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**THE FABRICATION OF ABORIGINAL HISTORY**  
**Vol 1, Van Diemen's Land 1803-1847**

**By Keith Windschuttle**  
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**T**he aim of this book is clear in the Introduction: to dispatch '[t]he corruption'<sup>1</sup> of the story of the early relationship of Whites and Blacks in Australia, and in this volume Tasmania in particular, which 'has been accomplished by historians under the cloak of academic respectability'.<sup>2</sup> The flaw in Windschuttle's treatment is that he does not restrict himself to matters of historiography, but deviates into a justification for the destruction of the indigenous Tasmanians. This is Windschuttle's undoing, as he consequently falls into serious error of technique as an historian. His failings are more subtle than those alleged against the subjects of his criticism, but they are all the more dangerous and unpalatable for being served in the guise of impeccably footnoted scholarship.

If one wonders as to the need for 436 pages pursuing alleged error in other historians, again, the answer is provided in the Introduction: to overturn the consensus amongst literate Australians 'that the Aborigines suffered the equivalent of the Holocaust'.<sup>3</sup> The target historians are accused that they 'created the intellectual framework and gave it the imprimatur of academic respectability'.<sup>4</sup> The end result of this perversion of the truth, as Windschuttle sees it, was to be found in the High Court judgments in *Mabo* and *Wik* in 1992 and 1996 respectively.<sup>5</sup>

Windschuttle is by no means off the mark in reflecting on the importance of a consensus on historical events. Guttenplan's *The Holocaust on Trial*,<sup>6</sup> the story of David Irving's failed libel suit against a publisher and author for calling him a Holocaust denier, was played out against Irving's claim to be setting an important historical record straight, against the tide of an accepted view. However, the British

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<sup>1</sup> Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History — Van Diemen's Land* (2002) vol 1, 10.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid 2 and see also 9.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid 3, 6.

<sup>6</sup> D D Guttenplan, *The Holocaust on Trial* (2001).

court found that ‘Irving was motivated by a desire to present events in a manner consistent with his own ideological beliefs even if that involved distortion and manipulation of historical evidence’.<sup>7</sup> A question for any reader is whether Windschuttle, who exhibits motivation in asserting blame transference (the fate of the Tasmanians was their own fault),<sup>8</sup> has distorted or manipulated the evidence to accord with an ideology or a group interest.

I should say at the outset that in my view, Windschuttle’s sins are infinitely more subtle than Irving’s, consisting not of falsifying documents, but of evidentiary selection which is consistently exonerating of the Whites, and suppressing of the dramatic narrative that would attract sympathy to the plight of the Tasmanians. The purpose might be simplistically stated as getting High Court judges to perform their reasoning against a background of White non-culpability, or perhaps just allowing all of us (mainstream White society) to relax and take off our inappropriate black armbands.

If we accept the history writing standards of Sir Geoffrey Elton<sup>9</sup> as best modern practice, then Windschuttle at first blush passes a primary test with flying colours. He is discriminating in his use of sources, and deals with material now averaging 170 years of age with the greatest circumspection as to contemporary acceptability and connection to eyewitness observations. Whether, unvaried, this is an appropriate approach to the evidence is really the question.

Evidence in history and the law needs to be differently employed and assessed. But Windschuttle appears to think that history is a court room in which ‘not guilty’ is the verdict while any ‘reasonable doubt’ exists. This is the inference that arises from Windschuttle’s reliance on the plethora of Tasmanian Governmental records,<sup>10</sup> while disparaging the use of oral evidence elsewhere.

Three points, obvious, but important, need to be made about the archival records. First, they record actions substantially from a bureaucratic viewpoint. They do not necessarily reflect the views or actions of British settlers, which in nineteenth century Australian history were often wildly at variance with the policy of the British Government, which in turn reflected the pressure applied by philanthropic groups such as those connected with Exeter Hall in London.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, murdering

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid 283.

