

# The value of Keith Windschuttle in promoting a sustainable culture: a benevolent analysis<sup>1</sup>

Mary O'Dowd  
Monash University

This paper is the writing of a non-Indigenous Australian. It considers the interplay of frontier history, culture and, latterly, a sustainable environment, through the lens of Australian national identity. It argues that a reformulation of the frontier pioneer identity is necessary to a sustainable culture and environment. It puts the case that coming to terms with non-Indigenous and Indigenous frontier history is part of this. It revisits the so-called 'history wars' and considers the concept of 'war' as a negative construction that has reinforced a public binary view of Indigenous/non-Indigenous history, that has continued in politics. Broadly, this binary positioned one group who accepted that Indigenous people were dispossessed and subjected to brutal treatment; and a second group who considered that frontier men were largely noble, and that while there may have been a bit of 'messy stuff' on the frontier it was best not dwell on it. The politics of these two views, as played out in the public arena, have been confrontational. Windschuttle's (2000; 2002) recent written work, and more importantly his skills in promoting the position of a benign frontier in the media, was the catalysis in promoting the binary into a 'war'. The paper argues that the way forward is to move beyond this binary in history and politics, and that key to this is a more mature understanding of the constructed myth of the 'noble pioneer'.

The concept of 'history wars' (Macintyre & Clarke 2004) arose out of a rediscovery of the many brutal actions on the frontier. Many writers have assisted this unravelling. Broome (2003, p. 88) considers that Rowley (1970), who wrote about the dispossession and brutality

1

## **Online Proceedings of 'Sustaining Culture' (2008)**

Annual Conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia (CSAA)

UniSA, Adelaide December 6-8, 2007

<http://unisa.edu.au/com/csaa/onlineproceedings.htm>



towards Aboriginal people, was the ‘father’ of this genre, but certainly Reynolds (e.g. 1972; 1973; 1982; 1989) was a significant uncle, particularly his *The Other Side of the Frontier*. Other key writers of this unveiling of what Stanner (1968) termed ‘The Great Australian Silence’ about Indigenous issues include Beatty (1962); Moorehead (1966); Plomley (1987); Blomfield (1992); Elder (1988); Read (1988) and Haelich (2000). These writings have been termed ‘leftist’ or even ‘revisionist history’ (to distinguish them from the historical writings since the 1880s, where emphasis was on the white explorer mastering the land—the ‘noble pioneer’ (see White, 1981 for a discussion of this concept)—but this term has also been applied to Windschuttle’s work (Atkinson 2003, p. 113). Manne (2003, p. 3) describes the genre as ‘new historians of the dispossession’. Yet these writings were more ‘re-discoveries’ than ‘new’, and the term ‘revisionist’ could be regarded as a slur, as it was after all simply an expanded history. The term ‘frontier’ is applied to the expanded frontier history in this paper.

There was a very slow penetration of the frontier history into schools and universities; this was despite the evidence being available and mounting through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. This failure to penetrate the academy (see Macintyre & Clark 2004, pp. 174-190, 194-198 on schools and the 2000 debate on the National Museum). This deficit in public knowledge can be linked to the vested conservative and economic interests of pastoral elites (typically associated with the Liberal/Country political parties) and mining interests (e.g. Brennan 2004; Macintyre & Clark 2004, p. 143). Yet national identity rather than vested interest was held up as the public face as to why the ‘new’ frontier history was not ‘true’. While nationalism had a role, that role was politicised, exaggerated and used to divide the nation. The binary was rather established in the politicisation of that history, and the vested interests were able to hide behind the face of nationalistic debate. In the debate the ‘noble’ national father was owned by one group, while that same national father was disowned by the second group. In short, complexity was largely disowned—particularly in the media discussions of these issues.



The politicisation of frontier history into a nationalist debate meant that land rights were constructed as a personal economic threat (as well as a threat to the national economic well being) and the debate focused on law, rather than justice. Former Prime Minister, John Howard, not very cleverly (but very successfully), characterised that to believe our brutal history towards Indigenous Australians was a slur on the nation, and importantly a slur on 'our' national self.

Ironically, Australian national identity kicked in and the 'noble pioneers' on both sides of a nationalistic divide came into play. The underdog, 'frontier' history, fought with the spirit of the noble pioneers whose presence they refuted. Those who denied the brutality of the past and advocated that the pioneers had been noble demonstrated a meanness of spirit supposedly absent in that same 'pioneer'. On both sides the issue became politicised and mediatised as a difference of 'truths' and a schism.

