

## among **historians**

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Trades Hall, Melbourne, 16 March 2003. An expectant buzz fills the auditorium. The capacity crowd, several hundred strong and mainly under thirty, is anticipating a spectacle: a contest between two members of a profession not otherwise known for staging fights in the public arena. This bout could have been billed ‘The Ugly v. The Righteous’. The Ugly is Keith Windschuttle, author of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*.<sup>1</sup> The Righteous is Patricia Grimshaw, Professor of History at the University of Melbourne.

Windschuttle’s argument is deceptively simple. He says that historians such as Henry Reynolds, Lloyd Robson and Lyndall Ryan have grossly overestimated the number of Tasmanian Aborigines killed by settlers in the first half of the nineteenth century. According to his calculations, ‘only’ 120 Aborigines were killed by whites—‘mostly in self-defence or in hot pursuit of Aborigines who had assaulted white households’. Windschuttle argues that the historians of colonial Tasmania have produced histories to further a political agenda. They got away with it because nobody checked their sources. When he, Windschuttle, went to the Archives Office of Tasmania, he found ‘some of the most hair-raising breaches of historical practice imaginable’. His allegations are serious. But those who expected him to take wild swings and resort to biting off a chunk of his opponent’s ear would be disappointed. Windschuttle’s attack has been almost clinical.

Patricia Grimshaw responds to Windschuttle’s accusations with indignation. Was not she the one whom the partisan audience expected to lecture the impostor about what history is and how it is done? She endorses what appears to form part of the rules of engagement—rules that had earlier been enunciated by her opponent: ‘I, too, believe that history is the pursuit of the truth about the past’. That endorsement puts Grimshaw at a disadvantage. As

she is not a historian of colonial Tasmania, she is not in a position to argue about the use of *specific* archival evidence. If Windschuttle had punched below the belt, she could have retreated to the high moral ground. But as he purports to be a stickler for the rules (and claims to defend those rules against cheats), Grimshaw seemingly cannot invoke her authority as incumbent of the Max Crawford Chair of History to fault Windschuttle's historical practice, and instead cries foul over the ease with which he communicates his findings to a wide audience. But could Windschuttle be blamed for publishing *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* with Macleay Press, which he owns? Could Grimshaw be blamed for drawing a professorial salary, and her employer for routinely subsidising academic publications? References to Windschuttle's personal wealth detract from a more important issue: his claim that Ryan and others were careless in their use of written evidence is persuasive. If it were true, would that validate his overall argument about the orthodox writing of the settler–Indigenous past?

If judged according to the rules of engagement agreed upon by the contestants, the much-anticipated stoush at the Trades Hall had a clear winner: Windschuttle. Because of the narrowness of these rules, I found it a tedious affair—as tedious as much of the so-called history wars between Windschuttle, on the one hand, and the academic historians he has attacked over the past three years and those who, like Grimshaw, feel compelled to come to their defence, on the other. But in Australia, those scoring victories against superior foes—Geoffrey Blainey is about the only senior Australian historian who has sided with Windschuttle—are often admired. Windschuttle has become a celebrity and been invited to parade his dogs on the cover of *Good Weekend*.<sup>2</sup> His views on settler–Indigenous relations in the past and about the writing of history in the present are being taken seriously, not least because he is perceived to have successfully challenged the academic establishment.

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Windschuttle's views are expounded through 436 pages in *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*. He conceived of this book as the first volume in a series about the history of settler–Indigenous relations in Australia. The series is to provide evidence for his claim that:

The British colonization of this continent was the least violent of all Europe's encounters with the New World. It did not meet any organized resistance. Conflict was sporadic rather than systematic. Some mass killings were committed by both sides but they were rare and isolated events where the numbers of dead were in the tens rather than the hundreds. The notion of sustained 'frontier warfare' is fictional. (3)

In this first instalment of his argument, Windschuttle tries to prove his point, and to disprove earlier claims to the contrary by what he calls the orthodox school, by meticulously

examining the written historical evidence about settler–Indigenous relations in Tasmania in the first half of the nineteenth century. He finds that the number of Aborigines killed directly or indirectly by European settlers has been grossly overestimated; that those in charge of the colony never intended to exterminate Tasmania’s Indigenous inhabitants; that Tasmanian Aborigines did not make any concerted effort to resist the settlers and did not wage anything resembling a guerrilla war against the Europeans; and that Europeans who killed Aboriginal people did so more often than not in response to Aboriginal attacks.

