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

An assault on historical truth

Part 3

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Below we are publishing the concluding section of the three-part series by Nick Beams reviewing Keith Windschuttle's The Fabrication of Aboriginal History. Part 1 *and* Part 2 *were published on September 16 and 17, respectively.*

In *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Keith Windschuttle insists that of all Europe's encounters with the New World, the Van Diemen's Land colony was probably the least violent. But he does confront one unalterable fact. Notwithstanding the claim made by Chilean academic Claudio Veliz in launching the book that, compared to other experiences, the colonisation of Australia was a "nun's picnic", the entire full-blooded population was wiped out as a result of its encounter with the settler colony.

How many died is open to question. Whatever one estimates the initial population to be—and this ranges from 2,000 to 7,000—the crucial issue is: what were the reasons for the rapid decline. Windschuttle offers two: the low technical level of Aboriginal society, which made it "dysfunctional," and the attitude of Aboriginal men towards women.

Windschuttle develops his thesis by taking up an argument advanced by historian Henry Reynolds that the Aborigines should not be seen simply as helpless victims of the invaders.

"This is a valid point," he writes. "But it also means we should see them as active agents in their own demise because their men hired out and sold off their women without seriously contemplating the results. In doing so they dramatically reduced the ability of their own community to reproduce itself. Only men who held their women so cheaply would allow such a thing to happen. 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. Until the nineteenth century, their isolation had left them without comparisons with the other cultures that might have helped them reform their ways. But nor did they produce any wise men of their own who might have foreseen the long-term consequences of their own behaviour and devised ways to curb it. They had survived for millennia, it is true, but it seems clear that this owed more to good fortune than good management. The 'slow strangulation of the mind' was true not only of their technical abilities but also of their social relationships. Hence it was not surprising that when the British arrived, 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" [*Fabrication*, p. 386].

It is doubtful whether, in the terrible history of the encounters between the expanding capitalist society and the indigenous peoples of the world, the destruction of a whole people has been described in quite such a cold blooded manner. What makes this passage particularly significant is that it is not simply a throwback to the past, when the destruction of indigenous peoples was justified on the basis that they were savages. Rather, it strikes a particularly modern tone: the Aborigines were responsible for their own demise because of the "choices" they made—just as anyone in the twenty-first century "free market" society must accept the consequences of their individual decisions. As Windschuttle remarked during a debate on his book in Launceston, the Aborigines who carried out raids on settlements were "like junkies stealing from a petrol station."

At this point it is instructive to compare Windschuttle's remarks on the causes of the demise of Aboriginal society with his analysis of the Black War. Here, he maintained that the term "war" was really a misnomer. Since the Aborigines had no concept of property, they could not be considered to be defending their land. They could not formulate their collective interests, could not be regarded as the subjects of an injured nation, were unable to formulate a platform which could provide a basis for negotiation with the colonists, showed no capacity for military organisation and in short "showed no evidence of anything that deserved the name of political skills at all." No higher motive could therefore be attributed to their actions. [*Fabrication*, p. 102.]

However, while this hunter-gatherer society had no concept of property, Aboriginal men, according to Windschuttle, were sufficiently "market savvy" to hire out and prostitute their women, and should have been able to see where this would lead.

The unity of these contradictory arguments lies in the fact that they serve to justify Windschuttle's central thesis: that Aboriginal society was destroyed not because of anything pertaining to colonial society, offering, as it did, the "gifts of civilization" to indigenous peoples, and guided by the principles of the Evangelical churches, but because of its own inherent flaws. The Aborigines perished because they deserved to.

The immediate question is: why is Windschuttle's book, which, in earlier times would have been dismissed out of hand as a malicious piece of historical falsification, receiving such widespread promotion? Why have all the right-wing columnists so eagerly rallied to the

Windschuttle banner?

The answer lies in the fact that such a book could not have been written in "earlier times." It is a definite product of the present-day socio-economic and political environment, and its promotion points to social and political trends within current society. These are reflected in the intellectual evolution of Windschuttle himself.

