

Contemporary Comments

Just like a 'nun's picnic'? Violence and colonisation in Australia

In a memorable phrase comparing Australia with other places settled by the European empires, Claudio Veliz has described British colonisation of this country as 'like a nun's picnic' (Veliz quoted in Lane 2002:3). The occasion was his launching of Keith Windschuttle's book, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One: Van Diemen's Land, 1803–1847*. It is appropriate that a research note on this book should appear in the pages of a criminology and criminal justice journal, for one of Windschuttle's more contentious arguments is that all the incidents of Aboriginal death during colonisation occurred as a result of the criminal behaviour of the Aborigines themselves (Windschuttle 2002). In a typical passage that demands the scrutiny of scholars of criminology, Windschuttle argues that 'far from generating resentment, the expansion of settlement instead gave Aborigines more opportunity and more temptation to engage in robbery and murder, two customs they had come to relish' (Windschuttle 2002:129). This is history and amateur criminology rolled into the most unapologetic advocacy of colonisation as civilisation that has been produced in this country for many years.

What kind of a 'nun's picnic' was this? Unpredictably, Windschuttle's book confirms that, at least in this part of Australia, the experience of colonisation was devastating for the Aboriginal inhabitants. For even on Windschuttle's narrow definition of 'plausible' evidence, the rate of death from violence in the first thirty years of Tasmanian settlement was extraordinarily high. Extrapolated to the Australian mainland, the rate of violent death in Tasmania delivers an unexpected challenge to what has become the Windschuttle counter-revisionist account. Yet Windschuttle does nothing to recognise this scale of significance because, when it comes down to it, he fails to exercise some of the most basic demands of social science — the need to take account of a population base, and to compare the experience of different populations.

In a detailed accounting of 'plausible' documented deaths, Windschuttle argues that 118 died in the three decades after the first documented death in 1804. To understand the significance of the figure of 118 deaths, we have to remember what is the appropriate population base. The recent bombings in Bali help make this point more clear. Most Australians have been touched in some way or another by the Bali bombings — they know someone who was in some way connected with the many casualties and deaths. Yet the total number of Australian deaths was 88, in a population of nearly 20 million. What was the population of Tasmanian Aborigines that suffered this impact of 118 plausible deaths? According to Windschuttle, historians bent on emphasising the catastrophic impact of colonisation have grossly exaggerated the pre-contact population. On reviewing the various estimates, he instead concludes that the population of Tasmania in 1803 should be regarded as less than 2 000 (Windschuttle 2002:371).

Let us start with that figure of 2 000 and develop a population count that takes account of the decline through disease and lowered fertility, consistent with Windschuttle's account. If we use his population figures to calculate the rates of violent death at the hands of settlers, then in the thirty years of first contact (1804–34) the chances of a Tasmanian Aborigine

dying a violent death were 365.9 per 100 000 population. On the hypothetical assumption of a stable, not declining, population (Windschuttle's 118 deaths in a population remaining stable at 2 000 across the period), the death rate by violence would be no less than 190 per 100 000 per year.

What was the rate in the worst years of violence? In a passage dedicated to showing that colonists had no incentive to cover up deaths, Windschuttle argues that after 1828 'the documentary record does not show a sudden increase in the number of killings by whites' (Windschuttle 2002:361). It's not clear what documentary record he is referring to, but the table in his book documenting 118 plausible deaths shows quite the opposite (Windschuttle 2002:387–397). Counting only Windschuttle's 'plausible' deaths, it appears that at least 41 of his total 118 deaths occurred in the two years after the declaration of martial law in November 1828. On the plausible assumption, consistent with Windschuttle's arguments, that the population by 1828–30 may have been not much more than 500, the rate of violent death in the two years from the declaration of martial law would have been almost 2 000 per 100 000.

Whichever way we look at it, these are very high chances of dying a violent death. In one of the developed world's most violent societies, the United States, the average homicide rate for the last quarter century has been between 9 and 10 per 100 000. Historians of violence in early modern Europe are astonished at rates of violent death of between 10 and 60 per 100 000. In Tasmania in 1996, 35 people were shot dead at Port Arthur — that massacre sent the annual homicide rate in the state to 8.4 per 100 000, although it had a negligible impact on the total Australian homicide rate for that year (Australian Institute of Criminology 2003). During the two years from 1828, the year after which Windschuttle argues there was no 'sudden increase in the number of killings by whites,' the violent death rate of Aborigines in Tasmania was more than three times the mortality risk of the Australian population during the First World War, when over 60 000 soldiers died.

