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# The Australian History Wars

The object of war is to vanquish the enemy. The duty of the scholar is to seek understanding. The importation of military methods into historical scholarship is ruinous to the enterprise. Adversarial intolerance is inimical to the principle of academic freedom. The public discussion of history, on the other hand, serves other purposes: remembrance, entertainment, instruction and argument are among them. Such purposes are poorly served when one dogmatic assertion shouts down another, and character assassination replaces reasoned argument. The History Wars are an ugly side of the Australian present and they debase public life.

Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark (2004)<sup>1</sup>

Among the most fundamental responsibilities of the national historian is to seek to influence public consciousness with stories that are both true and engaging, and yet sometimes uncomfortable and unsettling. For those who look to the past for a vindication of their own selfhood or past behaviour, the work of historians committed to honest and painstaking historical enquiry can be threatening ... [There is] a familiar attitude: the idea that histories of the national past should be patriotic, tidy and usable.

Frank Bongiorno (2019)<sup>2</sup>

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1 Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, 2nd edn, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press (hereafter MUP), 2004, p. 243.

2 Frank Bongiorno, 'Inaugural Professorial Lecture—Is Australian History Still Possible? Australia and the Global Eighties', *ANU Historical Journal II*, vol. 1, 2019, pp. 193–208, specifically p. 205, doi.org/10.22459/ANUHJII.2019.15.

The term ‘History Wars’ came into currency in 1996 in a book of that title about the controversy following the Smithsonian Institution’s proposed exhibition that would feature a refurbished *Enola Gay*, the Boeing B-29 aircraft that dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945. The idea behind the exhibition—to encourage discussion on the morality of dropping nuclear bombs on Japanese cities—aroused fierce opposition from veterans’ groups, among others.<sup>3</sup> The controversy also attached a label to something that had been happening, in localised outbursts, even before the professionalisation of the historical discipline. One definition reads:

History wars are not history but an argument for control of the past as a political resource. They are conducted as a polemical argument and rest on a misunderstanding of the nature of history and historical understanding.<sup>4</sup>

To refine this proposition, History Wars can be divided into three types. There are *internal* History Wars—that is, heated debates between historians in their books and journal articles. All historical writing is revisionist to some extent and only a few reinterpretations result in an internal History War. This happens when ‘interpretive differences’ transform into ‘interpretive battles’<sup>5</sup> involving an ongoing, back-and-forth engagement between the two protagonists. Typically, others will enter the fray in support of one side or another, or perhaps to modify a particular point of view, or else to provide a quite different perspective. Such interpretive battles are largely confined to the academy, an example being whether or not a ‘declining sense of Canada as a national entity’ and the rising popularity of social history was ‘killing’ Canadian history. This was ‘an intellectual family feud’—a case of Michael Bliss and

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3 Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt (eds), *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1996.

4 Stuart Macintyre, ‘The History Wars’, *Evatt Papers*, vol. 6, no. 3, 29 September 2003, n.p., available at: [www.evatt.org.au/post/the-history-wars](http://www.evatt.org.au/post/the-history-wars).

5 The phrases are taken from James M. Banner, Jr., *The Ever-Changing Past: Why All History Is Revisionist History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021, p. 74, doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1g2496z.

J.L. Granastein versus the rest.<sup>6</sup> Some such disputes can become exceedingly rancorous.<sup>7</sup> So was the Ryan–Clark controversy, but it does not qualify as an internal History War. The Ryan–Clark controversy was not played out in a university setting and neither was it an historiographic battle comparable, say, to the dispute over Keith Windschuttle’s interpretation of the Australian frontier wars and the extent of Aboriginal deaths, where archival-based discussion was at the forefront, even while ideology was imbricated in the debate.<sup>8</sup> Peter Ryan’s focus was not on the issues raised by the *History*, except to a very limited extent, but on Clark himself, both his personality and whatever political influence he was thought to have had.

