

## “Black Armband” versus “White Blindfold” History in Australia:

### A Review Essay

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In *The Australian* for September 18, 2003, Greg Sheridan writes that “the cause of Aboriginal welfare and the quality of Australian political culture have been seriously damaged by the moral and linguistic overkill” of those historians who claim that “genocide” is an accurate term for what happened during the European colonization of that continent. He is seconding the current prime minister, John Howard, who has publicly declared that he wishes the historians would stop “using outrageous words like genocide” (qtd. in Reynolds, *Indelible Stain* 2). Sheridan thinks that “the past mistreatment of Aborigines is the most serious moral failing in our history,” but that it “never approached genocide or had any relationship to genocide.” Academics of “a certain left-wing cast of mind” engage both in pedantic, “linguistic” hairsplitting over definitions of such loaded words as “genocide” (a “jargon word,” according to Sheridan) and use those same words with gross, hyperbolic inaccuracy. Sheridan knows this is the case because “all dictionaries give [it] the same meaning.” And that meaning, according to his “Penguin dictionary,” is: “the mass murder of a racial, national or religious group.” This, Sheridan believes, never occurred in Australia, even though he also believes that “substantial numbers of Aborigines were killed by white settlers and British authorities in Tasmania and in Australia generally....” Apparently, he spies some clear difference

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between his phrase, “substantial numbers,” and his dictionary’s adjective, “mass.” I fail to see the difference.<sup>1</sup>

Sheridan’s article is one of many in the Australian press that have responded to that nation’s version of a *Historikerstreit*—that is, of the controversy over the Holocaust among German historians (see Habermas). The controversy goes back at least to the 1988 bicentenary of the First Fleet, when the official celebrations were countered by Aboriginal protests that declared it “a year of mourning.” Speaking at a demonstration in Sydney in late January, 1988, the Chairman of the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council, TIGA Bayles, asserted:

You think about what White Australia is celebrating today—200 years of colonization, the 200 years since they invaded Aboriginal land. And some of the [white] people seem to expect Aboriginal people...to participate in the birthday party. *What bullshit.* That would be like asking the Jewish people to celebrate an anniversary of the Holocaust. (Bayles 340-1).

For Bayles and other Aborigines, there is no question that 1788 signaled invasion and two centuries of genocide.<sup>2</sup> But that view of history is “outrageous” to many—probably most--white Australians. The controversy among the historians has heated up since the 2002 publication of Keith Windschuttle’s *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, vol. 1. To understand the issues, it will help to be clear both about the meaning of “genocide” and about its use in legal and governmental Australian discourse. It is also necessary to know what happened to the Aborigines of Tasmania, the topic of the first volume of Windschuttle’s projected trilogy.

Sheridan may think his dictionary provides an adequate definition of genocide, and that anything else is academic pedantry or leftwing propaganda or some insidious combination of the two. The authoritative definition, however, is provided by the 1948 United Nations Convention on Genocide, which Australia ratified in 1949 and which declares: “genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) killing members of the group; (b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; [and] (e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group” (Charny 2:578). This definition is not a matter of academic “jargon” or ideological overkill; it is the basic, accepted meaning now operative in international law.

With all five of the genocidal “acts” listed in the U.N. Convention in mind, Colin Tatz asserts that the first Australians “suffered [them] *all*” (“Australian Aborigines”). Tatz may be one of the “left wing” academics of whom Sheridan complains, but he isn’t saying more than what can be found in *Bringing Them Home*, the 1997 report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission into the “removal” of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families to “assimilate” them into white society. “Removal of children with this objective in mind is genocide,” the Commission declared, “because it aims to destroy the ‘cultural unit’ which the [U.N.] Convention is concerned to preserve” (qtd. in Haebich 206; see also Read; Tatz, *Intent* 96-100). In her impressively researched *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000*, Anna Haebich rightly uses the term “genocide” in regard to the “removal” of Aboriginal

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and half-caste children from their families (143, 206-7, 425, 431, 456, 606). So “genocide” is not the invention of the “black armband” historians, as Geoffrey Blainey has been pleased to call them (Reynolds, *Why...?* 153), but is in use in official Australian discourse. “Genocide is now in the vocabulary of Australian politics,” writes Tatz, “albeit grudgingly, or even hostilely” (*Intent* xvi).

The 1960s and 70s saw the rapid growth of Aboriginal activism. In 1962, Aborigines gained the right to vote in federal elections, and they gained further citizenship status in a 1967 referendum which, among other things, struck down the constitutional provision that excluded them from the census (Bennett 22-4). Leading up to the “year of mourning” in 1988, there was much activity and organizing centered around such issues as land rights. In 1992, with the High Court’s ruling in the Eddie Mabo land rights case, the doctrine of *terra nullius* was overturned, giving Aborigines the right to claim “native title” and possess territory.<sup>3</sup> In their joint opinion, Justices Deane and Gaudron declared:

The acts and events by which [the] dispossession [of the Aborigines] was carried into practical effect constitute the darkest aspect of the history of this nation.

