

National

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So who's fabricating the history of Aborigines?

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Keith Windschuttle's book *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* has generated a debate with much heat but little light. Like Holocaust-denier David Irving, Windschuttle is a lucid writer who deploys primary evidence to great effect. The only effective response for those who would challenge him is through serious critique of his methodology.

Windschuttle calls his first chapter 'The Killing Fields at Risdon Cove'. In it he seeks to reinterpret the May 3, 1804, massacre of Aborigines by settlers at Risdon Cove in Tasmania. To Windschuttle, the way this event has been recorded in the past is a metaphor for his broader thesis. It shows, he says, "how the conflict between Aborigines and settlers has long been exaggerated by people far removed from the scene and by rumours and myths".

Windschuttle argues that historians of the Risdon massacre have been led astray by the testimony of those who were not there. He says that if we stick to the "facts" as told by the eyewitnesses, we see that the incident was merely an unfortunate misunderstanding in which just two or three Aborigines lost their lives. Yet Windschuttle seems to find some "facts" less convenient than others. While he accepts the word of two of only three eyewitnesses whose memories of that day were recorded, he goes to extraordinary lengths to wish away and discredit the testimony of the third. Is it a coincidence that this eyewitness, Edward White, claimed that "there were a great many of the Natives slaughtered and wounded"? White, an Irish ex-convict, left the most extensive account of the massacre under cross-examination before a committee of inquiry in 1830. He had no interest in embellishing or playing down the truth. The other witnesses, Lieutenant William Moore of the NSW Corps and Surgeon Jacob Mountgarrett, were active participants.

Windschuttle's attempts to wish away the inconvenient evidence of the Risdon massacre began two years ago in a National Press Club debate with Henry Reynolds. According to the transcript published on his website, Windschuttle implied that the reports of Moore and Mountgarrett were the only first-hand accounts. White's evidence about the number killed was not mentioned at all. Similarly, in *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Moore's and Mountgarrett's accounts are reproduced in full. White's is not.

White's testimony about the peaceable intentions of the Aborigines is ignored by Windschuttle. According to White, "the natives did not threaten me; I was not afraid of them; (they) did not attack the soldiers; they would not have molested them; they had no spears with them; only waddies". On the contrary, the language in three accounts admits to aggression on the part of the Europeans. According to White, "the soldiers came down from their own camp to the creek to attack the Natives".

Elsewhere, Windschuttle uncritically accepts Moore's explanation of events. Moore's principle justification for the attack by the soldiers was that the Aborigines were beating the settler Birt at his hut. No other first-hand account refers to such an incident. Even Moore admits he did not see it with his own eyes: "I was informed that a party of them was beating Birt, the Settler, at his farm". White, who was working close to Birt's hut, swore that the Aborigines never went near it.

Having accepted the stories told by Moore and Mountgarrett at face value, Windschuttle picks at the tiniest threads of White's evidence to try to show him as a mere peddler of gossip. First, he claims White could have only seen a very small part of the action. On the contrary, it is clear from White's statement that he was familiar with the entire incident.

Next, Windschuttle says that the soldiers would not have been physically able to kill as many Aborigines as White claims, because they only carried single-shot muskets. Yet this was a clash that lasted three hours - plenty of time to reload. There were between 74 and 80 Europeans at Risdon that day.

Finally, White's claim that Mountgarrett sent the bones of some of the murdered Aborigines to Sydney in two casks is further proof of his unreliability, according to Windschuttle, because he was a convict and therefore wouldn't be aware of what members of the "colonial elite" were doing. This argument is patently absurd. Living as they did cheek by jowl with 60 or so soldiers and convicts, it is hard to imagine even the most minor piece of gossip passing at Risdon without every resident knowing about it.

Keith Windschuttle has erred by weighting the facts to suit his thesis about what happened at Risdon Cove. The rest of his work warrants similar scrutiny. We will never know for sure how many were killed that day. Certainly it was more than two or three. Probably it was fewer than 50. Somewhere in between lies the "great many" spoken of by Edward White, whose poignant testimony remains for me the most credible description of this sorry episode.

Phillip Tardif has published a history of the Tasmanian convict experience. His study of the first settlement at Risdon Cove will be published later this year.