The binary politics made it difficult for complexity to be engaged. Yet some of the key writers on the frontier, such as Reynolds, often evidenced complex portrayals of 'settler/invader/Indigenous' contact and understandings and misunderstandings as well as abuse (Krygiel & Krieken 2003) also make this point. But as time moved on politics and the politics of history allowed even less for public discussion of complexity; for example, Reynolds had to substantiate invasion by the British and resistance by the Aboriginal people in Court cases to gain land rights. Complexity, in that negotiation and accommodation with Aboriginal people also took place, was largely lost in the public debate. The politics of the binary was taking an even greater hold during the Prime Ministership of John Howard. Prior to that there was some movement towards justice (e.g. the Mabo High Court victory and the associated Native Title Act of 1993), but with Howard everything became more tattered. There followed the Native Title Amendment Act 1998, undermining the so-called 'Mabo' High Court victory (see Behrendt 2006).



A sequence of writings followed which highlighted the story of the history—the invasion and the resistance; but not an understanding of the history (e.g. Manne et al. 2003). Another part of the binary produced writings highlighting Indigenous people's roles in the struggle for justice (e.g. Attwood & Marcus 1999; Curthroys 2002). This was a necessary documentation, but in an era where the more recent publications are often constructed as most up to date there was a down-playing of the role of non-Indigenous people in advocating justice. This silencing of white roles was an (understandable) attempt at balance. It was also the reversal of an earlier and still ongoing prejudice against, and construction of, Indigenous people. Those 'new' to Indigenous studies may have had less awareness of the larger picture.

Enter Keith Windschuttle (2002) with *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*. The book contained some truths. These few 'truths' (amid the hubris of often barely disguised racism) became a cornerstone of the book's public credibility. In fact the few 'truths' reflected the whole adversarial structuring of frontier history writing and debate. Windschuttle's few valid criticisms tended to be dismissed by academics, along with the totality. For example, Windschuttle pointed out that some frontier academics did not reference correctly (which was valid). He pointed out that some claims of fact were fictions; another valid point. Elder's book (1998) was voted the 10<sup>th</sup> most influential work of non-fiction in Australia by the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *the Age* poll of 1999. Windschuttle pointed out that the book was not nonfiction, but nonfiction embellished with imagination—and this was correct. Windschuttle was also justified in questioning the estimates of Indigenous people who died, and in highlighting that these estimates were questionable. Broome (2003, p. 97), in his response to this, used terms such as 'guesstimates' of Aboriginal deaths, but he did not acknowledge that some writers in the frontier history had used Reynolds' guesstimates about the numbers of Aboriginal deaths as facts. Windschuttle's point was again a valid one. Frontier historians and sympathisers typically dismissed Windschuttle's work in its



entirety—and so ultimately weakened their own position in the media skirmishes.

Windschuttle clearly had some valid points

### **Further examples of the binary**

Windschuttle (2003, p. 399, 184-186) explained away the impossibility that people on the frontier people were unjust towards Aboriginal people, arguing that the ruling ideas of Christian Enlightenment that prevailed at the time, and accompanying British attitudes and laws had evolved so highly as to make violence to Aboriginal people an impossibility. It was, of course, a spurious argument that the British could not have killed or behaved badly or unjustifiably due to the rule of 'law' when even today American law could not prevent the abuses in Abu Ghraib and could legalise torture (Otterman 2007). Windschuttle's patched eye ignored even the simplest challenges to his contention, such as the harsh and brutal reality of convict ships and convict labour. Equally, Windschuttle dismissed claims of a guerrilla war conducted by Aboriginal people in Tasmania, saying they lived in a 'savage state' (Windschuttle 2003, p. 399). He wrote as if colonisation were a period of beneficence and not of itself a form of savagery, where force was used to take land; indeed, as if warfare itself were not a form of savagery.

Reynolds' (2003) response reflects the other polarity. He berated Windschuttle's failure to accept that Aboriginal warfare was 'guerrilla-style'. Reynolds (2003, p. 127) notes that the Aboriginal Tasmanians were 'not criminals but noble and warlike', as if nobility and warfare are a kind of benign bread and butter, inseparably linked. Reynolds' construction of war is very much in the ANZAC tradition. Thus, in such discussion the concept of Indigenous 'difference' is submerged, and the lessons of pacifism undiscussed.