The nation as a whole must remain diminished unless and until there is an acknowledgment of, and retreat from, those past injustices.... The lands of this continent were not *terra nullius* or ‘practically unoccupied in 1788.’ (qtd. in Bourke and Cox 66).

The Mabo ruling was followed by the Wik case in 1996, in which the High Court’s decision meant that “native title may have survived on the estimated 42 percent of the Australian land mass covered by pastoral leases” (qtd. in Bourke and Cox 71; see also

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Bennett 50-56). And then there came, in 1997, *Bringing Them Home*, which was official acknowledgment of one type of genocidal action.<sup>4</sup> Removal of children began in earnest in the 1880s and continued into the 1980s. According to one estimate, there may be as many as 100,000 people of aboriginal descent today who have lost track of their families and communities (Read 26; Bourke and Edwards 102). Also leading up to 1988, another official inquiry got underway to investigate the high incidence of “aboriginal deaths in custody.” It issued its “interim report” in the bicentenary year, and its final report three years later, in 1991. Here was another public indicator that much more needs to be done to end the Australian version of racial discrimination and violence. But despite legal, political, and cultural gains, not much has changed for most people of Aboriginal descent (Bennett 3). Besides the high rate of Aborigines in custody, and their high death rate while incarcerated, there is also their tragically high suicide rate (Gordon 2).

Under Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, the Labor party held sway in Australia from 1983 to 1996, the years of the Mabo and Wik rulings, the reports on deaths in custody and “the stolen generations,” and increasing Aboriginal activism, as during 1988. Then came the backlash, fueled by increasing anxiety among white Australians about Aboriginal gains in land rights and in other areas. Enter, from stage right, John Howard as leader of the coalition Liberal and National parties, elected in 1996. Enter, too, even farther to the right, Pauline Hanson and her One Nation Party (Bennett 46, 172). And also enter, from stage far right, Keith Windschuttle, whose *Fabrication of Aboriginal History* is Greg Sheridan on steroids. There have been several indications that Windschuttle’s “revision” of the revisionist new historians has been welcomed by white conservatives in both the press and the government. He is exactly the historian the

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Howard regime needs to help bar the door against farther gains for Aboriginal rights and recognition (Moses 352-3). The current government has treated the “genocide conclusion” in *Bringing Them Home* as “risible” (Manne 4).<sup>5</sup> And it has “denied the existence of any ‘stolen generations’”:

It refused the recommendation for financial compensation to the separated children. It refused to offer to the members of the stolen generations in particular or to the Aboriginal people in general a formal government apology. (Manne 4)

Howard supports “reconciliation” rather than “apology” and reparations, and his version of “reconciliation” implies a two-way street, as if Aborigines and whites were and are equal partners in past and present violence and racism.<sup>6</sup> Yet in his Menzies Lecture on 13 December 2000, Howard declared that the Aborigines “have suffered enormously in the past, and as a defined group continue to do so. No one can, nor should attempt to, deny the devastating impact the introduction of western culture has had upon their civilization” (Howard). Denial, however, is exactly what both Howard and Windschuttle are up to.

Despite the political backlash, and despite continuing economic and social inequities for people of Aboriginal descent, the future looks brighter today than it did even as late as the 1930s, when it still appeared to many white observers that the first Australians were a “doomed race,” on their way to inevitable, total extinction. As Russell McGregor demonstrates in *Imagined Destinies*, his study of the Australian version of “doomed race theory,” the idea that the Aborigines were inevitably vanishing had numerous consequences for how they were treated, both unofficially and in official policy. The various attempts at “protection,” for example, meant guarding and isolating

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Aborigines from “white predators”—that is, sending them into exile and making sure they stayed there. Colin Tatz writes that most protective legislation was “predicated on the philosophy of ‘smoothing the pillow’ of a race near extinction. Given that there was a widespread assumption that Aborigines were dying out, settlers fulfilled the prophecy by acting to ensure that such was indeed the outcome” (*Intent* 81). Even when humanitarian in intention, protective practices were often dehumanizingly carceral; Lloyd Robson has called the Flinders Island reservation for the remnants of the Tasmanian Aborigines the world’s “first concentration camp” (220; and see Tatz, *Intent* 81-88; Smith 22).

