

Criminals and pimps: Keith Windschuttle and Tasmanian Aborigines

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Recent comment on Keith Windschuttle's *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* concentrates on the book's claims that both Henry Reynolds and Lyndall Ryan deliberately fabricated stories of frontier conflict, thereby greatly exaggerating the Aboriginal death toll. The purpose of this fabrication, according to Windschuttle, was to support a subversive political agenda of Aboriginal separatism and the generation of white self-hate.

Although bordering on the irrational, these are very serious charges. They are at the core of Windschuttle's book, and it is important they are rigorously scrutinised in both the press and scholarly journals.

Frontier killing, however, is not the only important issue raised by Windschuttle's work. The other key issue, perhaps *the* key issue, is Windschuttle's shameless and unsavory denigration of the character of Tasmanian Aboriginal society and culture. Both his book and several papers published prior to the book's release are littered with claims about the character of Tasmanian Aboriginal society that are not supported with evidence or which demonstrate either a broad ignorance or a deliberate misunderstanding of the scholarly work in Tasmanian Aboriginal Studies.

It is important to name this denigration and reject it. It underpins the book's arguments about frontier conflict, it is a major literary device in Windschuttle's work, and it has the potential to inflame racist attitudes to present-day Aborigines across Australia. And it needs to be pointed out that while Windschuttle habitually bleats that he is unfairly castigated by those historians whose reputations he seeks to destroy, his own work relies largely on systematic character assassination. His present targets are Lyndall Ryan, Henry Reynolds, and Tasmanian Aborigines in the past and present.

Windschuttle's arguments about the capacities and character of Tasmanian Aborigines are largely based on his view that they were the most primitive society known to man. The primitive claim rests largely on his perception that the Tasmanians' material culture was the most primitive known to man. Windschuttle knows this claim is now strongly disputed. He has consulted a small part of recent archaeological scholarship that effectively challenges 'the most primitive ever' claim in a range of technological and economic contexts. But with the same contempt he displays for Ryan and Reynolds, Windschuttle dismisses these arguments as politically-motivated rationalisation.

One tired old claim repeated by Windschuttle in support of his ‘most primitive ever’ claim is the idea that the Tasmanians did not have the technology, the skill or the intelligence to devise a method for lighting a fire. This is the point commonly wheeled out to support ‘the most primitive ever’ claim. Windschuttle recently told a Launceston journalist that even Neanderthal man could light a fire, which, in Windschuttle’s mind, locates Tasmanian Aboriginal culture somewhere on the other side of the Stone Age.

Windschuttle’s source for the view that the Tasmanians could not light fire is the 1966 publication *Friendly Mission*, Brian Plomley’s account of George Robinson’s journals. Presumably Windschuttle did not bother to check if any subsequent work had been done on this topic. Had he done so, he would have discovered a 1973 paper by German anthropologist Gisela Volger that argues the percussion method was used, a 1991 paper by myself that supports and consolidates Volger’s arguments, an admission by Plomley in his 1993 book *The General* that in all likelihood he himself was mistaken on this point, a recent paper by Monash University biologist Beth Gott that further consolidates the percussion view, and overwhelming linguistic evidence for the percussion method currently being advanced by University of Tasmania MA candidate John Taylor.

In making ‘the most primitive ever’ claim, Windschuttle is not practising forensic scholarship. He is renovating a colonial ideology that decreed that Tasmanian Aborigines were the missing link between apes and man. This idea formed a central plank of what is known to scholars as scientific racism. Scientific racism was the lens through which people of colour were viewed, not only in Australia, but also in much of Europe, the United States and South Africa from about the 1860s. Its ideological progenitors, the so-called Great Chain of Being for example, dated from at least the time of Christ and placed Australian Aborigines at the bottom of the evolutionary scale. Scientific racism reached its pinnacle in the Nazi extermination camps during World War II, after which it became widely discredited.

In the context of frontier conflict, Windschuttle characterises the Aborigines as intellectually and organisationally incapable of mounting an effective military challenge to their invaders. They were robbers and murderers with a natural criminal inclination.