The Ryan–Clark controversy, in other words, was an *external* History War, when competing versions of the past are fought out in the public domain, via the media. The stakes were to impose a particular view of the nation’s self-image—whether it be seen in an affirmative or in a negative light. In settler societies such as Australia, History Wars have come to be dominated by, although not confined to, the past treatment of Indigenous peoples and whether this constitutes a meritorious or a shameful record, and whether that nation’s history can or cannot be regarded as a success story. History Wars, by definition, are confrontational, with one side being accused of disparaging the Australian achievement and the other side seeking acknowledgment of past wrongs to clear the ground for

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6 Michael Bliss, ‘Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canadian History, the Sundering of Canada’, *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d’études canadiennes*, vol. 26, no. 4, 1991–92, pp. 5–17, doi.org/10.3138/jcs.26.4.5; Bliss, *Writing History: A Professor’s Life*, Toronto: Dundurn, 2011, pp. 296–300; J.L. Granastein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* Toronto: HarperCollins, 1998; A.B. McKillop, ‘Who Killed Canadian History? A View from the Trenches’, *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 80, no. 2, 1999, pp. 269–99, doi.org/10.3138/chr.80.2.269; Bryan D. Palmer, ‘Of Silences and Trenches: A Dissident View of Granastein’s Meaning’, *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 80, no. 4, 1999, pp. 676–86; Timothy J. Stanley, ‘Why I Killed Canadian History: Towards an Anti-racial History in Canada’, *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, vol. 33, no. 65, 2000, pp. 79–103. See more generally, William Lamont (ed.), *Historical Controversies and Historians*, London: UCL Press, 1998.

7 For example, Mary Lefkowitz, *History Lesson: A Race Odyssey*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2008.

8 Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Vol. 1: Van Diemen’s Land, 1803–1847*, Sydney: Macleay Press, 2002; John Connor, *The Australian Frontier Wars, 1788–1838*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2002; Robert Manne (ed.), *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle’s Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Melbourne: Black Inc., 2003; Bain Attwood and S.G. Foster (eds), *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*, Canberra: National Museum of Australia, 2003; John Dawson, *Washout: On the Academic Response to the Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Sydney: Macleay Press, 2004; 2nd edn, 2010; Bain Attwood, *Telling the Truth about Aboriginal History*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005. I am grateful to Graeme Davison and Robert J. Tristram, who separately suggested this line of reasoning.

a better future. In these ways, competing versions of the past become matters of media-driven public controversy. The Ryan–Clark controversy is a clear-cut example of an external History War.

A third type of History War involves *outside attacks on historians*, often by politicians who question their loyalty to the nation and their fitness to teach impressionable minds. Manning Clark himself was subject to such onslaughts as early as 1947, being described in the Parliament of Victoria as either ‘a highly overpaid ignoramus or an evilly disposed wrong-headed person’, as well as being ‘either woefully ignorant of what he is teaching or he is a paid agent of the Communist Party’.<sup>9</sup> Again, an outside attack on a given historian can blur into the other types of History Wars. Historian Geoffrey Blainey’s criticisms, in 1984, of the level of Asian migration to Australia contains elements of all three types of History Wars. To the extent that ‘the Blainey affair’ involved widespread public criticism, from politicians included, it can be regarded as an attack-on-an-historian type of History War. To the extent that Blainey’s views were debated within the historical profession, it was an internal History War. The Blainey affair is less obviously an external History War because the issues involved a present-day issue, except that Blainey insisted that he was ‘speaking very much as a historian’.<sup>10</sup> The three (often overlapping) categories of History Wars here described are, to an extent, labels of convenience, but they do help disentangle some of the conceptual problems surrounding the term.

Then there is the need to broadly distinguish between History Wars and Culture Wars. The former label seems to derive from the word *Kulturkampf*, to describe the hostilities between the German Catholic Church and an alliance of Lutheran conservatives and anticlerical liberals in the 1870s (or sometimes any conflict between secular and religious authorities), but the term Culture Wars was popularised only in the early

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9 Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark*, Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2011, specifically p. 264 for quotation; Stuart Macintyre and Fay Anderson, ‘History in the Headlines’, in Fay Anderson and Stuart Macintyre (eds), *The Life of the Past: The Discipline of History at the University of Melbourne, 1855–2005*, Melbourne: Department of History, University of Melbourne, 2006, pp. 355–76, specifically p. 362.

