

Go Away, You White Buggers

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Keith Windschuttle

THE FABRICATION OF ABORIGINAL HISTORY:
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KEITH WINDSCHUTTLE SEEKS to undermine a 'mindset' among historians of Tasmania that started in Henry Melville's *History of Van Diemen's Land* (1835) and continues in Henry Reynolds's *An Indelible Stain* (2001). Mindsets, or 'interpretive frameworks', sensitise historians to 'evidence' that fits their 'assumptions'. While 'often very productively' applied, Windschuttle concedes, some mindsets have 'overt political objectives'. Recent authors of the orthodox view of Tasmania's colonisation, such as Reynolds and Lyndall Ryan, 'seek to justify "land rights" and the transfer of large tracts of land to the descendants' of Aborigines.

Violence features in their Tasmanian orthodoxy. (Some even call it 'genocide', but Reynolds, in *An Indelible Stain*, argued that that was not the policy of Tasmanian authorities.) Windschuttle's estimates of Aborigines slain by colonists are low. Armed with stated criteria of 'plausibility', and building on Brian Plomley's research, he reviews written sources on 'Aborigines killed by whites' from 1803 to 1834, enumerating 118 'plausible' killings, most of them from 1827 to 1834. We find much higher estimates in Reynolds and Ryan, though these two authors have different approaches to estimating unrecorded deaths.

Taking 118 as the bare minimum indigenous death toll from colonial violence, what is its significance? Windschuttle reviews estimates of the Aboriginal population in 1803 and plumps for a maximum of 2000. As historian Mark Finnane has pointed out, the usual basis for comparing death rates by cause across locales with very different absolute numbers is to deal in notional population units of 100,000. On Windschuttle's figures, the annual Aboriginal death rate by colonists' violence was 200 per 100,000 in Tasmania in 1804. The rate increased as the years passed, partly because the indigenous population was rapidly falling through bullets and disease. With only 350 Aborigines by 1831 (Reynolds's figure, not disputed by Windschuttle), the annual rate of Aboriginal death from colonists' violence was 1716 per 100,000. This towers above the 1997 US metropolitan homicide rate of seven (143 for the high risk 18–24 years Afro-American males). My rough calculations for Australians serving overseas are 4060 and 767 deaths per year per 100,000 in World Wars I and II, respectively. Colonists were also in great danger of being

slain by Aborigines, at a rate of fifty-five (per 100,000) in 1825, rising to 221 in 1828.

Windschuttle's estimates of Aboriginal deaths from violence are probably too low. Conceding that there may have been some unrecorded European slayings of Aborigines, he credits the perpetrators' moral and prudential respect for the law. He judges it more tough-minded not to estimate the number of times the rule of law was so honoured. Notwithstanding the extreme caution of his violent death figures, I prefer the uncertainties of his statistical austerity to other historians' speculations (and in some cases lack of rigour). A sense of the injustice to Aborigines need not be founded in soft enumeration.

Windschuttle is ambivalent about the analytical utility of rates. He sometimes uses a time rate — that is, Aboriginal deaths per year. In his one calculation of a population rate (for 1804), he chooses 500 as his denominator, not the social science standard of 100,000. In discussing the colonists' deaths at Aboriginal hands, he chooses a population rate expressed as a percentage. This allows him to compare the slaying of colonists by Aborigines with the slaying of Australian soldiers by their enemies in both world wars. Oddly, he then dismisses the latter comparison (his best effort, by the standards of social science) as 'completely meaningless'. Not so. Rates are meaningful if our question is: what level of violent threat did each side of the frontier pose to its adversary? On Windschuttle's figures, colonisation constructed a scene of extraordinary violence, especially for Aborigines.

Did Tasmanian Aborigines fight a patriotic guerilla war against the British? If 'guerilla war' is, by definition, fought against troops, then this orthodoxy fails, as the Aborigines

chose to attack settlers. In their evasion of engagement with troops, however, they may be termed 'guerillas'. Patriotic?

No matter how difficult it might be, Windschuttle writes, it is 'the historians' duty to try to see the world through the eyes of his subjects'. Did the Tasmanians feel that the colonists were taking 'their' territory? Windschuttle knows of no recorded statement by an Aborigine (and he/she had better be representative) 'objecting to his dispossession from the land by the colonists'. He infers that Tasmanian Aborigines lacked the concepts of 'trespass', for there is no evidence that 'trespass' caused the many known fights among Aboriginal bands. Settlers remarking land proprietorship among Aborigines were merely projecting their Englishness onto Aborigines, asserts Windschuttle. Among the available glosses on Aboriginal language, he reports, the word 'land' is not to be found.

