



Photo – David Karonidis

Keith Windschuttle

For some years, controversy has surrounded the history of Australia's earliest white settlement and the treatment of the Indigenous Australians. Historian Keith Windschuttle has now provoked new questioning in his latest book – *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (Macleay Press) where he has challenged much of the evidence previously used by historians in this field. Keith Windschuttle addressed The Sydney Institute on Tuesday 11 February 2003

THE FABRICATION

OF ABORIGINAL HISTORY

Keith Windschuttle

Over the past 30 years, university-based historians of Aboriginal Australia have produced a broad consensus. They have created a picture of widespread killings of blacks on the frontiers of settlement that not only went unpunished but had covert government support. Some of the Australian colonies engaged in what the principal historian of race relations in Tasmania, Lyndall Ryan, has called “a conscious policy of genocide”. In Queensland, according to the University of Sydney historian, Dirk Moses: “... the use of government terror transformed local genocidal massacres by settlers into official state-wide policy”. The expatriate Australian Ben Kiernan, who is director of the genocide studies program at Yale University, writes that nineteenth century Australian colonists mounted numerous punitive expeditions against the Aborigines in which they committed “hundreds of massacres”. In Central Australia, Kiernan claims 40 per cent of the indigenous population was shot dead. In Queensland, the Aborigines “were hunted like wild beasts, having lived for years in a state of absolute terror of white predators”.

For most of my adult life I was a true believer of this story. I had never done any archival research in the field but nonetheless used the principal historical works of Henry Reynolds, Lyndall Ryan, Charles Rowley and others in lectures I gave in university courses in Australian history and Australian social policy. I used to tell students that the record of the British in Australia was worse than the Spaniards in America. However, in 2000 I was asked to review a book by Perth journalist Rod Moran about the infamous Forrest River Massacre in the Kimberley in 1926. Moran convinced me that there had been no massacre at Forrest River. There were no eyewitnesses and no bodies found. The charred remains of bones at first thought to be of Aborigines shot and cremated turned out to be those of kangaroos and possums. The massacre sites were nothing but camp sites. A list of Aborigines gone missing from the local mission, and suspected to have been murdered, turned out to be a fake, concocted by the white

clergyman running the mission. Many of those on the list were recorded alive and well years later.

On reading this I decided to investigate the story I had long accepted by checking the footnotes of the principal authors. I started with Henry Reynolds' claim in *The Other Side of the Frontier* that 10,000 Aborigines had been killed in Queensland before Federation. The reference Reynolds provided for this was an article of his own in a work called *Race Relations in North Queensland*. This was a typescript publication held by only a few libraries but I found a copy and read it. To my surprise, it was not about Aboriginal deaths at all. It was a tally of the number of *whites* killed by Aborigines. Nowhere did it mention an Aboriginal death toll of 10,000. Reynolds had provided an inaccurate citation of his evidence.

In the three years since then, I have been checking the footnotes of the other historians in the field and have found a similar degree of misrepresentation, deceit and outright fabrication. The project began in Tasmania, or Van Diemen's Land as it was known until 1855, about which I originally expected to write a single chapter. However, in going back to the archives to check what happened there, I found such a wealth of material, including some of the most hair-raising breaches of historical practice imaginable, that Van Diemen's Land has become the subject of the first of what will eventually be a three-volume series entitled *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*.

Van Diemen's Land is widely regarded as Australia's worst case scenario, indeed, one of the few cases of outright genocide in the British Empire. International writers now routinely compare the British in this colony with the Spaniards in Mexico, the Belgians in the Congo, the Turks in Armenia and Pol Pot in Cambodia. Tasmania's "Black War" from 1824 to 1831 and the "Black Line" of 1830 are two of the most notorious events in the history of the British Empire. However, after examining all the archival evidence and double-checking the references cited by the most reputable academic historians of the subject, I have come to the conclusion that most of the story is myth piled upon myth. Here are some of the transgressions by its leading historians.