If it were not for its tone, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* could be reviewed as the work of an antiquarian. As such, it would have value for others wanting to learn about colonial Tasmania. Windschuttle is very knowledgeable about nineteenth-century Tasmanian settler society, and his book is evidently the result of much diligent archival research. Tone aside, the book would be a good read for people who like antiquarian histories. But Windschuttle’s fury at the combined evils of left-wing liberalism and Aboriginal activism may make it unpalatable but for the most diehard believers in neoconservative politics. There is much in the book to put off everyone else: his sarcasm; his disdain for the Tasmanian ‘natives’ (the ‘blacks’), whose ‘culture had no sanctions against the murder of anyone outside their immediate clan’ (128), whose society was ‘so internally dysfunctional’ (386) and who, ‘[w]hen first contacted in the eighteenth century . . . were the most primitive human society ever discovered’ (377); his particular contempt for Tasmanian Aboriginal men, who ‘contributed little to the social unit’ (379) and for whom ‘killing others was a common and familiar practice’ (128); and his one-sided empathy, for example, ‘On the face of it, a demand from some settlers for the extermination of the Aborigines would not have been surprising’. (297) In his book, Windschuttle does punch below the belt, as it were.

While Windschuttle is contemptuous of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture, he is venomous about ‘orthodox’ historians. Those criticised by Windschuttle for ignoring, misinterpreting or doctoring historical evidence range from nineteenth-century commentators such as James Bonwick to contemporaries such as Henry Reynolds. While he is fairly indiscriminate in his attack—lumping together writers separated by a century, and academic historians with those popularising their work—he singles out the University of Newcastle historian Lyndall Ryan as by far the worst offender. Her work, Windschuttle claims, ‘is devoid of credibility [in] many places’. (169) He identifies dozens of cases in which her argument is supposedly not matched by her evidence and in which footnotes do not prove her point.

Footnotes replete with references to historical evidence keep the historian’s own present at bay. They convey to readers the message that the writing of history is principally informed by sources—supposed remnants of the past—and that these sources vouch for the factual truth of their historical accounts. Windschuttle purports to love footnotes: ‘An ideal work of history would provide a footnote for every claim it made’, he raves. (133) He cleverly

mimics the rhetoric of his adversaries, served up to generations of undergraduate history students, and proposes that footnotes make a historian—they are ‘one of the principal reasons why those who practise scholarly history can be trusted, and can trust one another, to tell the truth’ (133)—only to ‘discover’ that Ryan and Reynolds were half-hearted in their use of footnotes. Not only did they not have enough of them. The evidence they provided was also not hard enough—not for Windschuttle, anyway, who expects footnotes to be able to make facts irrefutable and histories true.

Windschuttle’s obsession with facts that can be proven, paired with a remarkable lack of curiosity about an unknowable past, means that he has little time for stories that cannot be substantiated by recourse to hard written evidence. Some of the writers he criticises have tried to defend themselves by pointing out that the killing of Aborigines may not always have been recorded. He retorts that:

[A]ny claim by a historian about unrecorded deaths is hard to sustain since deaths that went unrecorded would, by definition, remain hidden from historians. There might be rumours, gossip and legends that surface later but if there is no documentary evidence at all it is hard for the historian to determine the truth. This is not to argue that the lack of documents is of itself proof that nothing happened but, without reasonable evidence, the historian will find it difficult to sustain a case that something as dramatic as a killing did not take place. (359)

For Windschuttle, history is the account of a past that can be proven. He is not interested in pasts that cannot be reconstructed on the basis of firm historical evidence, but is obsessed about pasts that can be enumerated. The history he wants to tell is thus one that by default has to keep silent on much of what happened. It is an impoverished account of the past. He would argue that the alternative would be an embellished narrative in which facts and fiction cannot be told apart.

