



No winners in the endless history war

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UNLIKE most wars, but like the culture wars of which they form an episode, the history wars never end, unless history itself does. Thus we are denied the satisfaction of what literary critics call "closure" -- the big moment at the end when the prizes get handed out and we finally learn who was right all along. The war over Keith Windschuttle's book *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, in which he challenges what he calls "orthodox" accounts of the extent and nature of violence between blacks and whites on the colonial frontier, has been proceeding for nearly a year now. On all sides, there have been victories, losses, and even a couple of embarrassing capitulations. What seems true at this stage of the conflict was probably obvious before it began. The facts -- stubborn and resistant, but not always, alas, crystal-clear -- cannot be made to fit some pre-established narrative pattern that the historian finds convenient. And however much it annoys us, they cannot be drafted willy-nilly into whatever political campaign concerns us in the present -- neo-conservative, republican, whatever. Manning Clark -- and in this, he was not even particularly unusual or controversial -- was always trying to accommodate historical data to the shape of Greek tragedy. But history is not a tragedy, or a comedy, and Australian colonial history is no exception. After months of public bickering over the pitiful fate of the Tasmanian Aborigines, we are still short of a realistic account that sails between the tragic "black armband" school and the comic "Three cheers for the empire!" version.

Nevertheless, Windschuttle has managed to provide a powerful corrective to the view of the colonial administration of Tasmania as engaged in a genocidal war of extermination against the island's original inhabitants. But in the forensic drive to correct earlier accounts, what we miss in his book is the sense that the virtual extinction of the Tasmanian Aborigines -- whether it was from violence or disease or other causes -- was a human tragedy (if not a Greek one) that continues to hold moral implications, which are very different to political lessons, for Australia today. In recent weeks, Windschuttle has said repeatedly it is not the historian's responsibility to be compassionate, but dispassionate. Isn't it possible to be both?

That said, the response of the academic establishment to Windschuttle's work has been lamentable. It is supposed to be right-wing columnists who "hunt in packs", but left-wing academics have done themselves proud with *Whitewash*, in which 19 of them launch into Windschuttle's supposed failings as a historian and a human being, even comparing him, unforgivably, with Holocaust-denier David Irving. Windschuttle's personality, politics, and credentials are all vigorously attacked in *Whitewash*, as they have repeatedly been for the past year. But his facts -- or rather the serious factual lapses he located in his adversaries' work -- are not convincingly rebutted. The procedure adopted by many of the contributors in *Whitewash* will be familiar to anyone who remembers how Western left-wing intellectuals operated in

the 1950s, when all challenge, all dissent, was routinely dismissed as “ideological” rather than taken on its merits. This process begins in Robert Manne’s introduction, in which Windschuttle’s book is located firmly in the context of John Howard’s political agenda. Another of the contributors, Henry Reynolds, ends his piece with a rhetorical question about Windschuttle: “How do we explain the animus towards the Tasmanians? Whence comes the passion?” There could be any number of answer to this, but the only answer Reynolds can come up with is that Windschuttle is the “pied piper” to a “bevy of right-wing identities”, and that he wants to undermine the “staples of indigenous politics”. Last week, another left-wing historian, Stuart Macintyre, claimed Windschuttle -- a lone unaffiliated scholar with no resources apart from his own time and intelligence -- was part of “a campaign of vilification of historians and accusations against them and attempts to intimidate them”.

Why the hair-trigger anxieties? After all, there is little reason for professors Manne, Reynolds or Macintyre to feel embattled, given there are virtually no conservative academics in our humanities faculties to give them any lip. But that may give us our answer. When a minority has managed to capture key public institutions -- universities, charities, museums, public broadcasters -- it will patrol the borders of those institutions jealously. The Australian itself has been depicted by Professor Manne, in his introduction to *Whitewash* and elsewhere, as a committed player in this history war, when all we have really done is provide generous space to all views. If even that triggers a few anxieties, then we are not ready to apologise for it.