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

An assault on historical truth

Part 1

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16 September 2003

Part 2 *of this review was published September 17, 2003;* Part 3 *appeared September 18, 2003.*

"Great history," the eminent English historian E. H. Carr explained, "is written precisely when the historian's vision is illuminated by insights into the problems of the present" [E.H. Carr, *What is History?* p. 37].

By the same token, it could be said, historical falsification is bound up with efforts to obscure an understanding of the present.

This connection between the writing of history and contemporary social problems is illustrated by the so-called "History Wars" that have been fought out in Australia during the past decade. They have now reached a new peak of intensity with the recent publication of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* by Keith Windschuttle.

While the form of the increasingly heated debate is a conflict over the nature and significance of the impact of British colonialism on Australia's indigenous population, its content is about contemporary society. It is highly noteworthy that Windschuttle, a student radical in the 1960s, one-time self-styled Marxist and radical journalist, has become the standard bearer for a number of deeply reactionary right wing political columnists. He has also received plaudits from the Howard government and considerable promotion in the pages of the Murdoch press.

Fabrication deals with relations between the Aboriginal population and British settlers in Van Diemen's Land (now the state of Tasmania) from 1803 to 1847. It is the first in a planned series of three volumes on the impact of European settlement in Australia.

For more than 150 years it has been recognised, at least by what could be termed "civilised public opinion", that the wiping out of the Aboriginal society that had existed in Tasmania for more than 20,000 years was an immense historical tragedy. Carried out in barely five decades, it arose out of the establishment of the British colony. Moreover, it was generally understood that the destruction of an entire people could not simply be dismissed. It raised profound questions about the very nature of the society that was being established. This was not just a "left wing" or Marxist position.

The historian Paul Hasluck, later to become a leading Liberal politician and eventually Governor-General, noted that "the occurrence of a phase of violence in the early stages of contact is important because inevitably it left antagonism between the races, while some degree of shame or the need to justify what happened brought a tendency to defame the primitive defender of his soil as treacherous, black at heart, murderous and open to no instruction except by force" [cited in Krygier and van Krieken, "The Character of the Nation" in *Whitewash*, p. 105].

Of course, there is room for disagreement on a whole host of historical issues. The origin and significance of the impact of British colonialism on Aboriginal society, the role of government policy, the nature and extent of Aboriginal resistance, the character of pre-colonial Aboriginal life, among others. They have been, and will continue to be, the subject of research and controversy—part of the intricate and complex process of uncovering the truth of both the past and the present.

Windschuttle's book, however, is aimed at obscuring historical truth. His goal is to "prove" an already formulated thesis: that the violence committed against the Aborigines has been vastly overstated. He accuses "orthodox historians" of "fabricating" evidence to meet certain political agendas and claims that the total destruction of Tasmanian Aboriginal society was the fault of the Aborigines.

According to Windschuttle, the Aborigines brought the tragedy on themselves because of the wrong "choices" they made in response to the arrival of British colonialism. Instead of accommodating themselves to the new civilisation, they "chose" to resort to criminal activities—murder and robbery—in order to acquire the consumer goods of British society.

As we shall see, Windschuttle's method can be described as the application of "free market" ideology to the study of history. This is one of the reasons why his work has found such favour among those right wing commentators who regularly ascribe social problems and criminal behaviour to the activities of evil individuals.

Windschuttle acknowledges that "the debate over Aboriginal history goes far beyond its ostensible subject: it is about the character of the nation and, ultimately, the calibre of the civilization Britain brought to these shores in 1788." He wants to establish a counter-history of race relations which will demonstrate that claims of oppression and conflict misinterpret the whole process. The British colonization of Australia, he argues, was "the least violent of all Europe's encounters with the New World" [*Fabrication*, p. 3].

To the extent that violence occurred, it was the fault of the Aborigines, for whom murder and robbery were the means of acquiring the British "luxuries" that had become part of their way of life. There was nothing noble about the Aboriginal resistance. There were no military struggles, but a series of criminal activities which had to be, and eventually were, put down.

We cannot here review every argument advanced by Windschuttle in his pursuit of "fabrications". Experts in the field will no doubt be able to show how and where he has ignored key pieces of evidence to suit his agenda. They have already begun to do so. Even in the absence of such work, however, we can expose the character of Windschuttle's attack on historical truth. The necessary material lies within the book itself.