But Windschuttle’s privileging of provable facts is also a strategic manoeuvre designed to define the rules of engagement. He reduces the debate about the legacy of settler colonialism to one about the quantifiable aspects of frontier violence. He disputes claims about the number of Aborigines killed by settlers but carefully avoids references to other, less quantifiable aspects of violence. Most important, he glosses over the issue of dispossession. Regardless of whether settlers killed 120 Aborigines in Tasmania, or several times as many (as Ryan claims), Tasmanian Aborigines were dispossessed. Windschuttle suggests that Tasmania’s Indigenous people did not conceive of land as something one could have rights to—that, in fact, the term ‘land’ itself had ‘no role in either the vocabulary or the conceptual apparatus of Tasmanian hunter-gatherers’ (404)—and that therefore its alienation could not have meant

anything to them. But that point is immaterial. Even if land or country had meant nothing to the Aboriginal people who lived on it, with it and from it (which would be a ludicrous suggestion), its appropriation by settlers and the Crown still amounted to an act of dispossession, if only because those who took the land considered it to be alienable.

It is the initial act of dispossession, more so than settler–Indigenous conflict, that had a lasting impact on settler-colonial society and keeps haunting Australia to the present day. Colonial violence accompanied, and often made possible, the act of dispossession, but in the last instance was not a *sine qua non*. Irrespective of whether or not the violence was intended or condoned by the authorities—often it was not, as Windschuttle correctly observes—Aboriginal people were intentionally removed from their country. This removal constitutes unfinished business, and will remain so regardless of whether or not historians can agree on the exact number of settlers and Indigenous people killed in nineteenth-century Tasmania.

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‘Orthodox’ historians have risen to the bait Windschuttle keeps dangling in front of them and have vigorously defended their accounts of frontier violence. In mid-2001, Windschuttle objected to the National Museum of Australia’s ‘Contested Frontiers’ exhibition, which features an account of the so-called Bells Falls massacre. He claimed that the museum was endorsing a ‘complete fabrication’. In response to his accusation, the museum organised a symposium—presumably intended to bring together Windschuttle and writers whose work informed the exhibit and, more generally, to generate a discussion about how Australia’s settler-colonial history ought to be represented in a national museum. *Frontier Conflict*, a collection of articles edited by Bain Attwood and Stephen Foster, is the outcome of that symposium.<sup>3</sup> The book combines one article by Windschuttle and fourteen contributions critical of Windschuttle’s views on the history of settler–Indigenous relations.

The conference was held about a year before the publication of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*. But the substance of the debate in *Frontier Conflict* is not dissimilar to that generated by the publication of Windschuttle’s book (and by the associated marketing campaign in Rupert Murdoch’s *Australian*). Windschuttle’s critics try to assert that the evidence they use to support their claims of a violent frontier is hard, too, and that his claims are based on a selective reading of the archive. The book is disappointing—both as a collection of articles about frontier violence, and as a book about the controversy provoked by Windschuttle in a series of *Quadrant* articles in 2000 and 2001. Most of the contributors rehash arguments made on many previous occasions. Most of them limit themselves to addressing Windschuttle’s concerns about the interpretation of historical evidence. Only one of the

papers, Alan Atkinson's succinct, thoughtful and thought-provoking 'Historians and Moral Disgust', clearly moves beyond the debate begun by Windschuttle.

*Frontier Conflict* hardly challenges Windschuttle, because nearly all of its contributors respect the terms of the debate set by him, conceding that the interpretation of a past removed from the present is the central issue. This is surprising because the scholarship that had caught Windschuttle's interest and triggered his attack on the National Museum could have pointed them in another direction. In 1995, David Roberts published a paper about a reputed massacre in Sofala, near Bathurst in New South Wales.<sup>4</sup> He drew attention to the shallowness of the relevant non-Indigenous oral tradition and demonstrated that all written accounts of a massacre at Bells Falls could be traced to a 1962 newspaper article in the *Bathurst Times*.

Like Windschuttle, Roberts was initially only interested in finding evidence to prove or disprove the stories he heard and read about the massacre, and searched the Bells Falls Gorge for bullets and bones, and archives and libraries for documentary evidence. He could not confirm that the massacre had actually taken place. But he found evidence of widespread violence having occurred in the early 1820s and suggested that if the massacre had happened, it would have taken place during that period. His interest then switched from the period of martial law in the early 1820s to the early 1990s and the circulation of stories about the massacre. By focusing on Roberts's findings about the nineteenth century, Windschuttle missed the point of his research, which was about histories as much as about pasts.

