

What is at stake in Australia's "History Wars"

Part 1: Competing political agendas

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The following is the first part in a series written by Nick Beams, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) and member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site. Part 2 will be published on Tuesday, July 13. The remaining parts are available at the following links: Part 2, Part 3, Part 4, Part 5, Part 6, Part 7, Part 8, Part 9 and Part 10.

For the past two years or so, Australian political and intellectual circles have been reverberating with the sound of new battles in what has become known as the History Wars. While the immediate conflict has centred on the impact and nature of Australia's colonial settlement and the subsequent dispossession of the Aboriginal population, the issues raised by the History Wars extend far more widely.

The History Wars began in the early 1980s, flaring up on such occasions as the 200th anniversary of British settlement of Australia in 1988 and the centenary of the federation of the six colonies in 2001. In 2002 they acquired new intensity with the publication of Keith Windschuttle's book *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*—the first in what is scheduled to be a three-volume series.

According to Windschuttle, those historians who have written about the violence carried out against the Aboriginal population are not simply mistaken. They are guilty of "fabricating" the nature of colonial settlement, in line with a left-wing agenda derived from the radical politics of the 1960s.

Windschuttle began his campaign three years ago, with the publication of a series of articles on Aboriginal history in the right-wing magazine *Quadrant*. The most significant feature of the campaign is not its denial of historical truth. Rather, it is the fact that, instead of being dismissed out of hand, Windschuttle's outpourings have been lauded by right-wing commentators throughout the mass media. While knowing little or nothing about the history of colonial settlement, these people sense, correctly, that vital political questions are at stake.

A typical example was a comment by *Australian* columnist Janet Albrechtsen. Writing on the controversy surrounding the bicentenary of Lieutenant Bowen's landing at Risdon Cove in Tasmania in September 1803, where some 50 Aborigines were allegedly killed, Albrechtsen declared that the event "signalled the arrival of English law, parliamentary institutions, courts and procedures that form the basis of our legal system today—one that has served us remarkably well and is surely a moment worth commemorating. Instead, history has degenerated into mere emotion. The black armband is fastened so tightly it has cut circulation to rational thinking. Historical facts that make us feel proud have been expunged." [1]

Windschuttle sees his task as not simply setting the record straight. He wants to expose the deliberate falsifications of left-wing historians,

because he regards their accounts of the treatment of the Aboriginal population as a challenge to the present social order and the institutions upon which it is based.

Speaking at the launch of his book in December 2002, he denounced academic historians for their "long series of wilful misrepresentations" and their portrayals of "Australia as a society reeking of atrocities against the Aborigines."

"The debate over Aboriginal history is not simply about the Aborigines. Ultimately, it is about the character of the Australian nation and the calibre of the civilization that Britain brought to these shores in 1788. Pretty obviously, this book is a defence of the integrity of both the nation itself and the civilization from which it derives."

Furthermore, he concluded, "both at home and abroad" Aboriginal history was a subject "long used by all those who want to milk anti-Western prejudices for maximum political gain. It is an important issue for both Australia's international reputation and our international relations." [2]

Windschuttle's opponents and "reconciliation"

From the other side, historian Henry Reynolds—one of Windschuttle's chief targets and author of numerous books and articles on Aboriginal history and the violence of the colonial frontier—is no less clear about the political significance of the History Wars.

Reynolds is an advocate of land rights for Aboriginal communities. Like many others on the "left", he sees the granting of land rights as critical to righting the wrongs of the past. For Reynolds, Windschuttle's radical retelling of the history of Aboriginal-European relations has vast contemporary relevance. In Windschuttle, he declared, in his initial review of *Fabrication*, "right-wing Australia has found its historian." The book was sure to be hailed by an "adoring and uncritical chorus". "The black armbands can come off and go out with the rubbish. White Australia has no historically derived obligations to Aborigines. Land rights have no justification. Reconciliation is unnecessary. If anyone should say sorry for the past, it's the Aborigines, whose criminal ancestors behaved so badly towards the white pioneers." [3]

Others go even further. According to political commentator and academic Robert Manne, editor of *Whitewash*—a compilation of replies to *Fabrication*—the latest episode in the History Wars has immediate consequences for the development of a new national ethos.