<sup>8</sup> K Windschuttle, above n 1, 359–97, 384–6 in particular.

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Elton, *The Practice of History* (1967).

<sup>10</sup> K Windschuttle, above n 1, 4–5.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Western Australia, *Parliamentary Debates*, Legislative Assembly, 19 October 1896, 1138, (B G Clarkson); British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia, vol 32, pp 119–20, Western Australia Constitution Bill, [UK Parliament] Select Committee Report with Minutes of Evidence and Appendix (1890), (Sir TC

natives was a capital offence, so settlers were unlikely to leave 'official' accounts of such practices, if such practices there were. And thirdly, to screen out all oral evidence as unreliable may create inherent biases in the telling of the story.

This is not because oral history is all that the Blacks have by way of an account, but that much of the early telling of Tasmania's story was passed orally amongst the Whites before being written down by chroniclers such as Robinson and Calder. In Chapters Five and Eight the oral evidence relied on by the 'orthodox historians' for the acceptance amongst the early settlers of what had transpired by way of massacres is written off by Windschuttle as unreliable.

Matters are certainly difficult for historians of another era, faced with a journal of record, the *Hobart Town Courier*, claiming a party had shot five natives in 1829, and captured one,<sup>12</sup> when Windschuttle is able to claim that the diary kept on the party reveals no shootings, and only the one capture. The braggadocio that was, on Windschuttle's analysis, the cause of the 'false' newspaper report (and the misreporting conceded by the military in the matter of the 'seventy' massacred at Campbell Town),<sup>13</sup> should itself be the cause of interest as to the mores of the Colony on relations with the natives, but Windschuttle restricts himself to writing off the veracity of the journal.

At this juncture one realises that there will never be a 'trial' of evidence regarding the fate of the Tasmanians, such as Irving brought on regarding the Holocaust. Eyewitnesses were available for the Irving-Lipstadt contest in London in 2000: there are none left to bear witness to nineteenth century Tasmania. The absence of living witnesses makes it all the more important that the story of the Tasmanians be understood by reference to ordinary human behaviour and motivations. In this context, Windschuttle's defining failure is that of imagination, which Elton thought of as the writer-historian's motive spirit, guided and channelled by learning and scholarship, in the light of human experience.<sup>14</sup>

Windschuttle appears to be quite disconnected from the indigenous people whose fate he is both describing and justifying. Arguments are consistently marshalled by a process of discarding any alternative evidence that might leave the settlers blameworthy, and instead of a broad view of the impact of White settlement (disease would ensure a tidal wave no matter the most benign intent) we are presented with a hectoring account of indigenous inadequacy. There is no confrontation at any stage with the issue of settler motive, which of course must

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Campbell for the colonists under question from Mr Wodehouse), for settler anger at the institution.

<sup>12</sup> K Windschuttle, above n 1, 154.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid 148.

<sup>14</sup> G Elton, above n 9, 108ff.

have been acquisition and profit making, initially played out against, and then supplanting the provision of a convict dumping ground.

Blandly asserting, as Windschuttle does, that '[t]he British colonization of this continent was the least violent of all Europe's encounters with the New World',<sup>15</sup> is an exercise in intellectual deceit. The visible inducements to pillage in the shape of Aztec and Inca gold, which inspired well-recorded Spanish cruelty, had no counterpart in Australia. The interaction between Blacks and settlers at an economic level in Australia would be far more subtle. It is curious that Windschuttle, a sometime Marxist, makes nothing of this, except to harp on about how the Tasmanian women prostituted themselves (or were sold by their men) to the Whites.