Unfortunately, the editors of *Frontier Conflict* did not follow Roberts's lead and shift the agenda: away from a debate about historical evidence and towards one about the production of histories; away from a discussion about the past and towards one about how we live with, talk about and keep silent about that past; and away from a reactive engagement with Windschuttle's accusations and towards a proactive imagining of histories beyond prevailing orthodoxy.

The act of dispossession has had a profound impact on settlers as well as Indigenous people. In formats ranging from academic monographs to reports for the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, scholars have written extensively about the debilitating consequences of dispossession on Aboriginal people. Unlike other Australian writers, academic historians have paid scant attention to the effects of the act of dispossession on non-Aboriginal people.<sup>5</sup> Among *Frontier Conflict's* contributors, Ann Curthoys comes closest to turning her gaze away from Aboriginal people and nineteenth-century colonisers:

In the light of histories that recognise that colonisation of Australia produced population losses on a massive scale, it is a little curious to find today such strong reaction to the idea that the concept of genocide could be applied to the Australian colonial past.

Such strong reactions prompt an inquiry into their social, cultural and psychic basis. It seems to me that beneath the conservative critics' angry rejection of the 'genocide' label in particular, the 'black armband' view of history in general, there is a fear of being cast out, exiled and made homeless again, after two centuries of securing a new home far away from home. (198)

But non-Aboriginal scholars have tended to ignore the extent to which they, too, have been affected by that initial act of dispossession, instead pretending that it is possible to write only about *them*, be those others Aborigines or settlers shooting Aborigines or the good folk of Sofala. Curthoys's perceptive comments apply to another other—this time the Howards and Windschuttles in twenty-first century Australia. She and other contributors to *Frontier Conflict* missed the opportunity to neutralise the rules proclaimed by Windschuttle by evidencing self-critical awareness of and curiosity about the social, cultural and psychic basis of their own writing projects.

It is not that the contributors to *Frontier Conflict* would not know how to move the discussion beyond one in which the terms are dictated by their opponent. In his contribution, Henry Reynolds argues that written historical evidence sufficiently proves the intensity of frontier violence. His article does not appear to be a rejoinder to Windschuttle; instead, he reiterates an argument he has been making eloquently for more than twenty years, since at least the publication of *The Other Side of the Frontier* in 1981. Who is Reynolds trying to convince? Why did he not upstage Windschuttle by talking about the 'powerful all-important history' that presses 'heavily on the present', about how the 'terrible past of violence and dispossession still [haunts] the living', about the terror running 'like a powerful current beneath the surface of settler societies all over the world', about a past bearing down on Australians 'whether they knew it or not', as he does so powerfully in the first part of his 1999 memoir?<sup>6</sup>

In one of the more interesting chapters in *Frontier Conflict*, Deborah Rose discusses Aboriginal stories featuring Ned Kelly that are told by Aboriginal people from the Victoria River District in the Northern Territory. Many years ago, Rose's call to take seriously Aboriginal oral traditions of Captain Cook had provoked some irascible reactions from empiricists.<sup>7</sup> Since then, however, much has been written about the meaning of Aboriginal oral histories. As Attwood and Foster write in their introduction, it has been by interpreting them as narratives about the past in the present that 'historians and anthropologists have enabled Europeans to hear Aboriginal perspectives of the past rather than allow a situation where indigenous narratives might be effectively silenced'. (9) The rescue of Aboriginal histories from the disdain of empiricists in search of hard evidence has been a worthy endeavour. But Rose's article will not persuade Windschuttle's followers to respect the narratives of her

principal informant, the late Hobbles Danaiyarri, as pieces of historical evidence, as histories in their own right, or as moral-philosophical comments on settler colonialism. Who is she trying to convince? If it is not Australians of Windschuttle's persuasion, then why not push the argument much further?

Rather than the often-quoted Hobbles Danaiyarri, I would like to introduce a little-known Tasmanian Aboriginal writer into the debate. Ida West, who was born on one of the Bass Strait islands, published her memoirs in 1984:

There's always been those from other parts of the world who come to write about the people of Aboriginal descent on the Straits islands. They haven't been passive in what they've said. Ever since I was a girl there has been government officials visiting but they never got any stories from my people.

Uncle Johnny Smith and Aunty Millie were living at Robertdale when an official went up there to see them. Uncle Johnny Smith and Aunt Millie sat down. 'They won't get anything from me', he said, and they didn't. I don't blame him. Such a lot of people like the police, the councillors, the wardens all stand up and ask for our history but if they stopped to think, they have one too. Perhaps they don't want that put in books, either.