Lyndall Ryan cites the *Hobart Town Courier* as a source for several stories about atrocities against Aborigines in 1826. However, that newspaper did not begin publication until October 1827 and the other two newspapers of the day made no mention of these killings. Ryan cites the diary of the colony's first chaplain, Rev Robert Knopwood, as the source for her claim that, between 1803 and 1808, the colonists killed 100 Aborigines. The diaries, however, record only four Aborigines being killed in this period.

Ryan asserts: "Even if only half the stories [George Augustus] Robinson heard were true, then it is possible to account for 700 shot." However, Robinson's diaries record a total of only 188 Aborigines

killed by whites, and many of them are dubious claims. Ryan says that the documentary evidence shows 280 Aborigines were “recorded shot” and that unrecorded killings would bring the total to 700. However, she provides no sources for these figures. Brian Plomley did a survey in 1992 but could find records of only 109 Aborigines killed. I could find records for only 120.

Ryan claims that in 1826, police killed 14 Aborigines at Pitt Water. However, none of the three references she provides mention any Aborigines being killed there in 1826 or any other time.

Ryan claims that hostilities in the northern districts in 1827 included: a massacre of Port Dalrymple Aborigines by a vigilante group of stockmen at Norfolk Plains; the killing of a kangaroo hunter in reprisal for him shooting Aboriginal men; the burning of a settler’s house because his stockmen had seized Aboriginal women; the spearing of three other stockmen and clubbing of one to death at Western Lagoon. But not one of the five sources she cites mentions any of these events.

Between 1828 and 1830, according to Ryan, “roving parties” of police constables and convicts killed 60 Aborigines. Not one of the three references she cites mentions any Aborigines being killed, let alone 60. The governor at the time and most subsequent authors regarded the roving parties as completely ineffectual.

Ryan says the “Black War” began in the winter of 1824 with the Big River tribe launching patriotic attacks on the invaders. However, all the assaults on whites that winter were made by a small gang of detribalised blacks led by a man named Musquito who was not defending his tribal lands. He was an Aborigine originally from Sydney who had worked in Hobart for ten years before becoming a bushranger.

Lloyd Robson claims the settler James Hobbs in 1815 witnessed Aborigines killing 300 sheep at Oyster Bay and the next day the 48th Regiment killed 22 Aborigines in retribution. However, between 1809 and 1822 Hobbs was living in India, the first sheep did not arrive at Oyster Bay until 1821 and in 1815 the 48th Regiment never went anywhere near Oyster Bay.

Robson and four other authors repeat a story that 70 Aborigines were killed in a battle with the 40th Regiment near Campbell Town in 1828. However, all neglect to say that a local merchant told a government inquiry that he went to the alleged site with a corporal on the following day but could find no bodies or blood, only three dead dogs. “To tell you the truth,” the corporal then confessed, “we did not kill any of them.”

Both Lloyd Robson and Lyndall Ryan claim settlers killed Aborigines by giving them poisoned flour. Their sole source for this is a diary entry by George Augustus Robinson in which he recorded a conversation between a superintendent of the Van Diemen’s Land Company

and his convict shepherds after these men asked him for some poison. He asked them why they wanted it:

They said: "Oh sir we will poison the natives' dogs." Mr R took it away with him, their object, he said, being to poison the natives by putting it in their flour &c.

This is the only evidence either Robson or Ryan offers for this claim. It was nothing more than the superintendent's interpretation of what was, at most, an ambiguous statement of what his convict shepherds might do, not anything they actually had done.

Both Robson and Ryan also repeat the story of the heroic Aboriginal resistance fighter, Quamby, after whom the peak known as Quamby Bluff is supposedly named. They claim Quamby disputed the land occupied by the colonists near Westbury and repelled them, although he was later shot dead. However, Quamby Bluff was not named after an Aboriginal person at all. The first account of how it got its name appeared in the *Hobart Town Courier* in March 1829. A party of white kangaroo hunters came across a lone Aborigine who fell to his knees crying "Quamby, Quamby" meaning "mercy, mercy". In other words, "quamby" was not the name of a man but an expression of the language. More than a year later George Augustus Robinson invented the story about the Aboriginal resistance leader, which academic historians now repeat as if it were true.

