

Doubts raised on historic massacre

[Matthew Denholm](#) January 14, 2022



Flag raising at Risdon Cove, near Hobart, for the beginning of NAIDOC week. Picture: Chris Kidd

A group of researchers says it has uncovered evidence “debunking” claims that one of Australia’s worst Aboriginal massacres occurred at Hobart’s founding site.

History books have stated a massacre of 30-50 Aborigines occurred at Risdon Cove on May 3, 1804, in a bloody prelude to the Black Wars.

Two British officials involved reported the deaths of three or four “natives”, but in 1830 an ex-convict, Edward White, told an inquiry into frontier conflict that he witnessed a “great many” deaths.

White’s “eyewitness” account has been used since to justify claims of up to 200 deaths or even the butchering of “a whole tribe”, as well as inclusion on historian Lyndall Ryan’s national massacre map.

However, a group of amateur and professional historians has conducted an exhaustive search of convict lists and other archival material – and

found no evidence for any Edward White being at Risdon Cove, or anywhere in Van Diemen's Land, until many years later.

Researcher Scott Seymour said his group had discovered the Edward White identified as the eyewitness in a 2003 history of Risdon Cove by author Phillip Tardif could not have been – because he was dead.

“The Edward White that Tardif and other historians tell us about as having arrived on the ship Atlas and having been at Risdon Cove in fact didn't survive the journey from Britain to NSW,” Mr Seymour said. “He died on the way.”

Every list of those present at Risdon Cove – including one relied on in the Tardif publication – contained no Edward White, Mr Seymour said.



Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre CEO Heather Sculthorpe speaks at a flag raising at Risdon Cove for the beginning of NAIDOC week. Picture: Chris Kidd

Mr Tardif could not be contacted, but Professor Ryan said an absence of White from records did not mean he was not present.

“To claim that Edward White was not a witness to the massacre is ridiculous,” she said.

"None of the 19th century historians ... query White's testimony. If White was a fake, he would have been exposed long ago.

"This is the latest in a long line of massacre deniers."

All lists of convicts present in VDL from 1803 to 1805 contained no Edward White, with the name not appearing in records until 1818.

Similarly, lists of first inhabitants at Risdon Cove and Hobart contained no Edward White.

An Edmund White, whom Mr Seymour said "fits the bill" as the 1830 committee witness – "Edmund" interchangeable for "Edward" – did not appear in VDL records until 1811.

The researchers – who in April will publish a book detailing their findings – believe the White who gave evidence to the 1830 inquiry, rather than being an eyewitness, was regurgitating stories circulated in the preceding 26 years.

"We've turned three or four people who were killed – a tragedy that shouldn't have happened – into a massacre of a whole tribe," Mr Seymour said.

Aboriginal activist Michael Mansell agreed with Prof Ryan, saying those responsible for the killings – the basis of Risdon Cove being handed back to Aborigines in 1995 – had "plenty of reason to downplay their actions".

"Observing White at the hearing, rather than reconstructing a tale 200 years later, the committee saw White as a credible witness," Mr Mansell said.

"This (new) book seeks to reconstruct a convenient version of events, 200 years later. Credibility is the key issue here."

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