Windschuttle has passion to spare in his flaying of the delinquent historians, and for the fate of Whites slaughtered by Blacks, but curiously none for the indigenous Tasmanians, who appear with progressive infrequency in the course of this tale. Windschuttle on Truganini is illustrative. Truganini is the best known (only known?) Tasmanian Aborigine to most of modern Australia. Her sad eyed bust stands in every major public Art Gallery in the land. The sadness (also evident in the numerous photographic portraits taken in old age) should hardly be surprising in the light of her description of her life to the Tasmanian Government Surveyor, JE Calder.<sup>16</sup> While Truganini was a little girl, white men stabbed and killed her mother. When she was older and betrothed, two timber getters offered to row her to Bruny Island with her fiancé, Paraweena and another youth. Halfway across the Channel, which separates Tasmania from Bruny, the two sawyers threw the two males overboard, and when they tried to regain the boat, the Whites hacked off their hands as they clung to the gunwales.<sup>17</sup> Other writers note that Truganini's uncle was shot dead by Whites, and that her (tribal) sisters Lowhenunhe, Maggerleede and Murrerninghe were abducted by sealers and taken to Bass Strait. The last of these was killed by a sealer.

Truganini is introduced by Windschuttle as, in 1829, with tribal girlfriends, 'selling themselves for provisions to the eighty or ninety convicts and free men at Adventure Bay [on Bruny Island]'.<sup>18</sup> Not one word in the narrative about the circumstances of her life (she was born about 1812) growing up in the Channel country, the gateway to the Derwent River, watching the rising tide of White arrivals. But to be fair to Windschuttle, in a table appended to Chapter 10, 'Death Toll and Demise of the Aboriginal Population', (murders are not distinguished from

<sup>15</sup> K Windschuttle, above n 1, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Windschuttle cites Calder at length elsewhere: above n 1, see 36, 104 and 357–8, where Windschuttle says that 'James Erskine Calder deserves to be taken seriously'.

<sup>17</sup> E E Morris (ed), *Cassell's Picturesque Australasia* (1889) 562–3.

<sup>18</sup> K Windschuttle, above n 1, 203.

killings in self defence), four of the murders committed against Truganini's family are noted, three of them by relationship to her (the unattached murder is that committed by 'Bob Gambell, sealer', undated). Windschuttle tastefully presents us with the names of all the murderers where known in this table, but the names of the victims are not listed. Other writers have at least given us the names of Truganini's betrothed and her sister, killed by Gambell (or in other accounts, Gamble).

Windschuttle is meticulous regarding detail where he is settling a score, but blasé where Aborigines appear to be evaporating. At page 204 he recounts that 22 Aborigines, 'about half of those on [Bruny] island' died of disease in the course of 1829, but at page 206 refers to a total of more than 50 Bruny Islanders in early 1829, and there being only 17 by the end of that year. With all his meticulous accounting (only 118 'plausible killings' of Tasmanian natives, page 397), where did the more than 11 unaccounted Aborigines go in the above figures? The answer is brusquely supplied at page 383: as a result of the Bruny women selling themselves, they 'contracted venereal and other diseases' and, hey presto: 'Within months, the majority of those on Bruny Island were dead'. Well, that should have taught them to practise safe sex!

On his own analysis, Windschuttle determines that the number of Tasmanians could not originally have been greater than 2,000 (other historians have guessed about 5,000 to 7,000). By the mid-1830s, the Protector, Robinson, had transported all the remaining indigenous Tasmanians to Flinders Island. According to Windschuttle, they numbered 151, and a final six were found in the wild in 1842. If we add in Windschuttle's 'plausibly killed' of 118, and those women who went off with sealers (the author allows 50) we have accounted for 325. If we assumed that the Tasmanians did not reproduce at all after White settlement in 1803 (which is plainly not true) and that two in three would die in a state of nature over the 39 years from 1803 to 1842, we would be left with 660. In other words, approximately 330 souls have to be accounted for. These figures are no more addressed by Windschuttle than he addresses the reality of the impact of British colonial society on the Tasmanians.

True it is, we are informed of death rates from disease, presumably influenza, of 50 per cent in as little as 11 days when Aborigines were rounded up at Macquarie Harbour prior to transportation to Flinders Island, so 330 dead from new diseases would be quite possible, but it would have been preferable if this had been explored in the narrative. This is, of course, to play Windschuttle's game of clinical analysis. A remainder of 150 from 2,000 after just 30 years would seem a basis for sympathetic enquiry, but not from Windschuttle.