As McGregor notes, by the 1930s the belief that the “dying race” was about to disappear completely itself began to die out. This was in large part because the Aboriginal population began to stabilize or even increase rather than decline. For awhile, no one was certain about it, but in fact the population of both “full bloods” and “half castes” was starting to rebound. In 1788, the indigenous population was at least 250,000 and possibly far more. Economic historian Ned Butlin suggests that the figure may have been over one million (133-9), while Stuart Macintyre writes: “perhaps three-quarters of a million people lived here in 1788” (14). The population in 1921, however, was probably only a little over 60,000, though by 1996, it had grown to over 350,000 (Eleanor Bourke 45-6). Much of the depopulation was the result of disease, compounded by dislocation and famine. Henry Reynolds’s figure of 20,000 Aborigines slain in frontier violence is at least an educated guess, though he stresses it may have been far higher (*Frontier* 29-30, 53). To many white Australians, no doubt, that figure does not seem “substantial” enough to constitute genocide. But the border violence was

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also evicting Aboriginal groups from their traditional territories, forcing them into the desert outback, while kangaroos, wallabies, and other game they depended on for food was also disappearing. In *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*, Charles Rowley speculates that more Aborigines may have starved in exile, in the continent's desert interior, than were killed by either violence or disease (7). It's such a possibility that makes history of the positivist, body-count, Windschuttle variety more than a little ridiculous.<sup>7</sup>

Part of what upsets Windschuttle, Howard, and their ilk is what they see as the unpatriotic negativism in "black armband" history, subverting the rosy version of the Australian past served up by nationalist historians during the first half of the twentieth century. Just as disturbing to them, however, have been such events as the Mabo and Wik rulings and the reports on Aboriginal deaths in custody and child removal. The two causes of upset are connected, in part because of the influence the "black armband" historians have had on the reports and rulings. As Graeme Davison points out, starting in the 1990s, history has often made headlines in Australia: "Never before have historians occupied as prominent a place in Australian public life" (1). There is no doubt that the councilors and commissioners, as well as the High Court judges in the Mabo and Wik cases, were influenced by the "new," "critical" history (Davison 15). In his introduction to *Whitewash: Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Robert Manne notes that "the new historians of the dispossession" have sometimes "played [a]...direct legal or political role" in recent developments. He singles out the histories of Henry Reynolds as influencing "the thinking of the High Court judges who in 1992 at Mabo discovered native title in the common law." Reynolds describes his

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involvement especially with Mabo in his autobiographical *Why Weren't We Told?* (185-225), which offers an excellent overview of the historiographic and political controversies from the 1960s to the present. Manne also notes that without “the pioneering historical research of Peter Read, the inquiry commissioned by the Keating government into Aboriginal child removal might never have been held” (3; see also Broome, “Historians” 70-72). So history and the historians are having an impact in ways that make their *Historikerstreit* of major importance in the Australian public sphere.

In “Constructing National Histories,” Ann Curthoys notes that, for various reasons, many “non-indigenous Australians have difficulty” in sympathizing with the “black armband” version of the past “because they, like so many others, from the United States to Israel and elsewhere, see themselves as *victims*, not oppressors” (187). There is definitely a paranoid streak, of a populist, often racist variety, in the backlash against the new history. Curthoys writes:

At the same time as this kind of history has been growing in prominence and acceptance, so also has its widespread rejection. Conservative politicians detest it, for it tends to locate them, as critics of current indigenous demands, in a rejected past. So do many other non-Aboriginal Australians, who, facing significant economic problems of their own, are in no mood to consider themselves as ‘invaders’ or the beneficiaries of colonization. Many do not wish to be told their whole society was built on a process of invasion and child theft; they want, instead, to re-assert pride in their history, institutions and culture. In public debate...many...openly express a preference for returning to a ‘positive’ understanding of Australian history.... (186-7).

But history can't be rewritten by popular fiat, by political bias (of course, Windschuttle and his supporters claim that the bias is on the "black armband" side), by the mass media, or by John Howard. To both American and British readers, much of this situation will be familiar from our own version of the "culture wars."

From the time of W. E. H. Stanner's 1968 radio lectures on "the great Australian silence," historians, anthropologists, and political activists have done much valuable work to show the extent of frontier violence, including Aboriginal resistance, that had typically been downplayed or ignored in earlier, nationalist historiography.<sup>8</sup> Stanner did not mean that the Aborigines went totally unmentioned in earlier white Australian discourse, but that they were relegated to the margins in the mainstream histories of the new nation and, at least through the 1930s, treated as a dying race, unable to partake of modern civilization, doomed to extinction. Through most of the nineteenth century, white Australians produced "scores of sorrowful expressions of regard for 'the real welfare of that helpless and unfortunate race'; tenfold the number of condemnations of them as debased, worthless and beyond grace; and, one-hundredfold, acceptances of their inevitable extinction" (Stanner 147). But at least during the colonial period, the Aborigines were very visible in white Australian discourse. Stanner suggests that "the cult of forgetfulness" was more characteristic of the nationalist histories written in the first half of the twentieth century than of colonial writing (214). When Aborigines do appear in histories written between 1901 and the 1960s, they are usually seen as locked in "prehistory" and "barbarism," unable to advance with the advancing tide of white civilization (Broome, "Historians" 64-67). And as Bain Attwood notes in the introduction to *In the Age of Mabo: History, Aborigines and Australia*, "Aborigines were