The pre-historian and archaeologist, Rhys Jones, reports the following catalogue of horror:

The atrocities committed by sealers and convicts and reported to the 1830 committee included rape, flogging of women, burning with brands, roasting alive, emasculation of men, cutting flesh off and feeding it to dogs, dashing out the brains of children, kicking off a baby's head in front of its mother.

However, if you read the source Jones claims for his information, the evidence to and report of the 1830 Committee into Aboriginal Affairs, you find that hardly any of them are mentioned. There is a report of one Aboriginal woman being thrown onto a fire – that one is probably true – and another of an incident near Campbell Town where children were supposedly dragged from rocks by soldiers and had their brains dashed out – we know that one is definitely false. However, there is not even one mention in any document before this committee of burning with brands, flogging of women, emasculating men, cutting flesh off and feeding it to dogs or kicking off a baby's head in front of its mother. The last act, if you think about it, is technically impossible anyway. Kicking a baby in the head might crush it and break the neck but could never decapitate it. But the main point is that Jones has invented all these latter atrocities. Not one word about them was ever mentioned to the 1830 Committee.

Henry Reynolds claims the chief agent of the Van Diemen's Land Company, Edward Curr, was one of the settlers making "increased demands for extermination" of the Aborigines. The full text of the statement Reynolds cites, however, is Curr's pessimistic prediction of what might possibly happen if Aboriginal violence continued, not an advocacy of their extermination. "I am far from advising such a proceeding," Curr wrote. "My own hands however shall be guiltless of blood, and I shall discountenance it as far as my authority extends, except under circumstances of aggression or in self defence."

Reynolds claims Lieutenant-Governor Arthur recognised from his experience in the Peninsular War against Napoleon that the Aborigines had adopted Spanish tactics of guerrilla warfare, in which small bands attacked the troops of their enemy. However, Arthur's military career never included Spain. The full text of the statement Reynolds cites talks not about troops coming under attack by guerrillas but of Aborigines robbing and assaulting unarmed shepherds on remote outstations.

Arthur inaugurated the "Black Line" in 1830, Reynolds claims, because "he feared 'a general decline in the prosperity' and the 'eventual extirpation of the colony'". However, Arthur never made the statement attributed to him. Reynolds has altered his words. When confronted by journalists of the *Sydney Morning Herald* with this charge from my book, Reynolds replied: "I've never said that. That's quite, quite misleading. How could the Aborigines destroy the colony? ... Nowhere did I suggest that Arthur thought they could wipe out the colony. That would be a silly thing to say." However, six days later, after journalists sent Reynolds the page in his book *Frontier* where he did quote Arthur saying exactly that, he finally agreed what he had done. He said: "It's a bad mistake. I obviously didn't know it existed, far from it that I had done it deliberately to distort the story... All historians are fallible and make mistakes."

However, anyone who reads the offending page in his book *Frontier* will struggle to understand how it could be merely a mistake. In the same paragraph there are five other truncated quotations that appear to support the same false claim that the colonial authorities thought the Aborigines threatened the very survival of the colony. One of them was made by the editor of the *Hobart Town Courier*, James Ross, who said at a public meeting in 1830 that if Aboriginal violence was not stopped they would "come and drive us from this very Court room and compel us to take refuge in the ships." Reynolds presents this statement as if it were a common fear at the time. But he neglects to say that as soon as Ross said this, Robert Lathorp Murray, the editor of the rival newspaper, *The Tasmanian*, got to his feet and said:

No doubt that they are enabled to commit many atrocities, most frequently by the exercise of that cunning by which all savages are distinguished, but

to talk of six dozen miserable creatures, and never was a larger body seen assembled than 72, driving us from this room, is of course a joke.

Reynolds should have known that Murray had made this statement but he kept it from his readers – apparently in order to portray all the settlers quaking with fear. This omission is just as much a distortion of the truth as Reynolds’ original alteration of Lieutenant-Governor Arthur’s words.