God gave us eyes, and a tongue, and I've always been brought up to believe that the blacker you are the quicker you are in the eye—very alert in the eye. And so we are, we have seen more than people think we have. We're not dumb-dumbs all together.<sup>8</sup>

West's stories would be of no interest to Windschuttle (who does not list her book in his bibliography) because she does not provide hard evidence about nineteenth-century Tasmania. Her book is also conspicuously absent from the bibliography of Lloyd Robson's 1991 *History of Tasmania*, which ranks high on Windschuttle's list of orthodox histories. I suspect that West's history and stories would be of interest to some of the contributors of *Frontier Conflict*, given that they try to validate types of evidence not recognised by Windschuttle. Before seeking out West's stories, would they pause to think that they, too, have a history that may need to be told?

West's comments raise another issue. Windschuttle claims that only the past that can be known beyond doubt is worth reporting. His critics take a very different approach. The past, they seem to say, needs to be told as comprehensively as possible, regardless of whether or not it has been reliably documented, because the past, and particularly the terrible past of violence and dispossession, to use Reynolds's words, must not be forgotten. In twenty-first-century Australia (as much as in twenty-first-century Germany), a therapeutic function is ascribed to the act of remembering a terrible past. It is worth asking, with Ida West: who exactly is after such a comprehensive unearthing of the past, and why? Windschuttle's



selectiveness does not necessarily need to be countered with a comprehensive approach. The silence that envelops so much of the settler–Indigenous past can often be understood without the help of accountants cataloguing names, relationships and violent deaths. The silence sometimes needs to be respected.

I suspect that if Windschuttle had been allowed to nominate his favourite critics, his choice may not have been all that different from that made by *Frontier Conflict*'s editors. Their choice is noteworthy on two accounts: the absence of contributions by Indigenous Australians and the near-absence of scholars who cannot be suspected of wanting to demonstrate their disciplinary credentials by insisting, with Patricia Grimshaw, that 'I, too, believe that history is the pursuit of the truth about the past'. Rationalising the first omission Attwood and Foster write: 'There are very few academically trained Aboriginal historians, and even fewer with academic expertise on frontier conflict. Hence there was no obvious way of incorporating their perspectives'. (21) I find their claim most surprising and would be interested to know who among the ones that readily spring to mind were actually invited to participate in their project. It must be assumed that non-Indigenous scholars who are not 'academically trained historians with academic expertise on frontier conflict' did not qualify either. The volume and the debate it tried to generate are the poorer for both omissions.

Why do many academic historians feel so threatened by people who write history without subscribing to certain epistemologies and methodologies? Why do they feel particularly threatened when such histories are written (or told) by Aboriginal people? '[T]his book shows its author to be a master of historical methodology', Russell Ward wrote in a foreword to a text published in 1985 by the Aboriginal historian James Miller. 'The logical and chronological sequence of events, the unity and balance of the whole work, the accuracy and documentation of each major statement, even the apparatus of footnotes, are handled every bit as well as by an average honours student in Arts at any university in the world.'<sup>9</sup> Ward's condescension is only tempered by the palpable sense of relief that Miller endorsed the foundations upon which in this country the discipline of history has been built.

The authors represented in *Frontier Conflict* include some of the most respected practitioners of Australian history. Yet they are a curiously select lot. Some of the finest historians of settler–Indigenous relations, such as Heather Goodall and Anna Haebich, are notably absent. Curiously, none of the curators responsible for the controversial museum exhibit contributed to the collection (which has, after all, been published by the National Museum). Roberts aside, whose work does not seem to have had any bearing on the 'Contested Frontiers' exhibit, the collection does not feature a historian with a particular expertise of the history of the Bathurst area. The list of contributors excludes some notable Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics whose writings have significantly advanced scholarship about the

settler-colonial past and its histories, such as Stephen Muecke, Ian Anderson and Paul Carter. It also excludes authors whose important contributions to public intellectual discourse about settler–Indigenous violence have not been validated by academic training, such as Kim Scott and Geoff Page.

