

# Rendering the past less unpalatable

Keith Windschuttle's crude  
and politicised thesis fails the  
history test, argues Dirk Moses

**K**EITH Windschuttle's *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* has caused a greater sensation than any work on the Australian past since Robert Hughes's *The Fatal Shore* in 1986. It is not because he is the first to write on genocide. When Alison Palmer and Henry Reynolds published carefully argued books on the subject recently, they barely caused a ripple.

Windschuttle gets attention because he has a simple message many Anglo-Australians want to hear: historians have concocted the evidence of large-scale frontier conflict between the British and Aborigines in Tasmania. There was no frontier war, no Aboriginal resistance. There is no reason, therefore, to wear a black armband. We can all feel relaxed and comfortable about the past. The subtext of Windschuttle's book is, then, highly political.

Windschuttle's allegation about the thin evidentiary basis of some accounts of frontier violence will need to be answered by those with a knowledge of the Tasmanian archives. But who can gainsay the basic point that the indigenous peoples were violently dispossessed of their land? Other aspects of the book are highly tendentious.

His accusations of documentary fraud confuse inadvertent error with systematic falsification of the sources. Bain Attwood also showed on this page last Monday that Windschuttle has misrepresented specialist academic historians' work and failed to back up with evidence his claims regarding the historiography of genocide. If he is unable to describe historical writing accurately, what reason, one might ask, is there to trust his account of the past?

The weaknesses of the work stem from its author's misunderstanding of the culture and documentary practices of the historical discipline. This is not surprising. A freelance writer with no postgraduate training in the discipline, Windschuttle is a self-conscious outsider taking on university historians. By publishing his book with the family press rather than an academic house, he has avoided the quality control process that guarantees originality and intellectual seriousness.

This was also the case with his first attack on historians. *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering Our Past* (1994) polemicised against the "infiltration" of other disciplines into history. In the 1990s, he became deeply worried by the proliferation of historical writing by and about people who had been largely written out of the past: women, gays, ethnic



minorities.

The discipline has been deeply enriched by the proliferation of voices and methods, but

Windschuttle felt it was being hijacked by a new multicultural elite that uses the education system and government agencies (such as the National Museum and ABC) to

brainwash Australians into accepting a "postcolonial" view of the world: namely, that the country's Euro-British heritage is racist and genocidal and should be abandoned for a republican, Asian-oriented, polyglot utopia.

Although this grotesque caricature exists in his mind rather than reality, Windschuttle has made it his mission to rescue the past and present from these "ideologues". How? By returning history writing to the supposedly apolitical facts and limiting himself to the concepts in the sources, he will produce an ideology-free account of the past. That is his project in *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*.

Windschuttle's obtuse rejection of contemporary historical methods leads him into grave error. To begin with, he becomes the prisoner of past perspectives, adopting the mentality of the Tasmanian settlers and repeating their prejudices about the Aborigines, as Raymond Evans and Shayne Breen have pointed out. Consequently, critics such as fellow conservatives Roger Sandall, Ron Brunton and Peter Coleman have been dismayed by Windschuttle's striking lack of empathy with the terrible fate of the indigenous Tasmanians.

Another example of his refusal to utilise modern concepts in analysing the past is his rejection of the term "genocide" in the context of Australian history because it was not current in the 19th century. On this logic we could not refer to the Nazi murder of European Jews in the 1940s as the Holocaust because that term was not then used in this sense.

Then there is the misleading conflation of genocide and the Holocaust. Genocide is a crime in international law and encompasses a number of techniques of extermination in addition to mass killing. The Holocaust is an extreme form of genocide. No Australian historian contends there was an Australian holocaust. But many of them are conducting a sophisticated debate about genocide in Australia and other colonial situations. True to Windschuttle's tabloid tone, there is no engagement with this growing literature in *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, even though he has been made aware of much of it.

Furthermore, as will become in obvious in the forthcoming collection by Attwood and Stephen Foster, *Frontier Conflict*, Windschuttle insists on a highly idiosyncratic standard of evidence for frontier violence. Only direct witnesses can be used; second-hand accounts are inadmissible. Yet, much of what we know about the way the Holocaust camps worked, for example, is based on such accounts and no one except deniers is complaining.

In the unsuccessful libel case David Irving brought against Deborah Lipstadt for her accusation that he denied the Holocaust, the presiding judge explicitly endorsed the way historians make inferences based on the "convergence" of various sources of information, whether first or second hand.

Windschuttle needs to learn that professional historians produce knowledge in dialogue, not by attacking one another's integrity and suing others when they talk back. He will get a better hearing among them when he realises that academic work is a serious enterprise of rigorously contesting interpretations rather than waging "culture wars".

Dirk Moses teaches history at the University of Sydney. He is the editor of *Genocide and Settler Society*, to be published by Berghahn Books, New York, later this year.



**Tendentious:**  
Windschuttle's book