The truth is that there was nothing on the Aborigines’ side that resembled frontier warfare, patriotic struggle or systematic resistance of any kind. The so-called “Black War” was a minor crime wave by two Europeanised black bushrangers, followed by an outbreak of robbery, assault and murder by tribal Aborigines. All the evidence at the time, on both the white and the black sides of the frontier, was that their principal objective was to acquire flour, tea, sugar and bedding, objects that to them were European luxury goods.

The full-blood Tasmanian Aborigines did die out in the nineteenth century, it is true, but this was almost entirely a consequence of two factors: the 10,000 years of isolation that had left them vulnerable to introduced diseases, especially influenza, pneumonia and tuberculosis; and the fact that they traded and prostituted their women to convict stockmen and sealers to such an extent that they lost the ability to reproduce themselves.

Despite its infamous reputation, Van Diemen’s Land was host to nothing that resembled genocide, which requires murderous intention against a whole race of people.

In Van Diemen’s Land, the infamous, “Black Line” of 1830 is commonly described today as an act of “ethnic cleansing”. However, its purpose was to remove from the settled districts only two of the nine tribes on the island to uninhabited country from where they could no longer assault white households. The Lieutenant-Governor specifically ordered that five of the other seven tribes were to be left alone.

Henry Reynolds claims that throughout the 1820s, the free settlers spoke about and advocated the extermination of the Aborigines. However, only a handful of settlers ever advocated anything like this. They spoke of it not in the 1820s but only in the immediate aftermath of Aboriginal killings of whites in 1830 and 1831. The historic record shows this prospect divided the settlers deeply, was always rejected by government and was never acted upon.

In the entire period from 1803 when the colonists first arrived, to 1834 when all but one family of Aborigines had been removed to Flinders Island, my calculation is that the British were responsible for killing only 120 of the original inhabitants. In all of Europe’s colonial encounters with the New Worlds of the Americas and the Pacific, the colony of Van Diemen’s Land was probably the site where the least indigenous blood of all was deliberately shed.

Since the publication of my book last November it has been the subject of an often vicious debate in the press. Let me point out how academic historians have responded. In the February edition of *Australian Book Review*, Alan Atkinson of the University of New England described an article of mine in *The Australian* (9 December 2002) as “heart-sinking”. That article was largely a list of examples of the abuse of scholarship that I have just given, showing invented incidents, concocted footnotes, altered documents and gross exaggeration of the Aboriginal death toll. What made Atkinson’s heart sink, however, was not this catalogue of misconduct. Instead he was dismayed that my critique was based on such an outdated concern as getting the facts right. “Windschuttle aims to take the discipline of History back to some golden age,” he lamented, “when it was all about facts.”

Atkinson is one of the contributors to the National Museum of Australia’s book *Frontier Conflict* just launched. That book’s contents come from a conference staged in December 2001, after I had pointed out that the centrepiece of one of the museum’s exhibits, the Bells Falls Gorge Massacre, which supposedly occurred near Bathurst in the 1820s, was a mythical event for which there was no contemporary evidence. The real purpose of the conference, however, was to publicly demonstrate that my criticisms made me the odd man out and that the overwhelming weight of academic opinion was against me. Significantly, other authors who have questioned the same orthodoxy, such as Rod Moran who exposed the myth of the Forrester River Massacre, were not invited to participate, even though the museum exhibit also gives a completely misleading account of that incident.

The museum’s conference papers respond mainly to articles I wrote in 2000 and 2001, but they reflect the same attitude their authors have taken in the past two months to my own book *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*. Few of them have been troubled by the mistakes of their colleagues. Instead, most have portrayed me as the bad guy for raising these issues. This “debate” has been revealing about the standards now prevailing within university history departments and about the consequences of the long-standing left-wing ascendancy in Australian historiography.

Some non-academic commentators were concerned at my book’s findings – for instance, Michael Duffy wrote in *The Courier Mail* (14 December 2002) – “allegations of scholarly fraud on this scale are virtually unknown”. But academic historians tried to dismiss them as unimportant. One contributor to the museum conference, Raymond Evans of the University of Queensland, wrote in *The Courier Mail* (20 December 2002) that all I had uncovered in the work of Henry Reynolds, Lyndall Ryan and Lloyd Robson was a “clutch of regrettable mistakes”, including no more than “half a dozen alleged gaffes” in

Ryan's book *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*. Ryan herself in *The Australian* (17 December 2002) described these as "a few minor errors that can easily be rectified".