And that is really the heart of the matter. Windschuttle's purpose is to screw down the number of proved murders of Blacks by Whites, while stressing the number of Black atrocities that would justify the White behaviour. This is extraordinarily

blinker. The author betrays no apprehension that the charge of ‘holocaust’<sup>19</sup> which he is so strenuously, if disingenuously resisting, is in fact a distraction. The breast-beating that Lieutenant-Governor Arthur was not Adolf Hitler<sup>20</sup> becomes a device to obscure understanding of what actually happened in Tasmania.

It is true that British Government policy for the island, as throughout the Australian colonies, was intended to be, if not benign, then even-handed to the Indigenous inhabitants. Matters went badly for the Aborigines because the settlers, in Tasmania and elsewhere, were not readily amenable to the imposition of Imperial policy, and had their own agenda driven by the need to make profit. This was an Empire-wide phenomenon seen most recently in Rhodesia in 1965 and the years following.

As an example of Windschuttle’s technique, assumption on the part of all those pilloried by him as ‘orthodox historians’ that Truganini’s sisters were kidnapped by sealers is reduced in the new dispensation to:

At least three women from Bruny Island did end up with the sealers in Bass Strait and, although later reports claimed they were forcibly taken, [footnote reference to GA Robinson’s contemporary diary: the women are named] their removal was probably more an extension of their existing prostitution than outright abduction.<sup>21</sup>

Much is made of the possible attractions of sealers over the chauvinism and brutal behaviour of the Aboriginal men (such attraction obviously undercuts any generalised abduction thesis), but the account would have been so much more truthful if the story of Truganini’s sisters had been spelt out as ending with a one in three murder rate.

This demolition of ‘abduction’ on the basis of probability relating to prostitution emerges in the midst of the most tendentious material in the book. We are reminded that Truganini’s father did nothing to stop her ‘prostituting herself with convict whalers on Bruny Island in 1829’,<sup>22</sup> and then the author savages the Tasmanian Aboriginal men for acting the pimp to their women for short-term advantage, being the acquisition of White food or dogs. Having pronounced the males to be the root of the Tasmanians’ problems, the race is dispatched ‘as active agents in their own demise’.<sup>23</sup> The ‘real tragedy’ for the Tasmanians was not British colonisation, but that their society was ‘internally dysfunctional’, while at

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid 9.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid 385.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid 384–5.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid 386.

the same time 'incompatible with the looming presence of the rest of the world'.<sup>24</sup> In a final demonstration of the unsuitability of these people for the modern world, we are informed that the Tasmanians failed to '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'.<sup>25</sup>

The flaw in this analysis is not merely its lack of human sympathy, (or assumptions about the sexual mores amongst the Indigenous when dealing with strangers), but that the author's most trenchant attacks on others for the sins of anachronism ('guerrilla warfare') and sloppy, sentimental and Eurocentric thought, come back to bite him. The 'orthodox historians' are mocked for never having found a statement from a tribal Black that expressed 'a patriotic or nationalist sentiment'.<sup>26</sup> The point of the reference was that without a sense of nationalism, the claim for guerrilla warfare by the Blacks could not stand.

This is the sort of quibbling pedantry which mars what could otherwise be a most useful study. Just 13 pages earlier, Windschuttle recorded the Black murdering Esther Gough in 1828 (during an 'incident' in the Black War), when begged not to kill her children: 'No you white bitch, we'll kill you all.'<sup>27</sup> This sounds like a pretty determined statement of universal intent and, as such, having political content. If only the Blacks had flown their own flag of the People's Black Republic of Tasmania, so Windschuttle could see they were acting in a manner he can recognise and categorise. Of course, as tribal Indigenous they didn't fly a flag, but that is neither here nor there as to whether, in groups, they resisted encroachment onto their previously assumed territory, although such territory is not allowed to them either (see below). As it happens, Blacks had notionally flown just such a flag of independence, massacred all the French Whites and formed themselves into a community and then a State in 1804 in Haiti, but of course they had been exposed (as slaves) to European civilisation for well over a century.<sup>28</sup>