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consigned to the past but not to history by dint of becoming the subject of anthropology rather than history.” They were viewed by anthropologists and historians alike as “artifacts” or archaic relics “of the human past” (xii). They supposedly revealed what the very first humans were like; they were the Stone Age surviving into the present, but doomed to extinction in the very near future, which made anthropology—in Australia and everywhere else it has focused upon “primitive” societies—a “salvage enterprise.” In offering this descriptor for his discipline, James Clifford writes: “The theme of the vanishing primitive, of the end of traditional society...is pervasive in ethnographic writing”:

Ethnography’s disappearing object is, then, in significant degree, a rhetorical construct legitimating a representational practice: “salvage” ethnography in its widest sense. The other is lost, in disintegrating time and space, but saved in the text. (112)

In some twentieth-century histories, however, the Aborigines weren’t even “saved in the text.” One of the oddities of Windschuttle’s revisionism is that he tries, quite long-windedly, to restore the “great silence” by denying that there ever was such a silence (406-11). But as recently as 1955, in *Australia: A Social and Political History*, which Gordon Greenwood edited under the auspices of the 1951 Jubilee Celebrations Committee, the index contains no reference to Aborigines, “and only half-a-dozen oblique references in the whole book.” In that text, their chief role is “being no serious impediment to [white] settlement” (Broome, “Historians” 64). Manning Clark’s *Short History of Australia* (2d ed., 1969) is somewhat better, but its few mentions of Aborigines are brief, and these end in 1927, with the sorry tale of the “solitary aborigine”

who, at the opening of Parliament House in Canberra, “demanded to see the ‘whole plurry show’, but as he was deemed to be inadequately clad for the occasion, a policeman led him away” (215). It’s telling to compare Clark’s text with the far more thorough, sympathetic treatment of Aboriginal-white relations in Stuart Macintyre’s 1999 *Concise History of Australia*.

In accusing the “black armband” historians of exaggeration and inaccuracy, Windschuttle overlooks how careful they are to do just the reverse, as in Reynolds’s cautious estimate of 20,000 Aboriginal deaths caused by frontier conflict. So, too, in *An Indelible Stain? The Question of Genocide in Australia’s History*, Reynolds shows just how complicated it is to apply the U.N. definition of genocide even to Tasmania, which has often been viewed as the first and perhaps only case of the complete extermination of an aboriginal population in the history of the British empire.<sup>9</sup> Thus, in his bestselling *The Fatal Shore*, Robert Hughes called the supposed total eradication of the first Tasmanians by 1876 the “only true genocide in English colonial history” (120). That assertion is mistaken, however, not least because it implies that, if the extermination of a race isn’t total, then it isn’t genocide. On that interpretation, the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews would not qualify as genocide, because it wasn’t total. In any event, as do both Colin Tatz in *Intent to Destroy* and Alison Palmer in *Colonial Genocide*, Reynolds identifies other episodes in Australian history as more clearly genocidal than even the tragic extinction of the aboriginal Tasmanians. These episodes include the five or six decades during which the colonial authorities in Queensland gave at least tacit sanction to both the posses organized by settlers and the Native Police, an aboriginal force under white officers, trained to gun down other aboriginals, to “disperse” groups of “blacks” (Reynolds, *Transnational Seminar*, October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2004, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign).

*Indelible Stain* 101-109; Palmer 40-86). Reynolds quotes the *Queenslander* newspaper to the effect that “dispersal” was clearly understood to mean “wholesale massacre” (105). As many as 10,000 Aboriginal men, women, and children may have been massacred during the “killing times” in Queensland (Palmer 59; Tatz 79). The definitely genocidal episodes in Australian history also include the policy of child removal (Reynolds, *Indelible Stain* 158-174; Tatz, *Intent* 88-100; Haebich; Read). And there were many “genocidal massacres” in all of the colonies, though how many and what their death-toll was is a matter of conjecture. It is highly probable that many massacres were never reported.