Introducing *Whitewash* in 2003, he wrote: "The most unsettling aspect of the publication of *Fabrication* was the enthusiasm with which it was greeted by the right, including the Prime Minister, who awarded Windschuttle a Centenary Medal for services to history. [Historian] Geoffrey Blainey described *Fabrication* as 'one of the most important and devastating books written on Australian history in recent years.' There was clearly something about the song Windschuttle was singing

that was both familiar and appealing to certain ears. After the reception of *Fabrication* two things seemed clear to me. If Windschuttle's interpretation of the dispossession came to be widely accepted then all prospect for reconciliation—that is to say for a history that indigenous and non-indigenous Australians might share—was dead.” [4]

Manne's comments underscore the fact that the perspective of “reconciliation” between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians is not primarily about title to land, or monetary compensation—although both are of considerable significance—but about fashioning a new form of Australian nationalism, based on a “shared history”.

This is certainly the view of former Prime Minister Paul Keating who, during his term of office, frequently ventured into the realm of history—with the aid of his speechwriter, Don Watson, a “left” historian. Keating's aim was to advance the project of an Australian republic and a more Asia-oriented political and economic strategy.

Launching *The History Wars* last September, Keating explained that the book, authored by Melbourne University history professor Stuart Macintyre, would form a sort of “code stone” for understanding the motivations of the various players in the current debate. He went on to point out that “the protagonists in academe are now surrogates in a broader political battle about Australia's future.”

“We should reflect on this: alone, amongst the peoples of the world, we have possession of a continent, a continent we laid claim to as part of an empire, one we expropriated from another race, but a continent that is no longer an island in a sea of subjugated and colonial places. The Dutch no longer run Indonesia, the French no longer control Indo-China. And the Chinese now run China for themselves. ... The Australian story, for it to be a record of continuing success, has to come to terms with our expropriation of the land, our ambivalence about who we are and our place in the new geo-political make-up of the region.” [5]

For Australia to be able to venture into the region, it was necessary to establish a “proper basis of reconciliation” with the indigenous population.

For his part, Macintyre argues that the History Wars are not really about history at all, but “an argument for control of the past as a political resource. They are conducted as a polemical argument and rest on a misunderstanding of the nature of history and historical understanding.” [6]

The History Warriors act as bullies and in “submitting history to a loyalty test, they debase it.” Accordingly, “Australians deserve more from their history than the History Wars.” [7]

In other words, the right-wing History Warriors are disrupting genuine historical research to pursue their political agenda. This position, however, works to obscure the political and historical issues at stake. If, as Macintyre claims, the History Wars are simply an unfortunate intrusion into academic research, then there is no point studying them. Nothing much can be learned.

The key question is not whether Windschuttle and his supporters have a political agenda, but the content of their arguments and, even more importantly, what their arguments signify. Windschuttle's book certainly represents an attack on historical truth. But to denounce him for pursuing a political agenda misses the mark. The work of all historians, not least Professor Macintyre, is shaped by a political outlook. All of them, in one way or another, bring to their study of history a political agenda. The issue is whether this agenda prevents or advances the understanding of history, that is, whether or not it adds to the sum of historical truth.

Macintyre begins his book by noting one of the many forays of Australian Prime Minister John Howard into the History Wars. Speaking in the aftermath of his March 1996 election victory, Howard declared: “One of the most insidious developments in Australian political life over the past decade or so has been the attempt to rewrite Australian history in the service of a partisan political cause.” [8]

What Howard regarded as “insidious” was that his version of history, and the political agenda to which it was linked, should be challenged. But one cannot refute Howard by suggesting that his intervention somehow “disrupts” the study of history.

Historical method

There is no such thing as a non-political or value-free history. Every historian has a political outlook, which shapes their method, whether or not they are conscious of it, and whether or not they choose to espouse definite political views. In any historical study, political views—of the individual historian and in the wider society—exert their influence upon which facts and events are selected, and how these facts are related to each other. History, therefore, is always being rewritten, as outlooks and methods change due to changes in the political environment.

In the final analysis, this constant re-examination and re-evaluation arises from the nature of the cognitive process itself.

