

# Why Intellectuals Like Genocide

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**Abstract:** In 2002, the Australian free-lance historian and journalist, Keith Windschuttle, published a book that created a controversy that has still not died down. Entitled 'The Fabrication of Aboriginal History,' it sets out to destroy the idea that there had been a genocide of Tasmanian aborigines carried out by the early European settlers of the island.

**Key words:** intellectuals; genocide

中图分类号: G0

文献标识码:

Seemingly arcane historical disputes can often cast a powerful light on the state of our collective soul. It is for that reason that I like to read books on obscure subjects: they are often more illuminating than books that at first sight are more immediately relevant to our current situation. For, as Emily Dickinson put it, success in indirection lies.

In 2002, the Australian free-lance historian and journalist, Keith Windschuttle, published a book that created a controversy that has still not died down. Entitled 'The Fabrication of Aboriginal History,' it sets out to destroy the idea that there had been a genocide of Tasmanian aborigines carried out by the early European settlers of the island.

For about the previous quarter century, it was more or less an historical orthodoxy that there had been such a genocide. Robert Hughes accepted the idea in his best-selling history of early Australia, *The Fatal Shore*. I accepted it myself, because when I first visited Australia in 1982 I read several books on the subject by professors of history at reputable universities, and rather naively supposed that their work must have been founded on painstaking and honest research, and that they had not misrepresented their original sources.

Windschuttle argued in his book that they had fabricated much of their evidence, and that, contrary to what they claimed, there had been no deliberate policy on the part of the colonial authorities or the local population either to extirpate or kill very large numbers of aborigines. He showed that the historians' reading of the obscure source materials was either misleading or mendacious.

He sifted the material very carefully and found that there was evidence for the killing of 120 Tasmanian aborigines, either by settlers or by the military and police. Although this does not sound many, in relation to the population of Tasmanian aborigines it was a lot. It is the equivalent in the United States of upwards of 7,000,000, for there were only about 4,000 aborigines (or so it is thought) at any one time in Tasmania.

However, a similar number of settlers were killed by aborigines, and perhaps it is not so very surprising that there was conflict between people of such widely different conceptions of life as the aborigines and the early British settlers. But conflict is not genocide, which entails a plan deliberately to rid the world of a certain population. There was no genocide in Tasmania. The Tasmanian aborigines did indeed die out in the

nineteenth century, but largely of disease and as a result of the loss of fertility caused by the venereal disease introduced by the settlers.

After the book was published, there were furious challenges to Windschuttle. Slurs were cast upon him: he was, for example, the Australian equivalent of the holocaust deniers. A book of essays in refutation of his point of view was published; a refutation of the refutation was also published. He appeared all round the country in debates with some of his detractors. As far as I understand it, the massed ranks of the professional historians were unable seriously to dent his argument. A few small errors (which he acknowledged) were found in his book, but not such as to undermine his thesis; in any case, they were very minor by comparison with the wholesale errors of his opponents. He had been much more scrupulous than they.

What struck me at the time about the controversy was the evident fact that a large and influential part of the Australian academy and intelligentsia actually wanted there to have been a genocide. They reacted to Windschuttle's book like a child who has had a toy snatched from its hand by its elder sibling. You would have thought that a man who discovered that his country had not been founded, as had previously been thought and taught, on genocide would be treated as a national hero. On the contrary, he was held up to execration.

Why should this be? Here I confess that I am entering the world of the *ad hominem*. I will not be able to prove my assertions beyond reasonable doubt, and other interpretations are possible. However, when it comes to questions of human motivation, it is difficult altogether to avoid the *ad hominem*.

It is, of course, possible, that the professors and the intelligentsia were so convinced that there had been a genocide, and believed that the evidence that it had taken place so overwhelming, that any person who denied it must have been an extremely bad man. On the other hand, if the evidence was so overwhelming, they should have been able easily to produce sufficient of it in public to convince someone like me (and many others). This they have not done, and so one must conclude that, at the very least, the historical question is an open one. And if the question is still an open one, the fury directed at Windschuttle was quite disproportionate.

I think the explanation lies elsewhere. Australia is known, not without reason, as the Lucky Country. It has virtually every resource known to man. It is a liberal democracy and has been for most of its existence. No one in Australia has ever feared the midnight knock on the door. To live well there requires a good deal less effort than in most places, perhaps anywhere else. The climate in much of the country (the current drought notwithstanding) is very pleasant. Overall, it is probably the best place, certainly among the best places, on earth to live. The fact that it is lucky is not, of course, a consequence of its natural endowments alone, but of what human beings have made of those endowments. Australia is a triumphant success.

This is not to say that everyone in Australia is deliciously happy, or that Australia is a prelapsarian Garden of Eden. People who live there, like people everywhere, have their problems. They go bankrupt, divorce, neglect their children, have accidents, die prematurely, kill themselves, overeat, drink too much, get bored, suffer illnesses, and so forth, just like people everywhere else.

The fact is, however, that political reforms in Australia, whatever they might be, are very unlikely to add much to the sum of human welfare there. Australia confronts human beings with their existential responsibility to make happiness for themselves, and this is sometimes a hard responsibility to face up to. For if you are unhappy in a country like Australia, you have to consider the possibility that the problem lies with you rather than with the conditions that surround you.