Prior to the 1940s, even the most sympathetic observers—missionaries such as Rev. Lancelot Threlkeld, anthropologists such as Baldwin Spencer—often attributed the predicted total demise of the Aborigines partly or wholly to some failing of the Aborigines themselves: the rigidity or savagery of their customs, their mental backwardness, some biological, Darwinian unfitness to survive. In his exercise in genocide denial, Windschuttle resorts to this blaming-the-victim rhetoric as blatantly as any nineteenth-century author I have read. “It was a tragedy the [Tasmanian] Aborigines adopted such senseless violence,” he writes; “Their principal victims were themselves” (130). Their “violence,” moreover, was criminal, and not “guerilla warfare” or any other sort of organized resistance to the European invasion of their island. According to Windschuttle, the first Tasmanians were a “dysfunctional” (implicitly, already dying) society, whose reactions to their well-meaning white neighbors were senseless murder and plunder (116-122). Windschuttle goes farther: the main cause of the downfall of the Tasmanian Aborigines was their own maltreatment of each other, and especially the

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abuse of the women by the men, including the apparent eagerness of the men to sell or trade their women to sealers and bushrangers (386). “The real tragedy of the Aborigines was,” Windschuttle opines, “not British colonization *per se* but that their society was, on the one hand, so internally dysfunctional and, on the other hand, so incompatible with the looming presence of the rest of the world” (386). So, delete “genocide” from Tasmanian history, and blame the victim.

A convict settlement was established in Tasmania in 1803, and violence against the Aborigines began shortly afterwards, with the Risdon Cove massacre in 1804. Windschuttle, of course, denies it was a massacre (11-28), and indeed, as Henry Reynolds makes clear in *Fate of a Free People* (76-7), the evidence about how many Aborigines were killed in that fracas is contradictory. Reynolds also notes the difficulty in “determining the impact of the renegade Europeans—hunters, sealers, bushrangers—in the first twenty years of settlement.” But, he adds, “they almost certainly murdered more blacks than the five Europeans killed and three wounded by Aborigines between 1803 and 1824” (77; and see Plomley 7). Windschuttle will have none of this (42-60). If substantial numbers of Aborigines died before the 1820s, it was their own fault, caused mainly by alcoholism and disease, including venereal disease. From 1824 to 1830, by all accounts, Aboriginal resistance to white settlement became much more intense. This was the period of the so-called Black War, which culminated in the fiasco of the Black Line in 1830—an attempt by the white settlers, soldiers, and convicts to sweep through the island and herd the remaining Aborigines onto the Tasman peninsula. The dragnet captured only an old man and a boy.

Nevertheless, Windschuttle accuses Reynolds and the others of getting the story wrong through falsification and hyperbole. It wasn't the white settlers and authorities who treated the first Tasmanians with violence and dispossession, but the other way around. The Aborigines in that island weren't defending their territory against an invasion, because, according to Windschuttle, they had no conception of possessing territory. When the whites showed up, the blacks attacked, not as an act of resistance or self-defense, but because they were bloodthirsty savages who were also after plunder. Through four-hundred tedious, tendentious pages, Windschuttle tries to show how Reynolds, Robson, and Ryan in particular got it all wrong. His interpretation of the reaction of the Tasmanian Aborigines to the European invasion of their island certainly contradicts every other account I have read, including such early texts as G. A. Robinson's journals, Henry Melville's 1835 and the Rev. John West's 1852 histories of Tasmania, and James Bonwick's 1870 *The Last Tasmanians*. In her survey for *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, Ann Curthoys writes: "Nineteenth-century histories varied widely in their attitude to Aboriginal people and cultures, sometimes sympathetic, more often cruelly racist.... Yet they often also exhibited awareness of a history of frontier conflict, and worried over its moral implications" (3). In other words, before the "great Australian silence" became the norm among the nationalist historians of the first half of the twentieth century, earlier historians were more candid. As Curthoys notes, for Tasmania these include Melville, who "spent many pages in *The History of Van Diemen's Land*...on depredations, murders, and conflicts." So, too, West's *History of Tasmania* "provided detailed and sympathetic accounts of the indigenous people and the frontier conflict." And in his 1883 *History of Australia*, G. W. Rusden emphasized "the

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prevalence of slaughter, which ‘can be denied by none who know the course of Australian history’” (3). Curthoys could also have mentioned James Bonwick’s *The Last of the Tasmanians: or, the Black War of Van Diemen’s Land* (1870) and James Calder’s *Account of the Wars, Extirpation, Habits, etc. of the Native Tribes of Tasmania* (1875), both full, sympathetic studies. In short, the insistence that frontier violence was a major factor in the supposed total extermination of the first Tasmanians doesn’t start with Stanner, Crowley, Reynolds, Robson, Ryan, Tatz, Palmer, Curthoys, Moses, and their many students and supporters. It is quite clear in the texts of nineteenth-century historians. And it is just as clear in Robinson’s journals and in the official records of Gov. George Arthur, the Colonial Office in London, and the Select Committee on Aborigines. If Reynolds, Robson, and Ryan have “fabricated” aboriginal history, then so did Robinson, Melville, West, Bonwick, Calder, the members of the Aborigines Protection Society, and so on and so forth.