The rise of the pastoral economy

At the heart of all the issues raised by the colonisation of Tasmania, or

Van Diemen's Land as it was then known, is the marked change that took place in colonial society from the mid-1820s onwards. The colonisation process began in 1803-1804 and, notwithstanding the events at Risdon Cove in May 1804—when at least three Aborigines were killed—relations between the settlers and the Aboriginal tribes were relatively peaceful. However, from about 1824 onwards there was a significant shift, leading to the Black War, the instigation of the Black Line in 1830 and the subsequent transportation of the remaining Aboriginal population to Flinders Island in Bass Strait.

In his analysis of the outbreak of conflict, Windschuttle begins by noting that most historians "emphasize that up to 1824, relations between Aborigines and settlers were comparatively free of conflict" and that, in the words of one of his chief targets, historian Henry Reynolds, "the common view among colonists was that the Tasmanians were a mild and peaceful people" [*Fabrication*, p. 61].

According to the historian Brian Plomley, during the first 20 years of the colony there was no concerted resistance on the part of the Aborigines. But in the year 1824 everything changed. From then on "the attacks were purposeful, being motivated by the need to drive the settlers from their territories in order to live their natural lives, as well as by the starvation which was the outcome of the territorial occupation" [*Fabrication*, p. 62].

Historian Lyndall Ryan cites the following indices of the economic transformation underway: in the period 1817 to 1824, the colony's white population rose from 2000 to 12,643, while the sheep population increased from 54,600 to over 200,000. [*Fabrication*, p. 62]. So rapid was the rise of the pastoral economy that by the end of the 1820s Van Diemen's Land overtook New South Wales in wool exports.

Windschuttle, however, dismisses what he calls Ryan's "quasi-Marxist" explanation linking the increase in violence to the expansion of the pastoral economy. He likewise dismisses Plomley's account of growing hunger and Henry Reynolds' arguments pointing to enclosure of the land.

Windschuttle also rejects the position that the Aborigines engaged in a guerrilla war in response to the violation of their territory. He argues that, because they had no sense of property, they did not treat the colonists as trespassers. The Tasmanian Aborigines, he insists, did not regard themselves as "owning" the land. That concept was "not part of their culture". The "strongest argument" that the "colonists' possession of the land was not the reason behind the Aborigines' violence was that they took so long to respond to the British presence" [*Fabrication*, p. 111].

It is perfectly true that the Tasmanian Aborigines had no concept of land ownership or property. Nor, it should be pointed out, did the average English peasant of just two hundred years before. In the England of the seventeenth century there was only the notion of common property—based on the conception that the land was provided by God to all. That is why the philosopher John Locke had to undertake a theoretical revolution in order to provide the justification for private, that is, exclusive, property. It is why the enclosure movement, also aimed at the introduction of sheep, created such an upheaval in English society.

But the lack of a concept of exclusive landownership did not mean that the Aborigines' attacks on the settlers were not undertaken in defence of their mode of existence. The more perceptive of the settlers certainly understood that the conflict arose from their exclusive use of the land, combined with their hunting for cash of the game which had previously sustained the Aboriginal population.

In 1830, for example, Launceston pastoralist Richard Dry offered the following explanation:

"To the rapid increase of settlers who now occupy the best portions of the land, extensive plains and fine forests where formerly emu and kangaroo fed in such numbers, that procuring subsistence was a pastime to a black native, and not as it is now, attended with toil and uncertainty, from this land they are excluded and daily witness our encroachments in the extensive fences erecting [sic] by the settlers. These circumstances 'tho inseparable from the nature of the settlement, must impress the blacks with unfavourable ideas of our intentions towards them; yet the results cannot be [as] distressing to them as those arising from the wanton destruction of the animals on which they subsist, by collectors of kangaroo skins for sale; and to whom the carcass is of no value. I am confident that in this way also there are not less than eight thousand of these animals killed annually; by parties stationed in the interior, by stockkeepers, bushrangers, and others who to gain sixpence / the value of a skin / destroy a quantity of food sufficient for the daily subsistence of six natives" [*Fabrication*, p. 335].

In a passage that Windschuttle claims supports the thesis of his book, Plomley writes: "The occupation of the tribal territories may also in some degree have disrupted the cultural life of the tribe, but it is unlikely that it would have done so in any other sense than in preventing the use by the tribe of familiar camping grounds, drinking places and hunting and food-gathering areas, because the Tasmanian Aborigines lacked the highly organized sacred life of the Australian Aborigines, which was identified with the spirit of place" [*Fabrication*, p. 115].

