

# Whose fabrication of Aboriginal history?

## VIEWPOINT

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PROFESSOR Bill Rubinstein's article (*AJN* 8/8) on the Holocaust and Aboriginal genocide does his readers a disservice by confusing the central issues.

He gives the impression that *Whitewash*, the forthcoming book edited by Professor Robert Manne, equates the Australian case with the Holocaust of European Jewry. He thus makes it easy for himself by pointing to the obvious differences between what happened to Aborigines in 19th-century Australia and European Jews in World War II.

The last so-called "full-blooded" Tasmanian died in 1876, three generations after Europeans landed on the island. This is a human catastrophe, but there is no sense of tragedy evident in the writings of Windschuttle or Rubinstein, who reduce the issue to body counts and cold statistics.

But *Whitewash* makes no such equation. As readers of the original article in *AJN* (11/7) will remember, *Whitewash* assesses the claim of Keith Windschuttle in his book, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, that Australian historians have systematically concealed evidence of frontier violence for political purposes. This is a serious claim and now passes for fact among many Australians. Because it warrants a response, Professor Manne asked a group of specialists in Australian history and genocide studies to examine it in light of the archival sources. They can show that most of Windschuttle's accusations are ill-founded. Of course Rubinstein will

not know this because he has not read the book! It will only be launched at the Melbourne Writers' Festival later this month.

Surprisingly, Rubinstein does not address my contribution to *Whitewash*, which formed the main part of the original *AJN* article to which he objects. There I scrutinise the controversial parallel made by many between Windschuttle and Holocaust denier David Irving. Because the purpose of the book is sober analysis and not character assassination, I point out that Windschuttle does not deny the Holocaust nor share Irving's extreme political views. The question is what counts as evidence and the preparedness to engage in proper debate.

For example, many of the contributors to *Whitewash* concede points to Windschuttle where he has uncovered errors. That is how scholarship advances: Deniers, by contrast, ignore the legitimate insights of their critics because they are literally committed to a particular point of view. Most deniers, whether of the Holocaust, Armenian genocide or Japanese war crimes in World War II, want to rescue the "honour" of their respective nation. Whether Windschuttle wants to play politics or engage in scholarship, I suggest, depends on how he responds to *Whitewash*.

Rubinstein's other points border on the hysterical. The claim about the "Australian ideological left, hegemonic in our universities" should be treated as an embarrassing misjudgment attributable to his distance, in Wales, from the local scene. The same can be said of his



touching faith in the belief that the colonial authorities "did their utmost to protect the Aborigines from deliberate murder," a naivety at which Australian history undergraduates would roll their eyes.

Despite what Rubinstein thinks, Australian historians are not trying to undermine "the legitimacy of established society" with some "liberal death wish"; as he puts it breathlessly, They may be passionate about their work and express indignation at what he'll the Aborigines. After all, the last so-called "full-blooded" Tasmanian died in 1876, three generations after Europeans landed on the island. This is a human catastrophe, but there is no sense of tragedy evident in the writings of Windschuttle or Rubinstein, who reduce the issue to body counts and cold statistics.

Their understanding of the historians' work is very limited. Historians are not just detectives who uncover facts in archives. They also reconstruct how members of different cultures viewed the world. In this way, we can understand the values of our

ancestors. And we can also ask whether we want to continue or reject their traditions.

Some of them were clearly problematic. One of the beliefs of the British settlers in Tasmania was that they were doing the indigenous people a favour by bringing them "civilisation". They also believed that as hunter-gatherers, Aborigines did not own the land because they had not cultivated it like English peasants. Because they thought they had a right to the land, they regarded indigenous resistance as criminal.

The political philosopher on whom they relied for these views was John Locke, who argued that in such circumstances the natives had "declared war against all mankind, and therefore may be destroyed as a lion or tiger, one of those wild savage beasts with whom men can have no society or security". This is a licence to kill, and Windschuttle unknowingly endorses this ideologically extreme notion in his book.

Yet like Rubinstein, he accuses historians of bias because they think that Aborigines should be not criminalised like this. I leave it to readers of the *AJN* to decide who is politically driven here: I am confident that readers of *Whitewash* will see through the factual, moral and methodological confusion caused by *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* and its supporters.

Dr Dirk Moses teaches history at the University of Sydney, where he also convenes the masters in Holocaust studies. He is a contributor to Professor Robert Manne's book, *Whitewash*, to be launched at the Melbourne Writers' Festival on August 22.