Windschuttle is particularly outrageous in his assertions that Aborigines cannot be described in White terms in their reactions to loss.<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere,<sup>30</sup> Truganini described how her father would grieve for his murdered wife, 'when my mother would come to him'. Windschuttle is so busy cataloguing the deficiencies of the Indigenous, and the folly of those who attempt to understand their now dead culture, that he quite glosses over the failure of settler society to apply its own

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid 99.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid 86.

<sup>28</sup> R Segal, *The Black Diaspora* (1995) 126.

<sup>29</sup> K Windschuttle, above n 1, 104.

<sup>30</sup> See n 17 above.

standards to its own. Where is the catalogue of Whites charged, convicted and hanged for the murders (prior to the declaration of martial law in 1828) which even Windschuttle lists in his Chapter 10 table?

Windschuttle is masterful in demolishing starvation as a motive for Aboriginal aggression, but the ‘starving native’ thesis is derided without the slightest recognition that an impact on the scale of the settlement after 1803 would inevitably result in extreme dislocation to a fragile society, otherwise capable of equilibrium in isolation. Similarly, and it is a further example of quibbling pedantry, Aboriginal attachment to land is disparaged by reference to European concepts of ownership<sup>31</sup> but without reflection on whether the Tasmanians had a different style of relationship to land. The pedantry is quibbling because at the end of the day the land which the Tasmanians had utilised, if not owned, was no longer available to them because of use by British settlers. If nothing else, the record shows that the Blacks simply did not like being encroached on. (Unlike, one can hardly fail to note, more advanced societies, such as twenty-first century Australia, with its open borders, ‘hospitality hotels’, and come-hither immigration policy for all comers).

But Windschuttle’s most breathtaking moral assertions rest on his claim that Tasmanian Aborigines had a mental universe that could not be said to contain ‘humanity and compassion’, as ‘[t]hese terms come not from Aboriginal but from European culture’.<sup>32</sup> Windschuttle may be qualified to venture into comparative philosophy and sociology (I don’t know), but his references to the Enlightenment and Christianity are insufficient to sustain sole rights for Europeans in the field of emotions and social reactions.

Twenty and more years ago when Zimbabwe attained full suffrage, a white Zimbabwean woman wrote of finding herself hidden from view from a group of Africans at a particularly scenic vista, and listening to hear if the Africans had any sense of the aesthetics of the view. She admitted to guilt in her assumptions that Africans could not experience the world as Europeans did, and wrote of her surprise in hearing the group discuss the view just like Whites. Claims to exclusivity of the indicia of humanity need to be made with great care and clearly evidenced. I don’t think that Windschuttle’s description of White women and children being killed by Blacks will get him there: on his own listing of Black deaths, a considerable number of native women were murdered by Whites (ie not killed in self defence), and it seems unlikely that no children died with them. The Europeans’ exposure to Enlightenment and Christianity did not seem to insulate them from the propensity for murdering women and children.

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<sup>31</sup> K Windschuttle, above n 1, 110, 404.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid 406.

This is all a pity, as Windschuttle's work in detailing the views of 14 prominent Tasmanian settlers expressed in a questionnaire in 1830 is valuable. Typically he overplays his hand by chastising the 'orthodox' for asserting that the views of these worthies were all for extermination. They plainly were not, and indeed William Barnes wrote of the depredations committed by the Whites on a grand scale and the need for communication, but John Hudspeth, a surgeon who had viewed too many mutilated White bodies was not alone in advocating extirpation. The point is that the compromise in views became the policy of the Government, to remove the remaining Tasmanians, and that policy of course suited the landowners of the island. Extermination or removal — it mattered not; both went to the departure of the Tasmanians.