Are such comparisons appropriate in relation to the social process described in Windschuttle's book — the colonisation of a country occupied by hunter-gatherers? One exculpatory response to the argument put above has been that pre-contact Aborigines were accustomed to a more violent existence (see letter by John Dawson in *The Australian* 2003:8). Indeed, that is explicit in Windschuttle's own indictment of their pre-contact society — these were people, he suggests, who enjoyed killing and among whom there was a high risk of dying a violent death at the hands of other Indigenous people (Windschuttle 2002:128–130).

A quarter of a century ago, Geoffrey Blainey's *Triumph of the Nomads* drew attention to evidence of the incidence of violent death in pre-contact Aboriginal societies. On the basis of two accounts alone, his estimate was that the 'annual death rate in warfare' was between 1 in 270 and 1 in 300 (Blainey 1976:108–110).¹ While Blainey's evidence base was thin and his statistical speculations no less than heroic, he usefully drew attention to the failure of previous scholars to generate mortality rates from the raw figures of deaths counted:

1 Blainey used only two sources for his own speculative comments on indigenous warfare: the memoirs of the nineteenth century escapee convict William Buckley; and the commentary of anthropologist W Lloyd Warner on 'warfare' in Arnhem Land. Buckley's account was taken down some years after his return to settler society; while Warner's calculation of tribal death rates from violence was computed by a speculative doubling of his recorded numbers of deaths over a 20-year period — this alone was the basis of Blainey's estimate of 1 in 300 deaths, though he did not comment on its methodological origins. The flimsy base of these statistical calculations does not seem to bother Windschuttle in his eagerness to use Blainey as a source of evidence of the impact of internecine conflict (see Windschuttle 2002:382; Blainey 1976:108–110; Warner 1937:146ff). For a critique of Blainey's sources see Reynolds 1985:85–87.

As no prehistorian, to my knowledge, tried to convert the fighting deaths of hunter-gatherers into percentages, the illusion easily arose that in such societies fighting deaths, being numerically few, were not of great significance (Blainey 1976:265).

This methodological criticism is one that we can readily apply to Windschuttle's use of data.

Blainey's work was originally published in 1975. Subsequent research on warfare and disputes in hunter-gatherer and other pre-state societies largely confirm the serious levels of mortality that arose from internecine violent conflict, but also draws attention to the very significant range in these mortality rates. In a well-regarded recent overview of the subject, but only selectively cited by Windschuttle (2002:382), Lawrence Keeley uses evidence from Australian anthropology of both very violent tribes like the Murngin (or Yolngu) of Arnhem Land (studied by Lloyd Warner and the basis also of Blainey's calculation of 1 in 300), and very peaceful tribes like the Mardudjara of central Australia, who had no words for feud or warfare (Keeley 1996:118–119, 30).² Developing his general thesis of the commonality of warfare in all societies, Keeley embarks on the almost impossibly difficult exercise of computing annual warfare death rates. His comparison finds annual warfare death rates in pre-state societies regularly above those of state societies — although his state society calculations include decade ranges without significant wars (e.g. his use of Germany 1900–1990, for only 11 years of which the country was engaged in major wars). Nevertheless, not one of the 31 examples of warfare death rates computed by Keeley (1996:195) comes near the more than 2 percent (or 2 000 per 100 000) fatal casualty rate that I compute for Tasmanian Aboriginal death rates by violence during the years when Windschuttle argues that there was no war. And this violent death rate is more than three times the most violent warfare death rate speculated by Blainey for a pre-contact Aboriginal society in Australia.

Whatever the facts of pre-contact violence, the reality in Tasmania after 1803 was the new factor of a non-Indigenous settler population gradually making its presence felt throughout the island over the next three decades. The best possible analysis of the quantum of violence would be one that enabled us to compare this situation with similar historical examples. The dust jacket of Windschuttle's book claims boldly that 'the author finds the British colonization of the Australia (sic) was the least violent of all Europe's encounters with the New World.' The claim is developed again on the inside cover leaf:

the extensive and fully documented statistics produced in this book demonstrate that, in the entire history of Europe's colonization of the Americas and the Pacific, Van Diemen's Land was probably the site where the least indigenous blood of all was deliberately shed.

