

Whitewash v Fabrication: ideological rivals slug it out

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James Button watches as two historians stage a bitter public dispute.

“I regard Fabrication as one of the most implausible, unimaginative, ignorant and pitiless books about Australian history written for many years.”

Keith Windschuttle sat motionless as Robert Manne spoke. Occasionally he closed his eyes. When he spoke in turn his delivery was unemotional and dry. Yet he too had hard things to say.

“The Reynolds and Ryan story, which Robert Manne’s book tries to perpetuate, does not fan reconciliation, it only fans racial hostility and hatred,” he said, describing the work of two historians, Henry Reynolds and Lyndall Ryan.

Whitewash versus Fabrication. Last night a packed house at the Malthouse Theatre heard Keith Windschuttle, author of volume one of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, debate Robert Manne, professor of politics at LaTrobe University and editor of *Whitewash*, a book of essays that seek to debunk Windschuttle’s account of the fate of Tasmania’s Aborigines.

It was a measured debate, held before a polite audience that included Aboriginal leader Patrick Dodson, but a great deal was at stake.

It was, said historian John Hirst, debate chairman, “perhaps the most important issue in Australian history”. To Professor Manne, Fabrication was part of a wider campaign to destroy the progress of reconciliation, and “conservatives have hailed it with overwhelming enthusiasm”.

He noted that historian Geoffrey Blainey saw Fabrication as “one of the most important and devastating (books) written on Australian history in recent decades”.

He alleged that Windschuttle, in a debate in Hobart, described 19th century Aborigines as akin to “modern-day junkies raiding service stations for money”.

Windschuttle, a former Marxist turned right-wing revisionist historian, did not seek to refute the claim in his speech. However, he said many Aboriginal people supported his case, “especially in Tasmania”. He cited three Tasmanian Aborigines whom he said had publicly supported him.

Windschuttle said “the debate about Aboriginal history is not a moral debate but an empirical one”. And “I cannot see how a story about violence and warfare between blacks and whites, if it is untrue, can help reconciliation at all”.

Windschuttle's book seeks to show that no genocide or significant massacres of Tasmanian Aborigines occurred in the years between white settlement of Van Diemen's Land in 1803 and the early 1830s, when the indigenous population had dwindled to a mere 200 or so.

Instead, he writes, most Aborigines died of European-introduced disease.

To Professor Manne this argument - and especially Windschuttle's "pseudo-precise figure" of 118 Tasmanian Aboriginal deaths, now updated by Windschuttle to 120 - was "absurd".

He said that Windschuttle had relied extensively on the research of a key scholar of the Tasmanian Aborigines, Brian Plomley, but ignored the scholar's critical disclaimer that it was impossible to know how many Aborigines were killed by the British. What was more, he said, Windschuttle had "directly cited" from only three of the 30 books published on Van Diemen's Land between 1803 and 1834.

Windschuttle's criticism was directed mainly at Reynolds and Ryan, who wrote essays for Whitewash. He said that both historians had made a claim of genocide.

However, "the full historical evidence, not the selective and deceptive version provided by Reynolds, shows that even at the height of Aboriginal violence in 1830, very few settlers entertained such a notion (of genocide)".

Professor Hirst began the debate by pointing out that in the 1960s, most historians were focused on events such as the Great Strike of the 1890s or the Eureka Stockade - at which 30 people were killed in an argument over miners' licences. Only more recent history had revealed that thousands were killed on the frontier between whites and Aborigines.