The reflection on Tasmanian male indolence and the custom of violently overbearing their women folk (and the French navigator Baudin who performed the Marseillaise for Bruny Island women in 1802 reported on that state of affairs) provides food for thought as to the strength that any society might gain by community of effort between the sexes and the importance of civility. But again, Windschuttle spoils the reception of his writing by his swaggering cultural superiority. He cites an article by Jared Diamond, but fails to acknowledge that author's book, *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1997), or Tim Flannery's *The Future Eaters* (1994), which deal at length with the inevitable result of the geographical isolation that the Tasmanians had endured. The minatory tone in which Windschuttle herds the Tasmanians off history's page is quite inappropriate.

*Fabrication* presents a catalogue of a people's social inadequacies, indeed behavioural defects, juxtaposed with the story of that people's loss of ... it can only be existence, as Windschuttle refuses to concede that they ever held any land. It is so easy to sigh that the culturally backward must inevitably give way to the socially and technologically sophisticated. Such benign resignation completely misses the point that the incoming group profits from displacing the former inhabitants. These are not cosmic forces meeting by grand accident. One group of humans supplants another, and, by the standards of contemporary culture, should be able to accept responsibility for what it has done. Herbert Spencer and Social Darwinism have been out of vogue since at least 1945, and for very good reasons.

Why bother with this academic squabbling when one can read Martin Flanagan's *In Sunshine or in Shadow*<sup>33</sup> with its lively accounts of those who knew Truganini. Are we to imagine that Flanagan's youthful wonderment in love-making on Bruny Island was not also felt by Truganini? Windschuttle leaves the impression that she greeted Robinson 'Well, hello sailor', which is a very different thing. And what evidence has Windschuttle for his assertions that the Tasmanians produced no wise men (in the one generation given to them to elevate from 10,000 years of isolation

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<sup>33</sup> Martin Flanagan, *In Sunshine or in Shadow* (2002).

[since the sea rose to cut them off] to deal with the most technologically advanced people of the early nineteenth century)? Read *Community of Thieves*<sup>34</sup> for the story of the last of the Tasmanians not to have European genes in her makeup. Fanny Cochrane Smith<sup>35</sup> married a Hobart man, and ran a boarding house there, and a small farm in the Huon Valley, celebrating the juncture of her native traditions and the culture into which she had married. Everything about Fanny sounds happy and wise, down to the grant to her of 300 acres by the Tasmanian Parliament in 1889. One of her great grandsons is Rodney Dillon, at the time of writing the Tasmanian Commissioner on ATSIC.

But that leaves us with the original question: why bother to write this book? The author has been candid about his concern that the ‘orthodox’ have gained a stranglehold on the perception of Black-White relations in Australian history, and that that matters when senior decision makers such as members of the High Court are affected in their assumptions. It is reasonable to infer that Windschuttle hopes to construct a new and radically different consensus, in which Whites bear no moral obloquy for the fate of Native Australians, and indeed, one in which those Natives are entirely responsible for any misfortune that has befallen them. My concern is that such a view of history suits a small number of very influential decision makers in this country, most obviously managers of resource extraction companies: the miners, major pastoralists, and senior politicians of very set views, most obviously the Prime Minister. Why Windschuttle wants to be the flag-bearer for these people is his business: the consensus in the months since this book was published seems to be that Windschuttle has a compulsion for the limelight associated with controversy.

Conrad published *Heart of Darkness* in 1902, and using the imagination available to a novelist and of which Windschuttle is so scornful, had Marlow say: ‘The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much’.<sup>36</sup> I can hardly wait to read Windschuttle’s next two proposed volumes on the Fabrication of Aboriginal History. Can he go on writing at such length while ensuring he does not look into his subject too much?

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<sup>34</sup> C Pybus, *Community of Thieves* (1991).

<sup>35</sup> Her existence is noted by Windschuttle, above n 1, 435.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1902) 13.