Windschuttle does not support these claims with any statistical information whatever. If Windschuttle has looked for comparative statistics, he has probably given up in frustration. The fact is that the difficulties faced by Australian historians in estimating pre-contact populations are exactly those faced by historians of the European empires the world over: almost universally, we can say that there is not enough pre-contact data to analyse. No reader of the well-documented history of the European empires in the Americas, in Africa, Asia and the Pacific can fail to notice the similarity of the Tasmanian situation in the early nineteenth century with that faced by hunter-gatherer, nomadic and semi-agricultural peoples in places like New England, north-western Canada, Brazil, south-west Africa and elsewhere from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. Windschuttle has demonstrated nothing about these other situations, beyond rhetorical claims about their being worse than Van Diemen's Land.

2 Windschuttle's selectivity is hard at work in his use of Keeley — he fails to note the latter's citation of Tonkinson's work on the Mardu of the Western Desert (see Windschuttle 2002:382, fn 105; and cf Keeley 1996:30 and Tonkinson 1991:147).

To contemplate the vacuity of Windschuttle's claim about 'the entire history of Europe's colonization', we need only look across the Tasman to New Zealand. The early decades of Pakeha settlement of that colony were marked by sporadic negotiation and conflict, including a succession of wars at intervals from 1845 to about 1870. About 2000 Maori are reported to have died in the course of these wars, and more than 800 Pakeha, including some Maori allies (Oliver and Williams 1981:184, 492). A rough calculation of the violent mortality rates during these decades suggests a Pakeha death rate of just over 30 per 100 000, and a Maori one of over 140 per 100 000. These figures suggest a rate of violence considerably less than that prevailing in Van Diemen's Land in the decades studied by Windschuttle. Alternatively, they force us to re-appraise the situation in Van Diemen's Land as something other than a massive crime wave.

Mortality rates are of course a statistical artefact. But any social science consideration of patterns, trends and experiences of violence has to take account of such calculations, which are our means of estimating the significance of social behaviours. I have shown that Windschuttle's failure to compute such rates perpetuates an illusion created by his putative demolition of what he calls the 'orthodox' account of Australian history. A critic of my calculations might respond that these mortality rates would look somewhat different if Windschuttle's contentious pre-contact population figure was revised to something more consistent with other anthropological and pre-historical evidence, say the upper-end of Rhys Jones' 3 500–5 000 estimate (Rhys-Jones in Tindale 1974). However, the most this revision would do is produce a violent mortality rate of still more than 200 per 100 000 across the whole thirty years. And given the strong evidence of a very low Aboriginal population by the time of the worst violence (after 1826), it does nothing to alter the case against Windschuttle's gross under-estimation of the seriousness of this colonial violence.

I have shown that Windschuttle fails to observe one of the most basic demands of social science: to take account of the population base of the at-risk population. Paradoxically, however, he is not even consistent in that failure. In fact, Windschuttle effectively disguises in this book the impact of Aboriginal fatalities while simultaneously emphasising the scale of white casualties. Discussing the evidence for serious killings *and woundings* for the years 1824–1831, Windschuttle concedes that Reynolds is 'technically correct' in estimating the seriousness of settler/Aboriginal conflict during those years (Windschuttle 2002:84). He does so by taking into account the base population of the relevant community — in this case the non-Indigenous community. Yet his calculations are hopelessly wrong. Rather than 'roughly 2 percent' of the white population being serious victims of Aboriginal assaults, the estimated rate using his own victimisation and population figures would be 0.25 per cent — or 255 per 100 000. This is a serious enough figure and indicates the scale of conflict in a period when Windschuttle argues Tasmania was not at war (see in particular Windschuttle 2002:Chapters 4 and 6).

The erroneous calculation, however, is not the main issue here. In this discussion of the relative victimisation of settler and Aboriginal communities, the tendentious quality of Windschuttle's account is exposed. *Nowhere* in his discussion of Aborigines as 'serious victims' of encounters does he add numbers of wounded to numbers of killed. But even more seriously, nowhere in his discussion of Aboriginal casualties does he apply to them the same consideration that, on these pages (Windschuttle 2002:85–86), he applies in the course of estimating victimisation in the settler community. To use a metaphor of which he is fond, one can only conclude that in this respect Windschuttle has 'airbrushed' the evidence from his book, unless of course he never bothered to estimate what real casualty rates might have been. He certainly cannot claim that he hadn't thought about this dimension of his work — the detailed account of research on pre-contact populations suggests quite the opposite (Windschuttle 2002:364–371).