10 Andrew Marcus, ‘1984 or 1901? Immigration and “Some Lessons” of Australian History’, in Andrew Marcus and M.C. Ricklefs (eds), *Surrender Australia? Essays in the Study and Uses of History: Geoffrey Blainey and Asian Immigration*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1985, pp. 10–35, specifically p. 10.

1990s by a book of that name by James Davison Hunter.<sup>11</sup> The terms History Wars and Culture Wars are often used interchangeably, but this is to confuse issues. My preference is that a History War is an argument, or series of arguments, about the past in ways that connect the past to the present, whereas Culture Wars are contests over current moral and cultural values and played out over hot-button issues such as abortion, LGBTIQ rights, the right to die and affirmative action. The actual boundaries of History Wars and Culture Wars sometimes converge, but the distinction between the two should nevertheless be kept in mind. An illustrative example of the blurring around the edges is—once again—the Blainey affair. It qualifies as a Culture War in that it impinged on a contemporary concern, except that Blainey insisted that he was speaking as an historian and brought the past into play.

Dispensing with definitions, we can move to the broad contours of the Australian History Wars. In settler societies such as Australia, they revolve around a wide variety of issues—including but not confined to: immigration policy and multiculturalism, the representation of the nation's past in the 1988 bicentennial celebrations, the record of the country's military, the meanings of Australia Day and 'Anzackery', 'frontier conflict' and the interpretation of Aboriginal history, and Indigenous rights and redress. They also include school history syllabi and museum display policy.<sup>12</sup> The History Wars of other countries orbit around different concerns that stem from their own individual histories—including past involvement in slavery; whether one's former colonial empire was a 'good' or a 'bad' thing; whether one need acknowledge accusations of war guilt; and what to do about the Holocaust. There can also be an overlay of sectarianism to complicate existing issues, as in Ireland.

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11 James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, New York: Basic Books, 1991; see also Robert Manne, 'A Battle of Philosophies', *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 70, no. 5, 1998, 42–45, specifically p. 42; Christopher Clark and Wolfram Kaiser (eds), *Culture Wars: Secular-Catholic Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511496714.

12 Andrew Bonnell and Martin Crotty, 'An Australian "Historikerstreit"?' *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2004, pp. 425–33, doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8497.2004.00345.x; Anna Clark, *History's Children: History Wars in the Classroom*, Sydney: NewSouth, 2008, specifically ch. 4 ('A National Curriculum', pp. 89–111); Graeme Davison, 'A Historian in the Museum: The Ethics of Public History', in Stuart Macintyre (ed.), *The Historian's Conscience: Australian Historians on the Ethics of History*, Melbourne: MUP, 2004, pp. 49–63; Amanda Nettelbeck, 'The Australian Frontier in the Museum', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2011, pp. 1115–28, doi.org/10.1353/jsh.2011.0047.

The Atlantic slave trade, war guilt, the Holocaust and religious fervour have little, if anything to do with the Australian History Wars. What is noticeable with the Australian version is that the battleground shifts as one issue loses salience and another gains traction. The bicentenary of 1988 seems a distant memory; the disputes over the content of museum displays have gone away, at least for the moment; and the battles over the content of the school history syllabus have quietened down. Moments of quiescence, however, can give way to a period of intensity. The Australian History Wars spluttered back into life in 2016 when the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* rehashed a story over whether the British ‘discovered’ or ‘invaded’ Australia,<sup>13</sup> while the Rhodes Must Fall controversies and the growing prominence of the Change the Date movement ensured continuing controversy over Australia Day.<sup>14</sup> The following year ongoing disputes over demands to remove colonial statues gained impetus after the killing of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police, which in turn led to a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in Australia and beyond.<sup>15</sup> As well, disagreements over the Anzac tradition and meaning of Anzac Day can always be counted upon to trigger yet another conservative campaign against alleged sacrilege from ‘what passes for the intelligentsia in Australia’.<sup>16</sup>

Questions of national pride versus national guilt over the nation’s past are integral to the Australian History Wars. These were explicitly raised a month before the Ryan–Clark controversy erupted, in 1993, when their mutual friend Geoffrey Blainey coined the term ‘the Black-Armband

13 Janet Fife-Yeomans, ‘Whitewash: UNSW rewrites the history books to state Cook “invaded” Australia’, *Daily Telegraph*, 30 March 2016, pp. 1, 4–5.