Windschuttle is so blinded by his drive to use Plomley's assertion that the Tasmanian Aborigines had no sacred culture based on a sense of place—and therefore, in his view, no sense of property—that he fails to see that the remarks *in their totality* undermine his reactionary thesis that Aboriginal resistance was nothing more than criminality. If, as Plomley points out, the occupation of tribal territories prevented the Aborigines from using camping grounds, drinking places and hunting and food-gathering areas, then it signified nothing less than the destruction of Aboriginal society, which was built around precisely these activities.

The Black War

Windschuttle begins his analysis of the Black War by asserting that the initial attacks on settlers in 1823-24 were not organised by Tasmanian tribal Aborigines but by a Sydney Aborigine, Musquito, whose gang members were "simply outlaws." But how to explain the continuation and intensification of the conflict even after the capture and execution of Musquito and the others? Here Windschuttle needs to introduce a new phenomenon: the development of a criminal mentality, not only on the part of a few "outlaws" but extending throughout the Aboriginal population.

Conscious of the need to update the justifications for violence, Windschuttle writes: "Few historians today would accept the behaviour of Aborigines or anyone else could be explained in terms of inherent spirits of 'cruelty' or 'savagery'. However, most would acknowledge that the spirit of mammon still remains a valid, indeed timeless, stimulus for black people, as much as it does for white" [*Fabrication*, p. 122].

The Aborigines attacked the settlers because they wanted goods such as sugar, flour, blankets, tea and tobacco. They resorted to plunder, rather than "legal forms of acquisition" for two reasons: there had not been sufficient time for them to "adopt the customs and work ethic required to join the colonial labour force" and relying on charity left them at the mercy of white generosity, whereas "outlaw status left them in charge of their own fortunes" [*Fabrication*, p. 127]. In short, they preferred to remain free.

According to Windschuttle, "Aboriginal thieves had little compunction about killing anyone they found in their way" because "their own culture had no sanctions against the murder of anyone outside their immediate clan. Internecine warfare was rife in indigenous society and killing others was a common and familiar practice among Aboriginal males. ... The whites were unarmed and posed no deterrent to the Aborigines' main objective. They were killed simply because they could be.

"Overall, then, the spread of white settlement in the 1820s was certainly a major cause of the increase in black violence, but not for the reasons the orthodox school proposes. Far from generating black resentment, the expansion of settlement instead gave the Aborigines more opportunity and

more temptation to engage in robbery and murder, two customs they had come to relish" [*Fabrication*, pp. 128-129].

The tragedy of this period, Windschuttle continues, is that the Aborigines "adopted such senseless violence" because "their principal victims were themselves" [*Fabrication*, p. 130].

This odious thesis—that the Black War was the product of the love of murder and robbery on the part of the Aborigines, who brought their extinction upon themselves—collapses as soon as it is subjected to scrutiny.

An immediate question springs to mind. If pressure exerted by the developing pastoral economy was not the cause of the conflict, why did murder and robbery come to play such an important role from the mid-1820s? Why not a decade earlier, or right from the outset? After all, it would have been much easier for Aborigines to attack the settlers in an earlier period, when the settler population was considerably smaller.

Furthermore, it is clear that if, as Windschuttle maintains, Aborigines had developed a taste for European goods, then they must have obtained these goods in the earlier peaceful period by methods other than murder and plunder.

Windschuttle produces a newspaper report of the court testimony of a tribal Aborigine which, he claims, clinches his argument. According to the report "all that could be got from him was that the white man had destroyed several of his companions, and that he had most reason to complain; that when the tribe attacked the hut it was in order to obtain food, and such articles as the whites had introduced amongst them, and which now instead of being luxuries as formerly, had become necessaries, which they could not any other way procure" [*Fabrication*, p. 129].

In Windschuttle's view, this account demonstrates how, having no way of legally acquiring "what to them were highly desirable luxury products", tribal Aborigines "chose to plunder them from the huts and homesteads of settlers instead, and to kill any whites they found in their way" [*Fabrication*, p. 130].

But far from demonstrating the "choices" made by tribal Aborigines—as if they were operating in some kind of "market society," weighing up the costs and benefits of wage labour versus begging and plunder, as Windschuttle implies—the report documents the tragic and shattering impact of the new colonial society upon the tribal structure of the original inhabitants. Deprived of their hunting grounds by the new mode of production, they had, at the same time, become dependent upon its products.

To be continued