Table 1: Estimates of violent mortality rates, Tasmania, 1824–1831, based on data in Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* – death rates per 1 000 population for Aboriginal and settler communities

	Aboriginal deaths ^a	Aboriginal population (based on 2 000 in 1803) ^b	Aboriginal death rate	Aboriginal population (Plomley) ^c	Aboriginal death rate (Plomley base)	Settler deaths ^d	Settler population ^e	Settler death rate
1824	0	681	0.0	1500	0.0	10	12 303	0.8
1825	0	647	0.0	1215	0.0	8	14 351	0.6
1826	6	615	10.4	984	6.5	21	16 399	1.3
1827	17	584	28.5	797	20.9	36	18 447	2.0
1828	29	555	53.1	646	45.6	40	20 496	2.0
1829	15	527	29.1	523	29.4	29	22 544	1.3
1830	19	501	38.3	424	45.3	32	24 592	1.3
1831	8	476	16.1	343	21.9	11	26 640	0.4
	95		20.7		14.7	187		1.2

a. Windschuttle (2002:387–397) — on the basis of information in Windschuttle and his primary source material (Plomley’s edition of the Robinson journals) 21 deaths with no date indicated have been pro-rata distributed to years 1824–31.

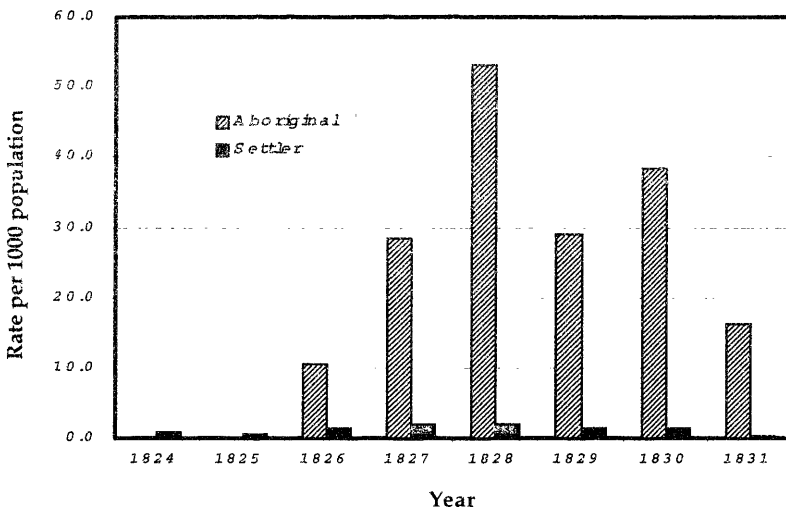
b. Population estimate based on Windschuttle (2002:371): original population at 1803 of less than 2 000. I have calculated a rate of decline of 5% p.a. to arrive at a population of no more than 500 by 1830 — this 1830 population would be higher than Windschuttle is likely to accept (see eg Windschuttle 2002:224).

c. Plomley population estimate — see Plomley (1992:11) — estimated 1500 in 1824 and 350 in 1831 — I have calculated a rate of decline of 19% p.a. for estimating years 1825–1830.

d. Windschuttle (2002:85).

e. Windschuttle (2002:84).

Estimated violent death rates in Tasmania, 1824–1831, based on Windschuttle data, 2002



Perhaps some visual evidence can help make the lessons of these calculations more clear. The attached graph, based on the data in Table 1, represents an estimate of the death rates per 1000 population of the Aboriginal and settler communities between 1824 and 1831. It is based on Windschuttle's death counts. This table illustrates the real scale of the violence during these years, and its extraordinarily unequal impact. Even taking Plomley's more generous population estimates, the lesson is clear. The figures illustrated in the graph, those based on an estimate of population closest to Windschuttle's figures, suggest a ratio of Aboriginal to settler mortality rates of at least 17:1 during the years 1824–1831. To put it even more starkly — if the settler population had suffered the same rate of violent death at the hands of Aborigines as the latter suffered at the hands of settlers, we would expect to find not 187 deaths during these seven years, but more than 3200. If the Aborigines had suffered the same rate of violent death as the settlers during these years, there would have been only 6 deaths, not the 95 recorded by Windschuttle.

