

New book published in controversy over Australian Aboriginal history

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A yearlong controversy over Australian Aboriginal history has entered a new stage with the launch in Melbourne and Sydney of a new book, *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (*Black Inc, Melbourne, 2003, ISBN: 0975076906*).

The book is a collection of essays written to refute the allegations made in a 2002 work *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* by right-wing author Keith Windschuttle. Windschuttle has asserted that major Australian historians since the 1960s, to whom he refers as the “orthodox school”, have deliberately fabricated or exaggerated evidence of massacres and ill treatment of the indigenous people by the early British colonialists. His book—the first volume of an intended three—specifically attacks those historians who have written on the fate of the Aborigines on the island of Tasmania, off the southeast coast of mainland Australia. The island’s Aboriginal population of between 4,000 and 7,000 was virtually wiped out or relocated to the remote Flinders Island by 1835, just 32 years after the arrival of the first British settlers.

Damning the “orthodox history” as “white guilt for genocide”, Windschuttle argued that the destruction of Tasmania’s Aborigines could not be attributed to British colonial rule, but was the result of disease, and the savagery, ignorance and backwardness of the hunter-gatherer Aboriginal people themselves.

Windschuttle has dismissed as ideologically-motivated exaggerations the accepted estimates of the number of Aborigines killed by settlers. Employing the narrowest standard possible, he only accepts as evidence of “deliberate killings” those cases that were publicly reported or recorded. He has categorised the bitter clashes in Tasmania during the early 1830s—known as the Black War—as “a minor crime wave by Europeanised black bushrangers [criminals]

and an outbreak of robbery, assault and murder by tribal Aborigines”.

In a comment in the *Australian* newspaper last December, Windschuttle declared: “True, the full-blood Tasmanian Aborigines did die out in the 19th century. But this was almost entirely a consequence of two factors: the long 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 such an extent that they lost the ability to reproduce themselves.”

Windschuttle’s work has gone far beyond the realms of an academic debate or discussion. He does not simply disagree with the interpretations of historians but accuses them of outright lies and deception. Moreover, he lauds the settlement of Tasmania as among the most benign in the history of colonialism and alleges that those historians who have documented the extermination of the Aboriginal people have promoted a false equation between Australia’s colonisation and the Nazi Holocaust.

The main conduit for Windschuttle’s accusations has been the media, above all the *Australian* and other publications owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Limited. Right-wing columnists and talk-show hosts have promoted his views and his book as a major contribution to an understanding of Australia’s past. Prime Minister John Howard made clear his sympathy for Windschuttle by awarding him a centenary medal for services to history.

In response, Melbourne academic Robert Manne commissioned 18 historians and other academics to answer Windschuttle’s accusations. The compilation, *Whitewash*, was formally launched on August 23 at the Melbourne Writers Festival, and a subsequent event was held in Sydney on September 2 at the inner-city

bookstore Gleebooks.

Manne told the Sydney launch: “The thing that links [orthodox historians] is what I think has linked... ‘civilised opinion’ ever since the 1830s, and that is that some terrible tragedy happened. What people understood by that was that not only was the way of life of a people of tens of thousands of years, but the people itself was... more or less destroyed... By the 1870s, as they used to say, no full-blooded Tasmanian Aboriginal was alive... That is the ‘orthodox school’.”

Manne described Windschuttle’s *Fabrication* as “one of the most astonishingly reactionary books that has been published in Australia for a very long time and taken seriously”. He declared he was “genuinely astonished” at the support given to it by the *Australian* newspaper and indicted the Murdoch press for providing Windschuttle with an audience he would not otherwise have obtained.

The Sydney launch was also addressed by *Whitewash* contributors: historian Lyndall Ryan, whose book *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* is one of the main targets of Windschuttle’s attacks; Dirk Moses, a historian at the University of Sydney; and academics Martin Krygier and Robert van Krieken.

Ryan spoke of her shock that her 1981 book “would be seen to be so contentious and so threatening to Australians in the twenty-first century” and characterised the campaign to promote Windschuttle’s charges as “a very vicious campaign in which no holds have been barred”. She referred to journalists contacting her vice-chancellor demanding to know if and when she would be dismissed from her academic position. In *Whitewash*, Ryan responds in detail to Windschuttle’s accusations that her earlier work fabricated evidence of killings of Aborigines.

Dirk Moses used the book launch to outline the central theme of his contribution “Revisionism and Denial”. Moses placed Windschuttle’s work in the context of a wave of nationalist historical revisionism taking place in a number of countries, including the US, Ireland, Germany and Japan.

Moses referred to the similarities between the narrow standards of evidence used by Windschuttle and those being employed by other revisionists, pointing to the “forensic notion of direct eyewitnesses or official confessions of guilt”. This definition was used by Holocaust deniers such as David Irving to argue that

“because there are no direct surviving eyewitnesses of gas chambers... therefore they did not exist or we cannot prove they exist”. Japanese revisionist historians have likewise dismissed the oral testimony of women who claim they were forced into prostitution by the Japanese military, demanding instead that official reports and records admitting to the crime be produced.

Martin Krygier pointed out that Windschuttle was “determined, desperate at times” to purge the history of Australian settlement of anything negative. Windschuttle had declared in the introduction to his book that at stake “is our understanding of the character of our nation and of the calibre of the British civilisation that we brought here in 1788”. Krygier described Windschuttle’s method as “setting up an extreme dichotomy” between viewing the settlers as the equivalent of Nazis or viewing the crimes against the Aboriginal people as “much ado about nothing”. Krygier insisted: “One should always ask when asked ‘do you think it was like the Nazis or are we home free’ if there is another alternative.”

The defence of historical truth against Windschuttle’s falsifications is a critical issue for the Australian and international working class. Over the coming weeks the *World Socialist Web Site* will be publishing further material on this controversy.



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