Most of the authors assembled to take on Windschuttle convey the sense that they have a common purpose. They all seem to agree on the issues that brought them to the conference at the National Museum, and do not allow internal arguments to get in the way of their mission. Their papers abound with complimentary gestures towards each other. Tom Griffiths's contribution is the only one in which internal disagreements are made visible—but it is not Griffiths himself who takes on one of his own. Instead he quotes comments by fellow historian Peter Cochrane (who is not a contributor) that are critical of Henry Reynolds's approach. According to the message conveyed by most of the contributors, the discourse among historians is marked by civility. Historians 'respectfully debate issues with a minimum of name-calling', as Richard Broome puts it. (95)

There is perhaps another explanation why the editors were so reluctant to include the voices of writers they classify as non-historians. In his contribution, Bain Attwood suggests that Windschuttle himself is a journalist (rather than a historian), and that he would be unaware of a discourse that has taken place in specialist journals. In her chapter on the Waterloo Creek massacre, Lyndall Ryan also distinguishes between Windschuttle's work and that of 'the historian'. Perhaps the decision to issue invitations mainly to academically trained historians—the anthropologist Deborah Rose and the archaeologist John Mulvaney are the exceptions—was informed by the desire to isolate Windschuttle. His article is placed in the centre of *Frontier Violence*. Anybody who bought the book to get an insight into the controversy sparked by Windschuttle and read it cover to cover would have had to get through seven contributions critical of him before reading Windschuttle himself, whose arguments are then subject of another eight critiques following his article. The impostor is surrounded by bona fide members of the discipline.

Windschuttle seems to unnerve many academic historians precisely because he appears to do what they do. Or, more to the point, because they realise that they do what he does. It is instructive to compare the outcry over his *Quadrant* articles and the more recent outcry after the publication of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* with the profession's reaction to his 1994 book, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering Our Past*. Then, the response was comparatively muted. The vast majority of academic historians did not identify with those attacked by Windschuttle and saw no need to defend them. Reading the attempts by Bain Attwood and others to deny legitimacy to those without academic historical training, I wonder whether Keith Windschuttle may after all have a point when he writes in *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* that no-one who disagrees with

Reynolds and his colleagues 'need now apply for any position teaching Australian history at an Australian university'. (6)

Not only does Attwood not rate Windschuttle as a genuine historian; he also considers the contribution he made to historiography negligible, dismissing his intervention as 'essentially irrelevant in scholarly terms'. (182) Why then bother and devote a collection of articles to critiquing this intervention? 'In today's political climate, answering ill-informed conservative criticisms of the work of academic historians has, sadly, been necessary', Attwood argues. 'But now it is time to move on. We have work to do.' (182) Attwood does not disclose what the promised work of those identified by the (exclusive) first person plural in his statement would entail. Nor does he explain why today's political climate demands that Keith Windschuttle needs to be taken seriously to the extent that the academic historians who have taken it upon themselves to answer his criticism accept many of his epistemological premises. It is indeed time to move on and to stop humouring neoconservative ideologues by accepting their terms of engagement.

Let us, for a moment, ponder the potential for a debate prompted by Windschuttle's diatribes, a debate that would go beyond the criticism levelled at him by historians trying to defend their turf. I suggest three avenues, in particular, for further discussion. First, in *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Windschuttle discusses the writings of Lloyd Robson to show 'what happens when moral sensitivity prevails over historical methodology'. (144) The discipline of history would benefit from a discussion about the moral dimensions of writing histories of the settler-colonial past, which addresses questions such as: how does a moral engagement with past and present inform historical methodology?

Second, Australian historiography would benefit from comparative studies of other times and places in which the past haunts the present. The latter could be other settler colonies, such as New Zealand,<sup>10</sup> or countries in which people try to grapple with an injustice that is almost incomprehensible.<sup>11</sup>

Third, those writing about the Australian past could fruitfully engage in a debate about the patriotism informing Australian historiography. Windschuttle is partly motivated by his aversion to histories that ostensibly denigrate the achievements of European settlers. He wants Australians to focus on 'national virtues'. (1) So did Henry Reynolds when he wrote about Aboriginal resistance fighters defending their country against the European invaders. What exactly are the implications of Reynolds's demand that Aborigines killed in the frontier wars be honoured in the Australian War Memorial, which, by the way, does not distinguish between just and unjust wars? An in-depth exploration and debate of these issues would perhaps make redundant much of what has been labelled the history wars. But most historians of settler-colonial Australia seem presently otherwise occupied.