This is a disagreeable thing, particularly for an intelligentsia, which is deprived by it of a providential role for itself. What does an intelligentsia do when a country is already as satisfactory in its political arrangements and social institutions as any country has ever been? Intelligentsias do not like the kind of small problems that day to day existence inevitably throws up, such as termites in the woodwork or conflict at work over desk-space: they like to get their intellectual teeth into weightier, meatier problems.

What could be a weightier problem than a prosperous, fortunate country that was founded upon genocide? Clearly, if it was so founded, an intelligentsia is urgently needed to help it emerge from the dark moral labyrinth in which it exists, hitherto blindly. For only an intelligentsia is sufficiently used to thinking in abstractions to be qualified to act as guide to the nation.

Of course, an intelligentsia needs allies, for it is rarely strong enough by itself to dominate and control a society, and oddly enough the genocide school of Tasmanian history has created allies in people who now call themselves Tasmanian aborigines. But – I hear you object – I thought you said that Tasmanian aborigines died out in the nineteenth century (the last one being called Truganini)? Yes, I reply, but that is full-blooded aborigines. Because there were sexual relations between the first settlers and aborigine women, there exist people in Tasmania with aborigine blood running in the veins. Admittedly, that blood is almost as dilute as a homeopath's medicine, but it is enough for some purposes.

Where there has been genocide, it is only right that there should be apology and, more importantly, reparation. In the case of the aborigines, this can only be restoration of the land to them as a collectivity. Indeed, it has been suggested that half the territory of the island of Tasmania be reserved to aborigines.

These aborigines live indistinguishably from their non-aboriginal neighbours. They speak no language other than English; they do not forage in the bush for food; they have the same jobs and are under no social disability, perhaps because they are also physically indistinguishable from non-aborigines. In fact they are descended to a much greater extent from the perpetrators and beneficiaries of the alleged genocide than from the victims of it. It would therefore be difficult to think of a more obvious attempted fraud perpetrated on a political entity than the claim by Tasmanian 'aborigines' to ancestral lands.

Actually, Tasmanian historiography of the genocide school has parallels elsewhere. I remember when I lived for a time in Guatemala reading the most currently-celebrated account of colonial Guatemala, called *La patria del criollo*. In all of its eight hundred pages the role of epidemic disease in reducing the number of Indians after the arrival of the Spanish was not mentioned even once, not even in passing, though it is almost certain

(that is to say as certain as it can be) that the overwhelming cause of the decrease was epidemic disease.

Why was it not mentioned? Because the author wanted to present the current, supposedly lamentable state of Guatemala to be a direct consequence of the colonial era, which was itself a time of genocide. This being the case, there was only one thing to be done: to found the state anew, to start all over again, to build a new state from a better blueprint. It is not very difficult to see what role the intelligentsia would have in constructing the new society: a very powerful, indeed directing one.

The same is true in Australia, of course. If the current state was founded on genocide then, however superficially satisfactory it might appear at first sight, it is necessary to re-found it on a sounder, more ethical basis. And the architects and subsequent owner-managers will, of course, be the intelligentsia; for only they are qualified.

Now Australia is a country that in general, until recently at any rate, has not cherished its intellectuals. It has not accorded them the respect to which they think they are naturally entitled. Indeed, until a couple of decades ago it was common practice for Australian intellectuals to flee their country and live elsewhere, so strong was the anti-intellectual atmosphere of their country. Australia was not a lucky country as far as intellectuals were concerned.

That has changed quite a lot recently, but still intellectuals in Australia are not taken as seriously by the public as they take themselves. Besides, there are now more of them, and competition for attention is therefore greater. And there is nothing much more attention-grabbing than the claim that your current happiness and good fortune is founded on a pile of bones. With a bit of luck, this claim will even turn people neurotic and increase the need for therapists.

It is hardly surprising, then, that when someone came along and challenged the version of history on which their new-found importance in society was to be based, they threw their dolly out of the pram, as the prison wardens in the prison in which I worked used to put it to describe the actions of a prisoner who had lost his temper. The dispute was not just a matter of the interpretation of the contents of old newspapers in Hobart libraries: it went to the very heart of the intelligentsia's self-conception as society's conscience and natural leaders.

A conflict over the veracity of footnotes was thus also a conflict also over the proper place of intellectuals in modern society. And Windschuttle was vastly more often right about the footnotes than he was wrong. This was quite unforgivable of him.

## 为什么知识分子喜欢种族屠杀？

西奥多·达林姆普尔

吴万伟 译

**摘要：**在2002年，澳大利亚自由职业者、历史学家和记者凯斯·文沙特尔（Keith Windschuttle）出版了

一本引起争议的书，到现在这个争议还没有完全平息下来。该书的标题是《原住民历史的编造》(The Fabrication of Aboriginal History)，试图颠覆塔斯马尼亚岛的早期欧洲定居者对原住民进行种族屠杀的说法。

**关键词：**知识分子；种族屠杀

**收稿日期：**2008-3-1