The binary is also illustrated, however, in the structure of texts written in response to Windschuttle. Attwood and Foster (2003) brought together on their side the voices of key



writers in an edited text including Atkinson, Broome, Mulvaney, Reynolds and Ryan (but had the grace to include Windschuttle). Robert Manne (2003) edited another text with a slightly overlapping group of writers, and came in swinging, his vitriol almost on a par with Windschuttle's. Manne (2003, p. 6) could not resist a 'bitch' criticism, albeit bracketed, which reflected the tone of much of his 'Introduction', when he commented on 'Windschuttle, who had at the time had done no systematic research on settler-indigenous relations (or anything else) ...'. Manne (2003, p. 11) stated that his book provided a 'thorough' and 'expert' discussion of Windschuttle's book, described as 'so ignorant, so polemical and so pitiless ...'. Thus Manne and many of the contributors to his book bought into the war. For example, Krygier & van Krieken (2003, p. 81) begin their article with a comment that Windschuttle's book is a 'tubby tome', and later a 'fat book' (used twice on page 83); equating size with badness, even before pursuing any argument about content. For the most part the writers in Manne's book are self-congratulatory, assuming that they are on the side of 'good'. The editor sets the tone of a 'punch out'. The few articles that step outside this style include the latter parts of Krygier & van Krieken (2003) who, after the initial pages of criticism, specifically address the complexity of the frontier. Some of Macintyre's (2004) style is in the same genre as he starts in chapter two, requesting pity and sympathy for historians at war with Windschuttle: such an adept media player ... as if academics were some delicate species.

In summary, where critical skills are applied in one context, they are ignored in another. The history wars were a barren area when it comes to scholarship.

### **The reactive & adversarial binary**

Historians and academics recognise that history is a product of the times in which they were written. For example, White (1981) noted that the myth of the National Father and its consequential concept of Australian manhood were accepted uncritically until the 1950s. It



must have been very exciting rediscovering the story of Australia's 'settlement' and expanding that narrow frontier history, using documents that had languished for so long. It is surprising that it was then undermined by historians themselves, at least until vested economic interests are considered. The rediscovered frontier history was increasingly written in a reactive and adversarial style—but this style was shared by both sides of the binary, a point Windschuttle interestingly failed to make.

The frontier generation historians, writing in response to the hostility, met those seeking to continue the silencing of history with their own silences: a silence to undo a silence—the censorship of war if you like. The silence of criticism within the 'frontier' school complemented the attempted silencing of that history, as any criticism could be and was taken up by the 'other side' as an attempt to undermine the obvious evidence. Frontier texts that penetrated the consciousness of the Australian public were not harshly peer reviewed; see for example, Elder's (1998) book, discussed above. Equally the issue of the numbers of Indigenous people killed went unquestioned until Windschuttle's work. It was an error to assume that 'worse is better', or that exaggerated nonfiction would survive as credible; and it belied the fact that the history on the frontier was brutal enough, as is the history until today (now itself recognised as meriting a formal national apology). Exaggeration was not necessary, yet it appeared to help gain an audience for the new history, so perhaps had a role.

The oft-cited term by Blainey (1993) that frontier history represented a 'black armband' view had become the counter to Stanner's 'silence' within media debates of history, particularly by the then Prime Minister. Yet, it is worth stating that Blainey's term was superficial rather than research-based, as his specialisation was largely outside the area of Indigenous/non-Indigenous conflict and relations. This was a comment on the level of interpretation, and not on its content. Within the history discipline there was no refutation



of the solid base of evidence of the rediscovered frontier history (at least, none until Windschuttle).

It is therefore important to understand the context of the writing of the frontier history, and how it grew into a more binarised debate when the 'revised' history failed to penetrate the academy, evolving eventually into a 'war'. The political context explains both the emphasis and the reactive and adversarial writing style of some of the writers. The style embraced silence. Reynolds wrote about Indigenous resistance *and* accommodation of the Europeans, but only certain aspects of this history were needed for political purposes. Native title law demanded proof that Indigenous Aboriginal people resisted the invasion of their lands, so aspects of invasion such as resistance were highlighted to suit the prevailing politics.

The adversarial writing style and the silences are both apparent, and both motivated by a sense of injustice. Broome (2001, p. 9) detects this 'noise' when he notes of his earlier writing (his book's first edition) 'a certain crispness and passion about the text' that he linked to his 'youth'. Titles chosen for books were designed to achieve this form of 'noise'. Consider, for example, Beatty's (1962) *With Shame Remembered*; Breslin's (1992) *Exterminate with Pride: Aboriginal-European Relations in the Townsville-Bowen Region to 1869*; Cribbin's (1984) *The Killing Times: the Coniston Massacre (1928)* and Elder's (1988) *Blood on the Wattle: massacres and maltreatment of Aboriginal people since 1788*. The style had a role. It was important that the nation hear her past. It was natural justice that this history be told. But the baggage that went with the telling, and the establishment's attempts to silence it, became even more problematic.