Discussing his historical method, Karl Marx noted that “human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape” and that “intimations of higher development among the subordinate animal species ... can be understood only after the higher development is already known.” [9]

The flow of time is from the past to the present. But the flow of historical understanding is from the present to the past. Unlike the example used by Marx—where knowledge of the anatomy of man is used to understand the anatomy of the ape—the anatomy of the present, however, is continually changing. The past is illuminated more clearly as we move into the future, when what might have appeared as mere nuances at one point have become tendencies, or when processes, once considered to be important, have been transcended. The movement into the future is, therefore, necessarily accompanied by a re-evaluation of the past and, consequently, by the rewriting of history.

Thus history, by its very nature, must be rewritten. The scientific practice of historical study demands it. To discover the past as it really was, we must probe it with insights derived from the present. And this is not simply a question of gaining more knowledge. To understand the past as it really was, we have to grasp the essential relationships between different processes, not merely the forms in which they appeared. But this differentiation of essence and appearance—the core of any scientific practice, including the study of history—is, itself, a product of the historical process. It is only in the future that the significance of certain events and tendencies becomes clear.

Historical understanding cannot be fixed for all time. Out of the present emerge new problems that require a re-examination of the past. The question we must ask is not: “does history have to be rewritten?” but “does the re-evaluation of history lead to the discovery of historical truth?” In other words, does the re-evaluation of history deepen our understanding of the past and its relationship to the present, thus providing a more complete explanation of the course of history?

The rewriting of history is, of course, stimulated by contemporary political conflicts. It is undertaken by historians with political outlooks and agendas. No less than those whom he denounces as History War warriors, Macintyre also has a political agenda. Here it is, in his description of the so-called “Big Picture” advocated by Paul Keating during his term as prime minister. “At home and abroad he [Keating] built up a story of a people who had suffered but overcome. They had triumphed over their tribulations and prejudices to embrace diversity with an egalitarian generosity that would enable them to engage with their Asian neighbours and flourish in the open, globalised economy.” [10]

Macintyre, in other words, favours a more “progressive” national outlook—one that acknowledges the so-called “achievements” of the Australian nation but which, at the same time, recognises the crimes and tragedies of the past.

Robert Manne, another determined opponent of Windschuttle, likewise enters the conflict with a definite political agenda. This was summed up in

an essay on the *Tampa* crisis, where he characterised the Howard government's refusal to allow refugees to land as a "turning point in the history of Australia." According to Manne, there was a "larger struggle ... being fought out over the question of refugees" that had immediate connections to history and the History Wars. The conflict over asylum seeker policy, he claimed, was part of the attack on the Keating legacy, a legacy bound up with a different national outlook

"Paul Keating," he wrote, "was a politician of unusually powerful imagination, who devoted his prime ministership to the task of completing what Gough Whitlam had begun: the transformation of Australia from an ex-colonial British settler society to fully independent post-colonial nationhood. ... He also grasped, more simply and radically than any previous prime minister, that the spirit of Australia would forever be troubled until non-Aboriginal Australians confronted the meaning of Aboriginal dispossession and its tragic aftermath." [11]

For Manne, no less than for Windschuttle or any other participant, the History Wars are part of a broader political struggle. This does not mean, contrary to Macintyre's claims, that they are, therefore, not really about history. The History Wars have not erupted accidentally. Nor have they emerged because a group of right-wing historians has received backing from powerful sections of the mass media. The conflict is the outcome of profound changes in the economic and political environment, which have brought long outstanding historical and political issues to the surface. To reveal the underlying conflicts that have given rise to the History Wars, the origins of each tendency and the competing national agendas they represent, we must examine some of the central features of the establishment of the Australian nation-state and its subsequent evolution.

To be continued

Note:

- 1) *The Australian* April 30, 2003
- 2) Windschuttle speech at the *Fabrication* launch December 9, 2002 available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20040623231419/http://www.sydneyle.com/Launch%20speech.htm>
- 3) *The Weekend Australian*, December 14-15, 2002
- 4) *The Age*, August 25, 2003
- 5) *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 5, 2003
- 6) Notes for History Wars launch, September 9, 2003 available at <http://evatt.labor.net.au/news/253.html>
- 7) Macintyre, *The History Wars*, p. 222
- 8) Macintyre, *The History Wars*, p. 1
- 9) Marx, *The Grundrisse*, p. 105
- 10) Macintyre, *The History Wars*, p. 3
- 11) Robert Manne, "The Road to *Tampa*", in Jayasuriya, Walker and Gothard eds. *Legacies of White Australia*, p. 173



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