

Nick Beams reviews Keith Windschuttle's The Fabrication of Aboriginal History

An assault on historical truth

Part 2

Nick Beams

17 September 2003

Below we are publishing the second in a three-part series by Nick Beams reviewing Keith Windschuttle's The Fabrication of Aboriginal History. Part 1 was published on September 16 and the final part will be published tomorrow.

Windschuttle is determined to remove any causal link between the establishment of colonial-settler society in Australia and the fate of the indigenous population. That is why he emphasises, time and again, that the extermination of the Aboriginal people was not a conscious policy—either of the Colonial Office in London or its representatives in Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania).

Windschuttle repeatedly asserts that he is upholding the historian's true craft against the "fabricators". But simply establishing that the destruction of Aboriginal society was not intended is a long way from addressing the most critical issues. Of course, one aspect of the historian's task is to clearly delineate, where possible, the intentions of the various historical actors. But very little real historical knowledge will be gained if that is the end of it. Behind intentions and conscious aims lie complex objective processes that shape the course of history. And these may well be at variance with the immediate motives of the various leading personalities.

One only has to consider, for example, the First World War. None of Europe's political and military leaders, in Britain and France or in Germany and Austria, intended launching a war that would last more than four years and plunge civilisation into a slaughter, the likes of which had never been seen. Both sides anticipated a short campaign similar to those of the nineteenth century. But objective processes were at work that disrupted all their plans.

Those historians who are driven to uncover historical truth are preoccupied not only with *what* happened, but with *why* it happened. In probing the causes of World War One they need, therefore, to go beyond the conscious intentions of the leading political figures of the day.

Likewise with the issue at hand. Windschuttle argues that since the government officials and settlers did not intend it, the extermination of the Aborigines could not have been a product of the colonial-settler society. The Aborigines themselves must have been to blame.

The most infamous event in the history of the colony, as Windschuttle notes, was the Black Line. It involved the mobilisation of more than 2,200 men—550 soldiers and the rest civilians, of whom some 1,000 were convicts. How significantly it was regarded at the time is indicated by the fact that the convicts were armed and that it cost some 30,000 pounds—about half the government's annual budget. When it began, it extended for 120 miles, with a man deployed, on average, every 100 yards. The Line stretched half way across the island and moved from the north towards the southeast. Its aim was to drive the Aborigines from the

settled areas in the middle of the island into the Tasman Peninsula, where they could be confined.

Windschuttle points to several statements by Governor Arthur to back his case that the governor wanted to prevent extermination. In a letter to Sir George Murray, the Secretary of State for Colonies, Arthur wrote: "As a portion of the south-east quarter, containing many thousands of acres of most unprofitable soil for Europeans, is well suited for the purpose of savage life, abounding in game, I have entertained strongly the opinion that it might be practicable to drive the savages into that portion of the territory, and that there they might be retained, as it is connected only by a very narrow neck, which might be guarded" [Fabrication, pp. 172-173].

After learning of the plan for the Black Line, Murray voiced his concerns to Arthur in a letter of November 5, 1830:

"The great decrease which has of late years taken place in the amount of the Aboriginal population, render it not unreasonable to apprehend that the whole race of these people may, at no distant period, become extinct. But with whatever feelings such an event may be looked forward to by those of the settlers who have been the sufferers by the collisions which have taken place, it is impossible not to contemplate such a result of our occupation of the island as one very difficult to be reconciled with feelings of humanity, or even with principles of justice and sound policy; and the adoption of any line of conduct, having for its avowed, or for its secret object, the extinction of the Native race, could not fail to leave an indelible stain upon the character of the British Government" [Fabrication, p. 195].

In November 1830, Arthur wrote that he had decided to organise the Black Line to preserve the Aborigines from the extinction they faced at the hands of the settlers. Only their complete separation from the settler population "could now arrest a long term of rapine and bloodshed, already commenced, a great decline in the prosperity of the colony, and the eventual extirpation of the Aboriginal race itself" [Fabrication, p. 196].

Windschuttle argues that the growing influence of the Evangelical Christian movement, with its emphasis on equality and campaigns against slavery, meant that any demand to exterminate the Aborigines would not only have defied His Majesty's laws, but amounted to a repudiation of the predominant religious and philosophical beliefs of the time, in Tasmania and more broadly. Be that as it may. The fact remains that the logic of events themselves—arising from the fundamental incompatibility between the developing pastoral capitalist society of the settlers and the tribal hunter-gatherer society of the Aborigines—was bringing about the extermination of the Aboriginal population. This was clearly recognised in both London and Hobart Town.

The central theme of all the writings and speeches of government

officials and settlers cited by Windschuttle was that the extirpation of the Aboriginal population was on the agenda. For those who opposed this “solution”, the only way they saw of preventing it was the physical removal of the Aborigines from the areas of colonial settlement.

In October 1830, George Augustus Robinson noted: “Nothing is heard of at Launceston but extirpating the original inhabitants. Cowardly beings! I question the bravery of those persons engaged in the crusade against the natives. What can be more revolting to humanity than to see persons going forth in battle array against that people whose land we have usurped and upon whom we have heaped every kind of misery. God deliver them” [Fabrication, p. 295].

Windschuttle claims that Robinson’s observation is an “exaggeration” because there were settlers in Launceston who opposed such a course. While there was “clearly a strong sentiment of this kind” it would be “more accurate to say that the settlers of Launceston were deeply divided over the issue” [Fabrication, p. 307].

In support of his argument, Windschuttle cites a letter written by the manager of the Van Diemen’s Land Company, Edward Curr, to the Aborigines Committee in April 1830.

