must therefore be seen as warfare in the same way that fighting for land would be considered warfare in agricultural societies. Since Windschuttle himself admits that Aboriginal raids for women are a form of warfare, it is difficult to see why Aboriginal farmhouse raids should not be defined in the same way.

Windschuttle also admits that the colonial government in Tasmania was 'waging war' on the frontier. Governor Arthur ordered troops to protect settlers from Aboriginal raiding parties, created combined police-military 'Pursuing Parties' and civilian 'Roving Parties' to patrol the settled districts, and mobilised ten per cent of the colony's population to take part in the 'Black Line' operation. Again, it is hard to understand Windschuttle's comment that 'the British certainly took military action against the Aborigines ... [but] there was not

a *state* of warfare between the two parties’.

Windschuttle argues that Aboriginal frontier raids cannot be defined as ‘war’ because they targeted civilians rather than soldiers and because Tasmanian Aborigines lacked any military organisation. This seems an excessively narrow and unhelpful definition of war. The al Qaeda attack on New York City in 2001 targeted civilians, but the US government still viewed the incident as an act of war. While it is true that Tasmanian Aboriginal warriors did not organise into large groups, they were still able to form effective small raiding parties, such as the group of five men who successfully carried out an incendiary attack on John Sherwin’s farm on the Clyde River in February 1830.

In the end, using Clausewitz’s definition to argue that there was a war provides a better description of what happened on the Tasmanian frontier than using Windschuttle’s definition to argue that there was not. Warfare can exist on any scale. Five warriors burning down a settler’s hut can be as much an act of war as a World War II bombing raid.

As I was writing this book review, the H-NET Military History Discussion List was discussing how the American Civil War should be commemorated. A member of the list, Tony Zbaraschuk, made the following comment: ‘I think we need to keep a basic principle in mind: keep one’s history honest. Choose what parts of it you wish to honour and remember, but don’t focus on them to the extent that you lose sight of the rest entirely. And be prepared for a vigorous debate about just what ought to be worthy of honour.’ This is the attitude that we should all be applying to the current Australian debate.