An author who, I suspect, does not fit Attwood and Foster's mould of the academic historian, who prefers to use the first person singular to the first person plural, and whose contribution would have enriched the collection, is Ross Gibson. And that brings me to the pleasurable part of my task. Ross Gibson's *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* is a deceptively inconspicuous intervention in debates about Australian history.<sup>12</sup> It costs half and weighs a quarter of *Frontier Conflict*, but it is by no means a lightweight book. Gibson does not write about Windschuttle—or about Reynolds, for that matter, who does not even earn a mention in the bibliography. But *Seven Versions* is exactly the kind of history that needs to be written to move beyond the squabbles between Windschuttle and the academic historians.

*Seven Versions* is about what has popularly been known as the 'Horror Stretch', a section of coastal Queensland between Rockhampton and Mackay. Borrowing a term coined two centuries ago in North America by French travellers to describe a particularly inhospitable part of Dakota, Gibson refers to the Horror Stretch as a 'badland'. The badland is a geographically defined area with a particularly bad reputation. It is a landscape suffused with murder and peopled by the ghosts of those murdered. It is also a kind of palimpsest inscribed with a series of horrible stories, and Gibson, while carefully reconstructing and retrieving the stories that have been partially or completely erased to make room for new stories, shows how it carries the weight of all that has been entered onto it.

Gibson's investigation of the badland's reputation begins with an account of a seemingly random and senseless double murder in 1975. But the murder, horrible as it is in itself, is only the top layer of a larger, deeper and more nightmarish history:

The Horror [the 1975 murder victims] encountered was part of history, something which people set up in barely-known complicity with larger forces such as chance, nature and narrative. This history lives as a presence in the landscape, a presence generated as a forceful outcome of countless actions, wishes and wills—not conscious entirely, not free necessarily. People upon people, land upon landscape. Past upon present and future. This history is made by people into stories, rendering events as interpretations, reasons and predictions. History is stories making facts happen. (50)

Beneath the story of the 1975 murder, Gibson finds stories about the settler-colonial past, such as the 'dispersal' of the coast's Indigenous people by the Native Police, and the late nineteenth-century recruitment of Pacific Islanders for the sugar industry and their early twentieth-century expulsion from Australia under the auspices of the White Australia policy. These stories are not about a past that has been 'done with'.<sup>13</sup> Writing about the Islanders who worked in the Central Queensland sugar industry, Gibson observes: 'they are part of the world we take our living from'. (149)

The world we take our living from, rather than historical evidence about a particular issue in the past (such as the level of frontier violence), is Gibson's starting point. Exploring how the past reverberates in the present, he productively juxtaposes issues and events that many historians may consider unrelated. But it is not so much their relatedness that interests him as their co-presence.

Gibson makes a mockery of Windschuttle's assertion that only the past for which there is sufficient documentary evidence can be told. Imagination as much as historical research allows him to sketch a portrait of the infamous Native Police officer Frederick Wheeler. His are the skills of a good fiction writer. But which good history is not also good fiction? His are also the skills of a good historian looking for more than facts and factual evidence:

Unable to invent comforting myths about consultation and constant mutation, yet sensing also that stories of manifest destiny and triumphs in the tropics were implausible, most Central Queensland communities learned to live in a mythological vacuum, without justifying stories or founding myths. So the colonists took shelter in tight-lipped vigilance and became adept at ignoring troublesome traces in the past, present and future.

What does this silence communicate, ultimately? Confusion. Vulnerability. Fear and hatred also, as well as a kind of self-assertiveness, given that the decision to be quiet can be a deliberate choice. All these elements agitated in the Queensland settlements. Perhaps this is obvious, but a history of such feelings is rarely offered when one tries to imagine how the shape of the past has pushed into the present of colonial societies. (107–8)

Gibson offers such a history of feelings. A history of feelings allows us to learn about ourselves (not merely about some others who lived in the past). A collective process of learning is perhaps the only means open to us that would empower us to live with the past. Windschuttle would of course disagree. He is trying to exorcise the ghosts rather than acknowledge their haunting presence.