However, as I've already indicated, Ryan's book – and I'm referring to her 1996 second edition which she claimed she had corrected – goes well beyond a few forgivable gaffes. There are at least 17 cases where she reported atrocities and other incidents for which there is no archival support, plus another seven cases where the number of Aborigines she claims were killed or captured is either outright false or exaggerated beyond belief. Lloyd Robson committed a similar degree of fabrication.

Ryan has had more than a year to answer my major charges, first made at the museum's "Frontier Conflict" conference, which she attended. Yet her published conference paper avoids them entirely. Her only substantive response (*The Australian*, 4–5 January 2003) has been to claim I left out one paragraph break in a passage quoted from her book. To this I plead guilty, but this trivial omission in no way distorted her meanings or the attribution of her footnotes to her text.

Michael Duffy also observed (*The Daily Telegraph*, 21 December 2002) that intellectuals on the left "have always had a remarkable ability to switch arguments as soon as they sense they are losing". The co-editor of the National Museum's anthology, Bain Attwood, confirmed this in *The Australian* (6 January 2003) where he claimed there was nothing new about my rebuttal of the Aboriginal genocide thesis. Academic historians had already abandoned the concept of overt genocide for more focused, local analyses, he said, citing the work of Reynolds, Ryan and Dirk Moses.

Hence my book was no exposé. "It's just old news from a tabloid historian. Only those ignorant of the academic historiography – or unwilling to go and read it – could believe otherwise." Moses himself followed Attwood (*The Australian*, 13 January 2003), arguing that since I was "unable to describe historical writing accurately" no one should trust anything I say.

It is true Reynolds has admitted the colonial authorities did not intend genocide, which I acknowledged in my conference paper and twice in my book. Instead, however, Reynolds claims it was the Tasmanian *settlers* who wanted to exterminate them, which is why I devoted my longest chapter to analysing and disproving this claim. Most of her readers have presumed Ryan's statement that Aborigines were "victims of a conscious policy of genocide" referred to conflict in early Van Diemen's Land. Not so, says Attwood. It merely denoted post-World War II assimilationist policies.

Unfortunately for Attwood and Moses, it is they who have trouble reading the literature. Ryan herself (*The Australian*, 17 December 2002) had already confirmed my interpretation, acknowledging that her

work “asserts that the Tasmanian Aborigines did indeed constitute a threat to British settlers, that the Black War *was* a ‘conscious policy of genocide’, though not in the end a successful one, as the Aborigines survived.” Anyway, the claim by academic historians that, instead of overt genocide, there were only “local genocides” or “indigenocide” or “genocidal moments” is simply terminological goalpost shifting, not a serious reappraisal of the orthodox story.

Let me finish by observing that the debate at the National Museum and in the press over the past two months suggests something is seriously wrong with academic history in this country. A small group of university teachers with overt left-wing political commitments believe they can decide among themselves what happened in this country’s past. When challenged, they resort not to debating the substantive issues but to demonising their critic and mocking his concern for facts. Historians, however, have a public responsibility to report the facts accurately and to cite their sources honestly. To pretend these things do not matter and that acceptable interpretations can be drawn from false or non-existent evidence is to abandon the pursuit of historical truth altogether.

It is important that we get this history right. The debate over what happened to the Aborigines is not only about them. Ultimately, it is about the character of the Australian nation and the calibre of the civilisation that Britain brought to these shores in 1788. Pretty obviously, my own work is a defence of the integrity of both the nation itself and the civilisation from which it derives. This is probably why I have been so vilified by my opponents. For some reason, they want to portray their own country as the moral equivalent of Hitler’s Germany or Stalin’s Russia. They are entitled to their opinion but they are not entitled to invent the facts on which that opinion is based. Nor are they entitled to deceive their students and the public at large, both white and black, as they have been doing over the past 30 years.