To accuse the “black armband” school of “fabrication,” Windschuttle finds he must also accuse most of the nineteenth-century historians, officials, and observers of inaccuracy and falsification. In both cases, he has to practice a sort of character assassination to get the results he wants. It is really quite astonishing how many “fabricators” of Aboriginal history, by Windschuttle’s count, there have been. His second-guessing of both the primary and secondary sources, however, winds up in pedantic absurdities. He scants or ignores the testimony of the French explorers, the main pre-colonization sources on the first Tasmanians’ behaviors and culture (Boyce 20-1). The primary ethnographic source on that culture is George Augustus Robinson, the great “conciliator,” who after the Black War of 1824-30 and the Black Line of 1830,

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rounded up the remaining Aborigines—a sorry total of 203 survivors out of a pre-1788 population of perhaps 6000--and relocated them on the Flinders Island reservation. There is a huge amount of evidence in Robinson's reports, letters, and journals that contradicts Windschuttle, and so he proceeds by citing Robinson's highly unsympathetic, sensationalizing biographer, Vivienne Rae-Ellis, who claimed that, to achieve his ends—both humanitarian and selfish—"he became 'a liar and a cheat, a man of little honour', whose reports about the conditions of the Aborigines under his control turned out to be largely fraudulent" (Windschuttle 35). But what was the nature of Robinson's alleged fraud? His reports from Flinders Island do exaggerate, but only by being too optimistic about how well his civilizing and Christianizing mission among them was working. So, too, according to Windschuttle, Henry Melville wrote his *History of Van Diemen's Land* vindictively, to "damn [Gov.] Arthur's policy towards Aborigines..." (35). The Rev. John West also falsifies along the same lines that, Windschuttle contends, the "black armband" historians do today (79). The "strategy" of Robinson and of all the nineteenth-century historians of Tasmania "was to exaggerate stories about atrocities against the Aborigines, while at the same time hiding their violence towards the colonists" (270). And, perhaps needless to say, Windschuttle throws Aboriginal oral testimony out of court as viable historical evidence by denigrating Aboriginal character and culture (261-2).

Just what can have motivated all of these observers and historians to exaggerate and lie about what went on between the Aborigines and the white settlers of Tasmania? The main motivation, it appears, is identical with the political bias that Windschuttle detects in "black armband" history. Like Reynolds, Robson, and Ryan today, all of the nineteenth-century writers were *too sympathetic* toward the Aborigines. They were all

race traitors, politicized by their humanitarian sentimentalism and lack of objectivity. Or so Windschuttle thinks. But this line of contention puts him in quite a bizarre position. Apart from his having to accuse dozens of both recent and nineteenth-century writers of “fabrication,” one of his main arguments for why white settlers in Tasmania and the rest of Australia could not have committed anything resembling genocide is that the British were humanitarians, whose mode of colonizing Australia was “the least violent of all Europe’s encounters with the New World” (3). Humanitarians don’t slaughter indigenous peoples; they try to protect them (though that doesn’t account for why they need to be protected). Humanitarians both past and present sympathize with the Aborigines so much that, in their accounts of frontier contact, they routinely “fabricate” tales about massacres and other forms of cruelty and dispossession.

There is no doubt that evangelical humanitarianism was a powerful influence in the Colonial Office in London in the 1830s. But how far did it extend to the authorities in Tasmania? And how far did it extend to the white population of that island, many of whom were convicts or ex-convicts? It’s clear that free British immigrants to Tasmania were sometimes—perhaps often—evangelical humanitarians. That was true of both Robinson and Gov. Arthur, for example. But the history of British imperialism around the world does not support Windschuttle’s belief that it was mainly benign, or was somehow moderated by a general humanitarian and religious culture on the frontiers in North America, New Zealand, South Africa, and elsewhere. Parliament’s abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and then slavery itself in all British territory in 1833 was indeed a triumph for evangelical humanitarianism, but rendered necessary because the British engaged in the slave trade and practiced slavery up until those dates. And just how did

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humanitarianism affect the treatment of the convicts at Botany Bay or in Tasmania? Not even Windschuttle can claim that the Aborigines were treated with loving kindness by the convicts, bushrangers, and sealers who were often their first and sometimes their last contacts with Europeans.