In his 1996 book *The Killing of History*, which attacked the influence of post-modernism, Windschuttle expressed an entirely different attitude towards the "orthodox historians" he now denounces as fabricators. Charles Rowley, he wrote, in *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society* published in 1970, "showed what most people had assumed to have been small, isolated outbreaks of violence against blacks, coupled with some sporadic, pathetic gestures at welfare, actually formed a great unbroken arch of systematic brutality, dispossession and incarceration stretching from the late eighteenth century to the twentieth. Rowley redefined the great drama of Australian history as the conflict between Europeans and Aborigines. Since 1970, many other writers have come into the field and either added to or reshaped some of Rowley's themes. Rowley had drawn his sources primarily from government records and his work was essentially a European view. It was not until the early 1980s, especially with Henry Reynolds's breakthrough in discovering and deploying previously untouched evidence, that historians found it was possible to use Aboriginal voices to tell the story. Nonetheless, since Rowley's book was published, no one has seriously challenged his underlying revelation of an unbroken chain of self-perpetuating attitudes, policies and responses that whites have imposed upon blacks.

"Before Rowley, Aboriginal people themselves knew of their treatment and their condition, including the massacre of many of their forebears, only as temporally isolated, unconnected events confined to local areas. The central methodological tool that enabled people to break free of these limited visions was narrative history. It was only when all these events were linked through the method of narrative that people could see what had been done across the whole of the continent and across the whole of the period since 1788" [*The Killing of History* by Keith Windschuttle, Encounter Books, San Francisco, 2000, p. 128].

I have quoted this passage at some length because it stands in such sharp contrast to what Windschuttle began to write just four years later in the magazine *Quadrant* and now in *Fabrication*.

Windschuttle argues that a book by Perth journalist Rod Moran on the infamous Forrest River Massacre in 1926 in the Kimberley region of Western Australia prompted his change of view. It apparently convinced him that no massacre actually took place. But drastic changes in political orientation—in this case, from recognising that the violence against the Aboriginal population was bound up with European settlement to denying that it played any essential role—are always bound up with changing political conditions in society as a whole. The individual may experience it as Pauline conversion, but the origins of the shift are social.

At the most immediate level, there is the obvious parallel between Windschuttle's trajectory and the coming to power of Prime Minister John Howard in 1996, with his denunciations of the "black armband" view of history. But to ascribe Windschuttle's change in orientation to Howard's influence would be to attach far too much historical importance to the present occupant of the Lodge. In any case, Howard's pronouncements are themselves the expression of deeper social and political trends.

As I have already pointed out, up until recently it was widely recognised that British colonialism and the new system of private ownership it established had a devastating impact on Aboriginal society. This conception of Australia's historical origins was bound up with the prevailing political agenda based on social reformism. Hasluck's views, cited earlier, developed within this political framework. And it is by no means accidental that the publication of Rowley's work in 1970 came at the high point of the post-war economic boom, in the midst of a period of social reform that was to culminate in the Whitlam Labor government of 1972-75.

That period of social reform has long gone. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s and the apparent triumph of the market, the political agenda of the ruling elites—whatever the specific colouration of the government in power—has been dominated by an offensive against the social position of the working class and large sections of the middle class.

This offensive, however, has resulted in the alienation of broad masses of the population from the official structures within which politics has been regulated for more than a century.

Under conditions where deep-seated contradictions within capitalist economy itself preclude the possibility of any genuine social reform, the stability of the present social order depends increasingly on preventing this widespread disaffection and broadly-felt resentment from coalescing into an active political movement fighting for the independent social needs of the mass of the population.

The development of such a movement requires, above all, a critical approach to the state of society, which is necessarily grounded on an historical analysis.

One of the most notable phenomena of the past decade has been the rise of a layer of strident right-wing political commentators—in newspaper columns and in the mass media more generally. Their central role has been to supply an endless stream of political and historical falsifications aimed at blocking the development of precisely the critical thought that represents such a threat to the ruling elites for whom they speak.

Windschuttle has become a cause célèbre in these circles. Utilising concepts such as "choice" and "individual responsibility" so beloved by the adherents of the "free market", his writings are aimed at legitimising the violence carried out against the indigenous population as the framework of capitalist society was being established.

The fact that he has been "picked up" says volumes about the level of social tensions in present-day society. Violence justified in the past is always a preparation for its use in the future. But the reliance of the ruling elites and their media mouthpieces on Windschuttle's distortions and falsifications is the surest sign of their ideological and political bankruptcy—and that the tides of history are moving against them.

Concluded