

Just like a 'nun's picnic'?

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In a memorable phrase comparing Australia with other places settled by the European empires, Claudio Veliz has described British colonisation of this country as 'like a nun's picnic'. The occasion was his launching of Keith Windschuttle's new book, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One: Van Diemen's Land, 1803-1847*.

What kind of a nun's picnic was this? Unpredictably, Windschuttle's book confirms that, at least in this part of Australia, the experience of colonisation was devastating for the Aboriginal inhabitants. For even on the most demanding of historical standards as applied by himself, the rate of death from violence in the first thirty years of Tasmanian settlement was extraordinarily high. Extrapolated to the Australian mainland, the rate of violent death in Tasmania delivers an unexpected challenge to what has become the Windschuttle counter-revisionist account.

In a detailed accounting of 'plausible' documented deaths, Windschuttle argues that 118 died in the three decades after the first documented death in 1804. To understand the significance of the figure of 118 deaths we have to remember what is the appropriate population base. Most Australians have been touched in some way or another by the Bali bombings – know someone who was in some way connected with the many casualties and deaths. There were 88 Australian deaths, in a population of nearly 20 million people. What was the population of Tasmanian Aborigines which suffered this impact of 118 plausible deaths? Windschuttle provides a helpful discussion on just this point. According to Windschuttle, historians bent on emphasising the catastrophic impact of colonisation have grossly exaggerated the pre-contact population – the pre-colonial population of Tasmania concludes Windschuttle should be regarded as less than 2000. Others may contest the argument – but his case is defensible.

Let us start with that figure of 2000 and develop a population count that takes account of the decline through disease and lowered fertility, consistent with Windschuttle's account. If we use his population figures to calculate the rates of violent death at the hands of settlers, then in the thirty years of first contact (1804-34) the chances of a Tasmanian Aborigine dying a violent death were 365.9 per 100,000 population. On the hypothetical assumption of a stable, not declining, population (Windschuttle's average deaths of about 4 per year in a population remaining stable at 2,000 across the period) the death rate by violence would be no less than 190 per 100,000 per year.

What was the rate in the worst years of violence? In a passage dedicated to showing that colonists had no incentive to cover up deaths, Windschuttle argues that after 1828 'the documentary record does not show a sudden increase in the number of killings by whites' (p. 361). It's not clear what documentary record he is referring to but the one in his book documenting 118 plausible deaths shows quite the opposite (pp. 387-397). Counting only Windschuttle's 'plausible' deaths for this period it appears that 68 of the 118 deaths occurred in the period after November 1828. On the plausible assumption, consistent with Windschuttle's arguments, that the population by 1828 may have been less than 500, the rate of violent death in the years from the declaration of martial law (1828-1834) would have been over 2,000 per 100,000.

Whichever way we look at it, these are very high chances of dying a violent death. In one of the world's most violent societies, the United States, the average homicide rate for the last quarter century has been between 9 and 10 per 100,000. Historians of violence in early modern Europe are astonished at rates of violent death of between 10 and 60 per 100,000. In Tasmania in 1996 35 people were shot dead at Port Arthur – that sent the annual homicide rate in the state to 8.4 per 100,000. The death rate during the seven years of the Tasmanian Black War, based on Windschuttle's own figures of plausible deaths, is more than three times the mortality risk of the Australian population in the First World War when over 60,000 soldiers died.

If we extrapolate to the Australian mainland these colonial Tasmanian rates of violent death, then our estimates of the numbers of Aborigines killed by colonists in the first thirty years of settlement fall in the range 11,000 to 44,000. This estimate depends on whether we take a low (200,000) or high (750,000) estimate of the pre-contact Indigenous population. Is extrapolation from Van Diemen's Land to mainland Australia warranted? Well, Windschuttle concludes at p. 398 of his book that 'in all of Europe's colonial encounters with the New Worlds of the Americas and the Pacific', Van Diemen's Land 'was probably the site where the least indigenous blood of all was deliberately shed'. One can only assume that the succeeding volumes will sustain the argument, and demonstrate that on the mainland of Australia, more blood was shed than in Van Diemen's Land.

On Windschuttle's figures we might conclude that Reynold's estimate of 20,000 slain Aborigines across Australia was too low. Windschuttle has asked us to take a new view of the Australian frontier. On the evidence he has produced so far, this was less like a 'nun's picnic' and more like a Port Arthur massacre repeated over and over.

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