Aborigines believed 'the game and other fruits of the land belonged to them', and they were not starving when they confronted colonists hunting kangaroo, he argues. However, this fails to satisfy Windschuttle's criterion of 'ownership', for the fruits of land are not the land itself. We can summarise Windschuttle's argument about 'ownership' in three propositions. Colonists asserted ownership of defined portions of land, while Aborigines believed the fruits of the land belonged to them. The colonists' sense of ownership was essential to the agricultural basis of their economy, while the Aboriginal sense of ownership was appropriate to their hunter-gatherer mode. 'The Aborigines did not own the land.' The third proposition does not follow from the first two. Having made an effort to see the world through Aboriginal eyes, Windschuttle draws his conclusion from the colonists' perspective — the dispossessioners' 'mindset' in a nutshell.

Windschuttle infers violent Aboriginal intentions from colonists' observations and from an analysis of what Aborigines took in their raids: a thirst for revenge, even against ostensibly inoffensive colonists, a thirst turning into lust to plunder their goods. European settlement presented not a challenge to Aboriginal 'ownership', he concludes, but increased opportunities for the ancient pleasures of violence and material gain. 'It was a tragedy the Aborigines adopted such senseless violence.' In 'tragedy', he echoes Reynolds. However, 'senseless' surrenders to cliché Windschuttle's discussion of the multiple meanings of violence to both perpetrators and victims. With a more historically sensitive notion of 'ownership' than Windschuttle allows, we can infer from Aborigines' murderous acquisitiveness their rage at British usurpation. 'Go away, you white buggers,' one native incendiary is reported to have shouted.

As a promoter of Aboriginal ownership of land, the colonist G.A. Robinson has excited Reynolds's admiration and now Windschuttle's scorn. While conceding that Robinson 'probably had a more intelligent and anthropological interest in [Aborigines] than anyone else in the colony', Windschuttle presents him as a coercive, callous and self-promoting opportunist who protected Aboriginal murderers from justice only

to condemn them to his own fatally negligent care in a series of wretched 'sanctuaries'. Because Robinson's rhetoric now appeals to the land rights agenda of the 'orthodox historians', Windschuttle argues, they refuse to concede how destructive he was. Some readers might agree that the miscarriage of Robinson's stated intentions discredits his declarations of principle about what colonial authority owed indigenous Australians. But that is an emotional, rather than a logical, entailment. Are principles mistaken if their advocates err? That is the strong implication of Windschuttle's condemnation of Robinson. His chapter illustrates the inescapable difficulty of writing a history of humanitarians — the problems of contextualising their choices and of discerning the boundaries between their characters, their opportunities and their professed values.

George Arthur, the colony's lieutenant governor from 1824 to 1836 and a prolific articulator of the colonial dilemmas of the rule of law, is a figure of great interest to Windschuttle. He quotes Arthur blaming Aboriginal violence on the provocations of lawless Europeans. With Reynolds and Ryan, and against Arthur's biographer, A.G.L. Shaw, Windschuttle argues that Arthur's 'Black Line' was not an attempt to 'exterminate' Aborigines and not a surrender to the demands of 'extirpationist' settlers. Rather, Arthur wished to end the violence between settlers and Aborigines by expelling the latter from the regions in which they and colonists had clashed. Those expelled would be settled elsewhere, under Robinson's supervision.

'The authorities' greatest fear,' Windschuttle writes, 'was that Aboriginal violence would provoke a reaction among the settlers that would get out of hand.' It is easy to forget the three-sided nature of the Tasmanian situation by the late 1820s: government, settlers and Aborigines. When Windschuttle summarises Arthur's objectives as 'to impose law and order under his authority and to save the Aborigines from the consequences of their own actions', he elides the unruly settlers, reversing Arthur's causal sequence.

Though competing body counts and disputes about particular violent incidents have been prominent in Windschuttle's emergence as an eager controversialist, his more effective line of revision is in characterisation. Forging a correspondence between the events of Tasmania 1803–47 and the post-Mabo conservative revisionists' nomination of who and what is now in play and at stake, Windschuttle recasts the moral topography of the public sphere. The Aborigines were/are vicious, their violence never rising 'above the level of criminal behaviour'. The authorities, beset by lawlessness, act(ed) as bearers of legitimate authority should. The humanitarians indulge(d) their fascination for social engineering. Some historians become their apologists, abandoning objectivity to be prophets and redeemers. Deploying this cast of 'characters' and 'interests', Windschuttle equips an admiring section of the public with its own version of the national story. In this rhetorical achievement, he challenges the cultural authority of Henry Reynolds.