“These opinions” Curr wrote, “I am sure will shock the feelings of the committee: it is a dreadful thing to contemplate the necessity of exterminating the Aboriginal tribes. But I am far from *advising* such a proceeding. All that I can say is that I think it will come to that. My own hands however shall be guiltless of blood, and I shall discountenance it so far as my authority extends, except under circumstances of aggression or in self defence” [Fabrication, pp. 302-303].

Windschuttle accuses historian Henry Reynolds of misrepresenting Curr as a supporter of extermination. Curr was not advocating extermination but simply “uttering a pessimistic prediction about the likely outcome if the Aborigines continued their attacks” [Fabrication, p. 303].

It is up to Reynolds to deal with Windschuttle’s charge. For our part, we simply note that in the text quoted by Windschuttle, Curr makes it perfectly clear that he supports extermination, however reluctantly, provided it takes place in self-defence. But no one argued anything else. Extermination was necessary for self defence.

At a public meeting held in Hobart on the eve of the launching of the Black Line, the solicitor-general Alfred Stephen—acknowledged even by Windschuttle as a supporter of extermination—declared that, since the Aborigines had waged war upon the settlers, “you are bound to put them down. I say that you are bound to do, in reference to the class of individuals who have been involuntarily sent here, and compelled to be in the most advanced position [convict stockmen in remote areas], where they are exposed to the hourly loss of their lives. I say ... that you are bound upon every principle of justice and humanity, to protect this particular class of individuals, and if you cannot do so without extermination, then I say boldly and broadly, exterminate!” [Fabrication, pp. 344-345].

Windschuttle maintains that none of the speakers in this debate, or writers for the colonial press, expressed anything like the motives attributed to them by the so-called “orthodox historians.”

“No one called for extermination of the blacks in order to clear them out of their way or to remove them from the land they coveted ... or because of any sense of superiority or white supremacy ... In every case, even the hardest attitudes were generated solely by the desire to stop the blacks assaulting and murdering whites. They would have been a peculiar people had they not felt the urge to retaliate. Despite the restraints of their culture and religion, and the admonishments of their government, the settlers of Van Diemen’s Land were only human” [Fabrication, pp. 348-349].

This is not argument but casuistry. According to Windschuttle, the settlers called for extermination, not because they coveted the Aborigines’ land, but only to protect themselves from the attacks of Aborigines whose land they had already taken. The settlers killed because of the human urge

to retaliate. But not the Aborigines. Their actions were not the product of being “only human.” After all, unlike the settlers, the Aborigines had no sense of property or attachment to place. They were motivated by greed and the lust for murder.

Windschuttle’s summing up of the significance of the Black Line throws some light on why his arguments have struck such a chord with the right-wing columnists inhabiting the Murdoch and other media. Whenever some particularly terrible crime is committed these “commentators” rush to denounce any notion that social conditions could be to blame. Their inevitable response is to call for tougher law and order measures that will combat individual “evil.” Windschuttle brings precisely this outlook to his analysis of the Black Line.

“From 1827 until the end of 1830,” he writes, “the robbery and murder of whites became a more widespread form of behaviour among tribal Aborigines. While their main motive was to acquire British goods, the ease with which they found they could do this, and the very few repercussions they suffered, were obviously factors that prompted them to continue, in fact, to increase these actions. Arthur’s main response in 1828, which was to appoint the ineffectual roving parties and to increase military patrols around the settled districts, clearly did nothing to dissuade the Aborigines from their newly adopted behaviour. They discovered that, after raiding a white household, they could easily elude any parties sent in pursuit of them. Arthur’s reluctance to mount a more determined police and military response to the growth in Aboriginal assaults, should therefore be seen as part of a process that led to their increase. Hence, the concern the colonial authorities felt for the fate of the Aborigines, their reluctance to have Aboriginal blood on their hands, the *leniency* they initially adopted—in short their humanitarianism—was itself a factor that fostered the growth of Aboriginal violence. It was not until the formation of the Black Line that the Aborigines fully confronted the military power of the colonists. Once they recognised this for what it was, their violence quickly ended and they gratefully sought refuge with Robinson” [Fabrication, p. 181].

So the purpose of the Black Line was not to exterminate the Aborigines, but to protect them by removing them from the areas of colonial settlement. In order to establish historical truth, however, we are obliged to go further—beyond intentions to an examination of the objective logic of events themselves. Without the Black Line, and its show of military violence, Robinson could not have succeeded in persuading the Aborigines to accompany him to Flinders Island—a project for which he received considerable financial reward from the colonial government.

Once contained on Flinders Island, the remaining Aborigines rapidly died. While it was not a concentration camp, Windschuttle observes, “its death rate was comparable to one” [Fabrication, p. 247].

Contemplating his role in the Black War and its aftermath, Robinson noted that, despite the rate at which they were dying on Flinders Island, the transportation of the Aborigines had been well worth it.

“When I reflected that but a few years since those men were the cause of so much terror in the settled districts and were now so peaceable employed, I see great cause for thankfulness that I have been the honoured instrument in removing them from the main territory. The sad mortality which has happened among them since their removal is a cause for regret but after all it is the will of providence, and better they died here where they are kindly treated than shot at and inhumanly destroyed by the depraved portion of the white community” [Fabrication, pp. 238-239].

Whether it resulted in death by shooting at the hands of settlers or soldiers, or from disease after being transported to Flinders Island, the inherent and inexorable logic of the system of pastoral capitalism established in Tasmania—whatever the intentions of government officials or settlers—was the extermination of the indigenous population.

To be continued

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