Parts of Reynolds's *Why Weren't We Told?* is also about a haunted Queensland present. My favourite passage from this book concerns Reynolds's observations about dreams he had while living in Townsville in the 1970s. He describes how the subject matter of his research manifested itself at night 'in strange and worrying patterns, in agitated scenes of turmoil, gunfire and sexual violence'.<sup>14</sup> Reynolds appeared in his own dreams in two radically different poses: 'Sometimes I was an observer looking on from some detached vantage point almost as a historian does when reading about the past. But on other occasions I seemed to be involved, with violence swirling all around me.'<sup>15</sup> In his historical writings, Reynolds has always striven for the detached vantage point. Gibson, by contrast, lets the violence swirl around him.

I recommend *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* unreservedly. Go and get yourself a copy, and let yourself be mesmerised and disturbed by Gibson's tales. This is not to say that I agree with everything he says. I am not entirely convinced by his attempt to apply the findings of the Mitscherlichs, who wrote about the collective psyche of postwar West Germany, to Australia. I also find some of Gibson's projections too romanticising. We—those of us interested in Australian histories and cultures—should debate Gibson's book. It deserves it. But let's not get carried away here. The Trades Hall is unlikely to witness a public debate between Gibson and a well-known academic historian. Alas, rest assured, there will be more symposia devoted to discussing *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* and its sequels. There will be special editions of academic journals and more edited collections in which academic historians take issue with Windschuttle's work. And, alas, more people will come to believe that the key issue is how to winnow the truth about the past from hard historical evidence.

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1. Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, vol. 1, *Van Diemen's Land 1803–1847*, rev. edn., Macleay Press, Sydney, 2003.
2. Jane Cadzow, 'Who is Right Now, Then?', *Good Weekend*, 17 May 2003, pp. 18–24.
3. Bain Attwood and S.G. Foster (eds), *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2003.
4. David Roberts, 'Bells Falls Massacre and Bathurst's History of Violence: Local Tradition and Australian Historiography', in Emma Greenwood, Klaus Neumann and Andrew Sartori (eds), *Work in Flux*, University of Melbourne, History Department, Parkville, 1995, pp. 111–30. Another version of Roberts's paper was subsequently published in *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 26, no. 105, 1995, pp. 615–33.
5. Writers of fiction have been far more successful in dealing with the debilitating effects of settler colonialism on settlers and their descendants than historians and sociologists. Randolph Stow is but one of the most gifted in a long line of Australian novelists grappling with the colonial legacy: see Klaus Neumann, 'Remembering Victims and Perpetrators', *UTS Review*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1998, pp. 1–17.
6. Henry Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told? A Personal Search for the Truth about Our History*, 2nd edition, Penguin, Ringwood, 2000 (first published 1999), pp. 3, 38, 40, 41.
7. Deborah Bird Rose, 'The Saga of Captain Cook: Morality in Aboriginal and European Law', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, no. 2, 1984, pp. 24–39; for an empiricist critique, see Kenneth Maddock, 'Myth, History and a Sense of Oneself', in Jeremy R. Beckett (ed.), *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1988, pp. 11–30; for a response, see Chris Healy, '“We Know Your Mob Now”: Histories and their Cultures', *Meanjin*, vol. 49, no. 3, 1990, pp. 512–23.
8. Ida West, *Pride Against Prejudice: Reminiscences of a Tasmanian Aborigine*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1987 (first published 1984), p. 46.
9. Russell Ward, 'Foreword', in James Miller, *Koori: A Will to Win: The Heroic Resistance, Survival and Triumph of Black Australia*, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1985, p. ix.
10. See, for example, P.G. McHugh, 'Australasian Narratives of Constitutional Foundation', in Klaus Neumann, Nicholas Thomas and Hilary Ericksen

- (eds), *Quicksands: Foundational Histories in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1999, pp. 98–114.
11. Fruitful comparisons can be made between postcolonial Australia and post-fascist Germany; see, for example, Dirk A. Moses, 'Coming to Terms with Genocidal Pasts in Comparative Perspective: Germany and Australia', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 25, 2001, pp. 91–115; and Klaus Neumann, 'Haunted Lands', *UTS Review*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2000, pp. 65–79.
  12. Ross Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, Queensland University Press, St Lucia, 2002.
  13. See Klaus Neumann, *Shifting Memories: The Nazi Past in the New Germany*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2000, p. 7.
  14. Reynolds, pp. 51–2.
  15. Reynolds, p. 52.