The ‘disorganised criminal’ view owes more to English philosopher John Hobbes’ description of Australian Aborigines as nasty, brutish and short than it does to credible evidence. The criminal view is a re-run of the colonial concept of savagery, a European concept with a long and nasty history. Much of the justification for the enslavement of black Africans in America, for example, was based on the view that all blacks were savages.

The concept of savagery was rife, although not universal, in early Tasmania. A large number of sources support this claim. Typically, Aborigines were seen as violent, treacherous, bloodthirsty, cowardly, and godless. Windschuttle accepts and modernises this view.

But compare Windschuttle's view with that of Governor George Arthur. In 1833, three years after hostilities had largely ceased and the Aboriginal survivors had been incarcerated on Flinders Island Arthur reflected on the dispossession in this way (emphasis added):

The necessity of driving a simple but **warlike** and, as it now appears, **noble-minded** race from their native hunting grounds is a measure so distressing that I am willing to make almost any prudent sacrifice that may tend to **compensate the injuries** the Government is unwillingly and unavoidably the instrument of inflicting,

At least Arthur had the grace to acknowledge his enemy, accept responsibility for the dispossession, and admit the need for compensation.

Windschuttle's claim that many Aboriginal deaths resulted from the men selling their women into prostitution is a calculated guess. We will never have a body count, nor an accurate tabulation of the various causes of death, which, I might add, does include credible evidence of numerous multiple killings.

There is some evidence that Aboriginal men, especially along the northern and south-eastern coastlines, used women as trading commodities. Some of this trading was culturally-sanctioned, some of it was not. Sometimes women willingly participated, sometimes they did not. But no credible documentary evidence is available for widespread selling of women into prostitution.

There is, however, strong evidence that the abduction of women by colonists was practised across the island for much of the period to 1820. Indeed, the 1830 Aborigines Committee found that the abduction of women was a major cause of attacks against colonists by Aborigines.

Windschuttle's characterisation of Aboriginal men as pimps who sold their women into prostitution ignores the substantial and credible documentary evidence of abduction. This characterisation is little more than a post-modern regurgitation of the colonial concept of savagery.

In the final pages of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Windschuttle claims it is absurd for present-day Tasmanian Aborigines to claim land rights as compensation for past injustices. He argues that present-day Tasmanian Aborigines are descended from the same race of murderers and rapists that Reynolds and Ryan condemn as perpetrators of massacres.

The claim that present-day Aborigines are the descendants of perpetrators of massacres is a rash generalisation. Windschuttle has applied the popular

stereotype of sealers as incorrigible rapists and murderers to all the European men who formed long-term relationships with Aboriginal women, thereby producing the Bass Strait community of Aboriginal Islanders. Present-day Aborigines are descended not from an abstracted race of rapists and murderers, but from a small number of identifiable individuals with personal and family histories. No doubt some of them were nasty men, but some were not. Take, as one example, Thomas Beedon.

Beedon was a London Jew, belonged to a family of jewellers, and was transported to Van Diemen's Land for mutiny from the British navy. He was financially supported by his London family and had the means to live where he chose, which was with his partner Emmerenna and their daughter Lucy on Gun Carriage Island. When George Robinson arrived at Gunn Carriage in 1831 and forcibly removed Beedon and several other sealers then living with Aboriginal women, Beedon (and several others) successfully petitioned Arthur to have their partners and children returned. In the 1850s Beedon was prominent in Islander claims for land as compensation for their dispossession from the Tasmanian mainland. And in the 1850s he provided funds to his daughter Lucy to enable her to establish a school on Badger Island.

Windschuttle also argues that Aborigines do not deserve land-rights because they have fabricated their Aboriginality. They are not 'real', or 'authentic'. This argument for a fabricated Aboriginality is simplistic in the extreme. It fails to take account of the complex ways in which identities are formed. It assumes that identities are fundamentally matters of race; and it fails to recognise that cultural identities are as much a product of family, place and history as they are of descent.

Windschuttle's work is replete with misconceptions, distortions, character assassinations and unsupportable generalisations of the type I have outlined above. He is paranoid about the word genocide and he nurtures the delusion that he alone can find historical truth.

Windschuttle's book is well named. It is, as the title claims, a fabrication of Aboriginal history.

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