Windschuttle got his 'break' because frontier history was already politicised, and already constructed as a binary. Indeed the few 'truths' that Windschuttle pointed out were waiting to be identified, not because of their complexity, but because of the brashness in some of the writing, fully intended to promote the development of a non-Indigenous conscience



about frontier history. It was unfortunate that it was Windschuttle who decided to query the 'noise', but then in a way it was also fortunate, since he could not control his own 'noise'—his racism. However, it could be no accident that he entered the adversarial ring with a politics to delight powerful mining and pastoral influences, and, of course, to delight the Prime Minister of the day, John Howard.

The advantage for politicians when it came to Keith Windschuttle was his media experience. Almost single handedly (albeit supported by a larger politics) he escalated an adversarial history and binary into a 'war'. The 'boys' of the frontier school of 2003 and their mates responded. Manne (2003) and Attwood and Foster (2003) went on their own Cooee March to recruit writers and commission edited texts of responses, and along with Macintyre and Clarke (2003), in the ANZAC tradition, went to war.

### **Beyond binary and war**

The noble pioneer image denies the realities of white occupation of this country, and how destructive it has been to Indigenous people. The related (and interwoven) damage to Indigenous people has been to the land of Australia, the environment (see, for instance, Slater 1978; Smith 1992; Barr & Cary 1992; Conacher 1995; White 1997 & 2000; Mercer 2000; O'Dowd 2006). Non-Indigenous Australians need to achieve some reconciliation with our frontier past in order to negotiate beyond our frontier national present, reconcile with our history, and come to terms with the real actions of our 'noble' pioneers and their impact upon Indigenous people and their land. The 'noble pioneer' as the national-self myth needs to be confronted as a more complex character of good and bad, drawing on knowledge of diverse disciplines, including psychology, sociology, group behaviour, and peace and reconciliation studies. It is time for us to understand our history, and not just to tell the story. Wilfred Owen's First World War poem, 'Strange Meeting' is a realisation of the futility



of war which the similarities of those constructed as others once war proclaims them 'enemies'—even if, sadly, this realisation is achieved only in death.

It seemed that out of battle I escaped  
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped  
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.  
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned...  
... one sprang up ...  
'I am the enemy, you killed, my friend.'

Ironically, given his project, Windschuttle shows us the frontier we need to leave behind. He is too angry and denies too much to prevail. To try to move beyond the war we need to meet the 'enemy'—ultimately an aspect of our cultural self, and an important step towards a sustainable culture and environment, in negotiation with Indigenous Australians.

## References

Atkinson, A 2003, 'Historians and Moral Disgust', in *Frontier Conflict: the Australian Experience*, eds B Attwood & S Foster, pp. 113-119.

Attwood, B & Marcus, A 1999, *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights: a documentary history*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards.

Attwood, B & Foster, S 2003, *Frontier Conflict: the Australian Experience*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra.

Barr, N & Cary, J 1992, *Greening A Brown Land: The Australian search for Sustainable Land Use*, Macmillan Education Australia, Melbourne.

Berndt, C & Berndt, R 1983, *The Aboriginal Australians: the first pioneers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Pitman, Carlton.

Behrendt, L 2006, 'The Long Path to Land Justice', *The third annual Mabo lecture series*, James Cook University, Townsville, 7 May.



Blainey, G 1993, 'Drawing up a Balance Sheet of Our History', Sir John Latham Memorial lecture, *Quadrant*, vol. 37, no. 7-8, pp.10-15.

Breslin, B 1992, *Exterminate with Pride: Aboriginal-European Relations in the Townsville-Bowen Region to 1869*, Department of History and Politics, James Cook University, Townsville.

Blomfield, G 1992, *Baal Belbora: End of the Dreaming*, The Alternative Publishing Co-operative Ltd, Chippendale, NSW.

Brennan, FSJ 2004, *A fair go in an age of terror: Countering the terrorist threat to human rights and the Australian identity*, viewed 8 December 2008, <<http://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=905>>.

Broome, R 2002, *Aboriginal Australians: Black responses to white dominance 1788-2001*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

Broome, R 2003, 'The Statistics of Frontier Conflict', in *Frontier Conflict: the Australian Experience*, eds B Attwood & SG Foster, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, pp.88-98.

Cribbin, J 1984, *The Killing Times: the Coniston massacre 1928*, Fontana Collins, Sydney.

Curthoys, A 2002, *Freedom Ride: a freedom rider remembers*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

Elder, B 1998, *Blood on the Wattle: massacres and maltreatment of Aboriginal Australians since 1788*, New Holland Press, Sydney.

Haelich, A 2000, *Broken Circles: fragmenting Indigenous families 1800-2000*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle.