Windschuttle is a “revisionist” of history in the worst sense. We need histories and historians who tell the truth as best they are able, and this has been a major virtue of many Australian historians—from Melville and West, skipping over a few twentieth-century decades, to Reynolds, Robson, Ryan, Manne, Read, Haebich, Broome, Curthoys, Cove, and many others. The media in Australia and elsewhere should support and applaud such painstaking honesty, rather than jumping on the latest denial bandwagon. After all, isn’t the same epistemological standard shared by both “the news” and historiography? And that standard is the truth.

Indeed, all of the nineteenth century authorities, including Gov. George Arthur, contradict Windschuttle. While disease may have been as much a factor as frontier violence and massacres in exterminating the original Tasmanians, all of these nineteenth-century writers are quite clear about the decimating effects of white settlement and violence toward the Aborigines, who began to fight back in a concerted way in the late 1820s, the period of the so-called Black War. Windschuttle’s claim that the “black armband” historians “fabricated” this version of Tasmanian history is belied by the nineteenth-century accounts.

Windschuttle, in denial mode, and in lock step with the current conservative hegemony in Australia and, indeed, throughout the West since 1989 (and, even moreso, since 9-11), argues quite illogically that, because the British colonizers of Australia were

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civilized, Christian humanitarians, they could not have committed anything like genocide anywhere in their colonial estates. After all, hadn't they abolished slavery in all British territory in 1833? Of course, this line of argument doesn't quite explain why they supported slavery, and profited enormously from the slave trade, until that date. And Windschuttle never quite comes to grips with the fact that the First Fleet of 1788 established a convict settlement, and that much of the violence suffered by aborigines in the first half of the nineteenth century came from convicts or ex-convicts—and of course also from Her Majesty's troops.

Certainly there was no intention on the part of the British Colonial Office or of authorities in Hobart, Tasmania, between 1803 and the 1830s to exterminate the first Tasmanians. On the contrary, officials including Governor George Arthur tried, with varying degrees of concern and effectiveness, to prevent what was very quickly recognized as an inevitable, tragic outcome. Windschuttle's attempt to revise the revisionist historians such as Henry Reynolds, Lloyd Robison, and Lyndall Ryan by attempting to prove they "fabricated" the demise of the Tasmanian aboriginals is flawed in many respects, most of them well-documented in Robert Manne's anthology, *Whitewash*. One aspect of Windschuttle's false claims that seems underplayed by the contributors to *Whitewashed*, however, is Windschuttle's own emphasis on the evangelical humanitarianism of the officials in charge of British colonial affairs from 1803 to the mid-1830s. Yes, indeed, those authorities—including Gov. Arthur—were evangelical humanitarians; yes, indeed, they supported the abolition of slavery in all British territories in 1834; and yes, indeed, they deplored what was happening to

indigenous peoples in Tasmania, South Africa, and many other parts of the British empire.

Windschuttle takes this humanitarian inclination, however, to be some kind of *fait accompli*—which it never was, anywhere. Why did the slave trade and slavery have to be abolished? Partly because the British were major players in those activities. Why was there so much humanitarian concern expressed, both in London and in Australia, about the decimation of the Tasmanian aboriginals? Because the humanitarians knew it was happening. Windschuttle contends instead that, because British officialdom was both evangelical and humane, therefore the decimation of the Tasmanian aboriginals could not have occurred—at least not at anything like a genocidal level. But despite the humanitarian concern of the Colonial Office in London (and it was genuine), and despite a similar concern on the part of Governor Arthur and a number of other white colonists in Tasmania, there was very little control in the early decades over frontier violence. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to understand that, even in the relatively small geographical space of Tasmania, in the early 1800s the long arm of the law—much less the well-intentioned wishes of humanitarianism—did not extend very far. Comparison with virtually every other colonial frontier—British, French, American, Russian, you name it—has involved similar genocidal violence. As Hannah Arendt, Zygmunt Bauman, and many others have argued, genocide isn't a rare event in modern history; it is instead a frequent, repetitive occurrence that partially characterizes modernity.

Echoing W. E. H. Stanner on “the great silence” in Australian history-writing, in his 1980 Boyer lectures for the Australian Broadcasting Commission Bernard Smith declared: “a spectre has haunted Australian culture, the spectre of Truganini” (9).

