

Historians, choose your battles

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To everybody writing and talking about Aboriginal-white history on the Australian frontier: have a Bex and a good lie down. An angry race to destroy reputations is not the way to get at the truth.

Robert Manne ("Aboriginal history: a few facts", on this page yesterday) is in danger of saying it is scandalous to estimate Aboriginal deaths at white hands in early colonial Tasmania as too low but it is quite OK to estimate them on the high side.

The main point of his article seems to be that the numbers of Aborigines killed in frontier conditions cannot be known. However, the main point of the historian he is attacking, Keith Windschuttle, in his book *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, is that some writers on early Tasmania have estimated this unknowable number as far too high.

Lyndall Ryan, whose *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* Windschuttle most criticises in *Fabrication*, estimates that as many as 700 Aborigines there died at the hands of colonial whites. Henry Reynolds, another Windschuttle target, put it at more like 400-500.

Each of these three is at least having a go at assessing how serious the situation was. Many other writers over the years have written emotionally about the racial violence in Tasmania and elsewhere, but all too often vaguely as well. Tasmania has special poignancy because the distinctive indigenous people, excluding those with white blood, died out within less than 70 years of the first white colonists arriving. Most appear to have died through illness.

There is no question there was a lot of violence in early Australia, including Tasmania, but it varied enormously and knowledge of what happened is sketchy. Estimating the numbers killed can seem distasteful but it is the best way of knowing how severe this violence was.

Over the past 30 years many historians have done research on the Australian frontier and its impact on Aborigines. Skilled and time-consuming research has produced much valuable information, but there are still huge discrepancies in the estimates of

what happened - after all, it was long, long ago.

A better picture is gradually emerging, but the truth seems more likely to be reached by welcoming a diversity of opinions at this uncertain stage than by acrimony and an angry posse of well-resourced academic experts bearing down on one independent, self-funding conservative revisionist, combative as he can be.

One of the main problems in Australian history is that nobody really knows what happened, in Tasmania as anywhere else. The period debated between Windschuttle and his antagonists is 1803-30 - up to 200 years ago. The Aborigines knew little English and most had no reading and writing. Therefore, almost nothing is known of their views about the white settlers or their experiences at white hands.

Estimating the number of Aborigines killed in the many fights with whites or their motives for attacks on whites is extremely hazardous. Most occurred in remote camps and homesteads. They were classed as murder unless in clear self-defence, and for that reason unlikely to be reported and officially counted.

It was also fairly hard to kill Aborigines in these circumstances, assuming one wished to. Unlike most of the British settlers, they knew the country intimately and had developed over generations ways of both hunting in it and defending themselves from attack. This was particularly so in Tasmania, with its dense forests and rugged terrain.

The settlers' main weapons were muskets, which took time to load and fire and were not accurate beyond 80-100 metres. Rifles and repeater guns did not appear until the 1850s when frontier conditions in Tasmania were over and most of its indigenous people were dead.

There were few horses in the early colonial period, so most whites did not have this advantage over Aborigines until much later, when frontier skirmishing had largely receded to the tropical north of Australia.

It is hardly surprising that historians trying to unravel this period differ greatly in how they interpret the many incidents that occurred.

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