Herbert, X 1974, *Capricornia*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.

Lawson, S 2006, *The Archibald Paradox: a strange case of authorship*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

Krygier, M & van Krieken, R 2003, 'The Character of the Nation' in *Whitewash: on Keith Windschuttle's fabrication of Aboriginal history*, ed R Manne, pp. 81-108.

Lockwood, D 1962, *I, the Aboriginal*, Rigby, Adelaide.

Macintyre, S & Clark, A 2004, *The History Wars*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.



Manne, R (ed.) 2003, *Whitewash: on Keith Windschuttle's fabrication of Aboriginal history*, Black Inc Agenda, Melbourne.

Mercer, D 2000, *'A Question of Balance': natural resources conflict in Australia*, Federation Press, Annadale, NSW.

Moorehead, A 1966, *The Fatal Impact: an account of the invasion of the South Pacific 1797-1840*, Penguin, Middlesex.

O'Dowd, M 2006, 'Constructions of Australian national self and the land: the need to move from tough bushmen to gentle lovers', paper presented at the *International Landcare Conference\_Melbourne*, 9-11 Oct 2006.

Owen, W 1963, *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. C Lewis, Chatto & Windus, London.

Ottoman, M 2007, *American Torture: from cold war to Abu Ghraib and Beyond*, MUP, Melbourne.

Plomley, NJB 1987, *Weep in Silence: a history of the Flinders Island Aboriginal settlement*, Blubber Head Press, Hobart.

Read, P 1988, *A Hundred Years War*, ANU Press, Sydney.

Reynolds, H (ed.) 1972, *Aborigines and the Settlers: the Australian Experience 1788-1939*, Cassell Australia, North Melbourne.

Reynolds, H 1982, *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal resistance to the European invasion of Australia*, Penguin, Ringwood.

Reynolds, H 1987a, *Frontier: Aborigines, Settlers and Land*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

Reynolds, H 1987b, *The Law of the Land*, Penguin, Ringwood.

Reynolds, H 1988, *Aboriginal Land Rights in Colonial Australia*, National Library of Australia, ANU, Canberra

Reynolds, H 1989, *Dispossession: Black Australians and white invaders*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

Reynolds, H 1990, *With the White People*, Penguin, Ringwood.



Reynolds, H 1991, 'Beyond the Frontier: an interview with Henry Reynolds', *Island*, no. 40, pp. 30-32.

Reynolds, H (ed.) 1993, *Race Relations in Northern Queensland*, Department of History & Politics, James Cook University, Townsville.

Reynolds, H 1995, *Fate of a Free People: a radical re-examination of the Tasmanian Wars*, Penguin, Ringwood.

Reynolds, H 1998, *This Whispering in our Hearts*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

Reynolds, H 1999, *Why Weren't We Told: a personal search for the truth about our history*, Penguin, Ringwood.

Reynolds, H 2000, *Black Pioneers: how Aboriginal and Islander people helped build Australia*, Penguin, Ringwood.

Reynolds, H 2003, 'Terra Nullius Reborn', in *Whitewash: on Keith Windschuttle's fabrication of Aboriginal history*, ed R Manne, Black Inc Agenda, Melbourne, pp. 109-138

Rowley, C 1970, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*, ANU press, Canberra.

Slater, P 1978, *Rare and vanishing birds of Australia*, Rigby, Adelaide.

Smith, J 1992, *The Unique Continent*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia.

Stanner, WE 1968, 'After the Dreaming: black and white Australians: an anthropologist's view', Boyer Lectures, ABC, Sydney.

Turnbull, C 1974, *Black War: the extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines*, Sun Books, Melbourne.

White, M 1997, *Listen Our Land is Crying: Australia's environmental problems and solutions*, Kangaroo Press, Kenthurst.

White, M 2003, *Earth Alive: from Microbes to a living planet*, Rosenberg, NSW.

White, M 2000, *Running Down: water in a changing land*, Kangaroo Press, East Roseville

White, R 1981, *Inventing Australia: images and identity 1788-1980*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.



Windschuttle, K 2000, 'The Myths of Frontier Massacre in Australian History, Parts 1, II & III', *Quadrant*, vol. 44, no. 10-12, pp. 8-21, 17-24, 6-20.

Windschuttle, K 2002, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Vol 1, Van Dieman's Land 1803-1847*, Macleay Press, Paddington, NSW.

## Note

1. Identity is a politics. I try to address 'Whitefella' business. I use 'Whitefella' as despite the limitations of this descriptor of non-Indigenous Australians; it has simplicity as recognised elsewhere (e.g. Reynolds 2000, p. iv).