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How shall we redeem it from the guilty awareness that these acts of genocide and attempted genocide were being enacted most vigorously at that very time when our own white Australian culture was being...born, and that its very growth presupposed the termination of a black culture which for the rest of the world, apart from ourselves, has come to be regarded as more interesting, coherent, and identifiable as a unique human achievement than our own European-derived culture? (10)

Stanner, Smith, and the more recent historians who are attempting to tell the truth about Australia's violent conquest and colonization deserve to be read and praised for their efforts by everyone concerned with modern history. There is nothing to be gained from attempting to bury the past while that past still haunts the present, and future. In Smith's eloquent account, keeping Truganini's spectre alive is the paradoxical task that Australian historians accept, if they are to ensure that there is an Australian culture in the future that will be recognized as a unique human achievement by the rest of the world. The alternative—"white blindfold" history, as Reynolds has called it (qtd. in Attwood and Foster 16)—is "history written for Caesar, victory history: nectar drunk from the skulls of the slain" (Smith 23).

Despite the continued bad news for many people of Aboriginal descent, including the great distance that remains to travel before anything like equality and "one nation" are really achieved, the "new history" has played an important role in the public domain by "reminding White Australia of what it would prefer to forget" (Attwood xv).

According to Bain Attwood, one outcome of the new history has been the growing conviction among many Australians that "the past which is signified by Aborigines

and/or Aboriginality holds the key to Australia's future" (Attwood xxiii). This belief "that the Australian future is contingent upon our coming to terms with the Aboriginal past has been very influential," writes Attwood; "Most importantly, it has been expressed at the highest political and legal levels, evidenced by the stance of successive Labor governments as well as by the High Court of Australia" (xxx). And as for people of Aboriginal descent, Henry Reynolds writes:

They feel that at last white Australia has admitted things they have always known; that finally the truth is being told. And telling the truth is central to the Aboriginal agenda for reconciliation. They want to have the truth told about numerous things—about the taking of the children, about the exploitation of labour, the systematic abuse of women. But above all is the matter of violence, the long history of frontier conflict. They want white Australia to own, to accept, to identify with a past that they know only too well. (*Why...?* 126).

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<sup>1</sup> Israel Charny, editor of *The Encyclopedia of Genocide*, defines the term as the "mass killing of substantial numbers of human beings...under conditions of the essential defencelessness and helplessness of the victims" (qtd. in Tatz, *Intent* 71; my italics). According to this definition, "mass" and "substantial" mean the same thing.

<sup>2</sup> Like "genocide," "invasion" is also a highly controversial term. See Henry Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?* 153-167.

<sup>3</sup> *Terra nullius*, meaning nobody's country, was the legal principle invoked to justify dispossession. An influential study of its significance and use, as well as of land policy and rights, is Henry Reynolds, *Law of the Land*, which provides comparisons with how questions of sovereignty and possession of territory was treated in other colonial settings, particularly North America.

<sup>5</sup> Howard, Pauline Hanson, and other conservatives have been charged with genocide by Aboriginal activists, who have sought to bring them to trial, so far with no success. Of course, this helps to explain why Howard finds the very term "risible." See Reynolds, *Indelible Stain* 7-8.

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps something about the fragility of whiteness in the Australian context invites genocide or even Holocaust denials or rationalizations, as in the strange affair of "Helen Demidenko" and her novel, *The Hand that Signed the Paper*. In 1995, Demidenko, a.k.a. Helen Darville, won the prestigious Miles Franklin Award for best novel of the year by an Australian. Therein, Demidenko sympathizes with her Ukrainian immigrant characters who participated in genocide against Jews during World War II at Babi Yar, but who did so, apparently, because the Holocaust was the reaction of many Europeans against the great Jewish conspiracy of Bolshevism and Stalinism. As Robert Manne indicates in *The Culture of Forgetting*, the uproar over Demidenko-Darville's obvious anti-Semitism, after she had won the prestigious

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national literary prize, was nearly as noisy as that over Windschuttle's *Fabrication*. Manne clearly thinks that the two controversies are culturally related.

<sup>7</sup> As Attwood and Foster note, "historians have found it necessary to recapitulate their work on frontier conflict, much of it undertaken 20 or more years ago, and debate has been forced back onto well-trodden paths with no discernible benefits" ("Introduction" 22).

<sup>8</sup> Stanner's ABC Boyer lectures were published as *After the Dreaming*. They are reproduced in *White Man Got No Dreaming*, which I cite in the text.

<sup>9</sup> The complete extinction of the Beothuks of Newfoundland came earlier, but that group was not clearly seen as a distinct "race," as the Tasmanians were at least through the nineteenth century. Of the recent studies directly focused on the question of genocide, Reynolds' *Indelible Stain* offers the most thorough treatment. Alison Palmer's *Colonial Genocide* provides a good comparison between the genocidal activities of settlers and Native Police in Queensland from the 1840s to the 1890s and the deliberate extermination of the Hereros in German Southwest Africa. Colin Tatz's *Intent to Destroy* is also comparative, carefully contrasting the Australian situation with the Nazi Holocaust and the Apartheid regime in South Africa.