In a series of articles in the monthly *Quadrant* and now in his book, Windschuttle has made it clear that the object of his substantial exercise in counter-revisionism is to demolish what he sees as the 'orthodox' view of Australian history. He identifies Henry Reynolds as the high priest of this orthodoxy and contests the latter's speculation that 20 000 Aborigines suffered violent death during colonisation (Windschuttle 2000). Now that we have finally seen the product of his own research, what are the implications of Windschuttle's work for his speculation of Reynolds? It is my contention that Windschuttle's thesis collapses under the weight of his own evidence.

If we extrapolate to the Australian mainland the Windschuttle-derived rates of violent death, then our estimates of the numbers of Aborigines killed by colonists in the first thirty years of settlement across all the different regions of Australia fall in the range 11 000 to 44 000. The high and low figures depend on whether we take a low (200 000) or high (750 000) estimate of the pre-contact Indigenous population — the calculations also presume a rate of population decline in the various regions that was comparable to that in Tasmania.

Is extrapolation from Van Diemen's Land to mainland Australia warranted? Well, Windschuttle concludes on page 398 of his book that 'in all of Europe's colonial encounters with the New Worlds of the Americas and the Pacific', Van Diemen's Land 'was probably the site where the least indigenous blood of all was deliberately shed' (Windschuttle 2002:398). One can only assume that the research to be published in the succeeding volumes will sustain the argument, and demonstrate that on the mainland of Australia, more blood was shed than in Van Diemen's Land. As I have noted earlier, Windschuttle does nothing in this book to examine evidence of violent death in any of these other encounters.

On Windschuttle's figures we might legitimately conclude that Reynolds' estimate of 20 000 slain Aborigines across Australia was too low. Windschuttle has asked us to take a new view of the Australian frontier and promises a 'counter-history of race relations in this country' (Windschuttle 2002:3). On the evidence he has produced so far, this was less like Veliz's imagined 'nun's picnic' than a catastrophic war. The chilling thing in retrospect is that Windschuttle has brought us to this new understanding through an exercise in sustained exclusion of uncertain evidence, as well as a demonstration of the prevalence of fictional or imagined narratives in much of the existing historiography of the Australian frontier. In spite of all the revisionism, Windschuttle's book ends up demonstrating the violence of colonial conquest in Australia. The question that remains is why he wants to evade the conclusions of his own version of Aboriginal-settler history.

Mark Finnane

Professor of History, Griffith University. Postal address: Dean, Postgraduate Education, Griffith University, Brisbane, Qld, 4111. Email: m.finnane@mailbox.gu.edu.au.

References

Australian Institute of Criminology (2003) 'Australia, states and territories, homicide victimisation rates 1989/90–1999/2000': <<http://www.aic.gov.au/research/homicide/stats/hvr.html>>.

Blainey, G (1976) *Triumph of the Nomads*, Sun Books, South Melbourne.

Dawson, J (2003) 'Letter to the Editor,' *The Australian*, 2 January 2003, p 8.

Keeley, LH (1996) *War before civilization*, Oxford University Press, New York.

Lane, B (2002) 'British arrival a benign "picnic"', *The Australian*, 10 December 2002, p 3.

Oliver, WH and BR Williams (1981) *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Plomley, NJB (1992) *The Aboriginal-Settler Clash in Van Diemen's Land*, Launceston, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery.

Reynolds, H (1985) 'Blainey and Aboriginal History' in Markus, A and Ricklefs, MC (eds) *Surrender Australia? Geoffrey Blainey and Asian Immigration*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

Tindale, N (1974) *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia*, ANU Press, Canberra.

Tonkinson, R (1991) *The Mardu Aborigines: living the dream in Australia's desert*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc, Forth Worth.

Warner, WL (1969) *A Black Civilization: A Social Study of an Australian Tribe*, Peter Smith, Gloucester, Mass. (orig. 1937).

Windschuttle, K (2000) 'The myths of frontier massacres in Australian history,' *Quadrant*, December, pp 6–20.

Windschuttle, K (2002) *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Macleay Press, Sydney.