14 Michelle Grattan, ‘Liberals stir the culture war pot but who’s listening?’, *The Conversation*, 24 January 2019, available at: [theconversation.com/grattan-on-friday-liberals-stir-the-culture-war-pot-but-whos-listening-110445](http://theconversation.com/grattan-on-friday-liberals-stir-the-culture-war-pot-but-whos-listening-110445).

15 Camron Slessor and Eugene Boisvert, ‘Black Lives Matter protests renew push to remove “racist” monuments to colonial figures’, *ABC News*, 10 June 2020, available at: [www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-10/black-lives-matter-protests-renew-push-to-remove-statues/12337058](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-10/black-lives-matter-protests-renew-push-to-remove-statues/12337058).

16 Mervyn F. Bendle, *Anzac & its Enemies: The History War against Australia’s National Identity*, Sydney: Quadrant Books, 2015; Miranda Devine, ‘Insulting charge of history-lite brigade’, *Sunday Telegraph* (Sydney), 18 April 2015, available at: [www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/opinion/miranda-devine-insulting-charge-of-historylite-brigade/news-story/53f9ea213fbdc92d737cf9901a931017](http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/opinion/miranda-devine-insulting-charge-of-historylite-brigade/news-story/53f9ea213fbdc92d737cf9901a931017). See especially the indictment of Anzacery and the associated ‘confected ceremonies that manipulated sentiment’ in Stephen Garton, ‘Contesting “Anzacery”: Marilyn Lake and Envisioning Australian Nationalism’, in Joy Damousi and Judith Smart (eds), *Contesting Australian History: Essays in Honour of Marilyn Lake*, Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2019, pp. 9–20, specifically pp. 9–12.

view of history'.<sup>17</sup> The label summed up an important strand in Ryan's argument and the Australian History Wars generally—that Clark's *History* had purveyed an excessively negative, guilt-laden and unpatriotic presentation of Australia's past. This was in line with the conservative reaction in other countries to expressions of national guilt, such as Howard Zinn's (1922–2010) *A People's History of the United States* (1980), which is denounced to this day.<sup>18</sup> Ryan denied that his motivations for attacking Clark were in any way political, but we shall see that this was anything but the case.

Meg Foster provided an excellent analysis of the differences between the 'black armband' view of history and the 'three cheers' view of history. As she wrote:

The expression 'black armband view of history' has been used to describe a brand of Australian history which its critics argue 'represents a swing of the pendulum from a position that had been too favourable, too self congratulatory', to an opposite extreme that is even more unreal and decidedly jaundiced. Not only, it is said, does the black armband view belittle past achievements, it also encourages a 'guilt industry' and impedes rational thinking on current problems. From this perspective, the black armband view of history is a strand of 'political correctness'—the dominant but erroneous view of how we see ourselves and what we see as worthwhile in our culture. For others, the term is inherently political and a misrepresentation of the work of many serious historians. It is an attempt to appropriate an established symbol of genuine grieving, loss and injustice by those who do not accept, or do not want to accept, that past wrongs must be fully recognised before present problems can be resolved. Both sides accuse each other of attempting to distort history and of taking an extreme view.

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17 Geoffrey Blainey, 'Drawing up a Balance Sheet of Our History', *Quadrant*, vol. 37, nos 7–8, July–August 1993, pp. 11–15, specifically p. 11, which to some extent was anticipated by a forum on 'The Writing of Australian History' in the *IPA Review*, vol. 42, no. 3, December 1988–February 1989, pp. 49–54, notably the contribution by John Hirst, 'The Blackening of Our Past', specifically pp. 49, 51 and 54. Other critiques of black-armband history in the late 1980s are identified in Norman Abjorensen, 'The History Wars', in Jim George and Kim Huynh (eds), *The Culture Wars: Australian and American Politics in the 21st Century*, Melbourne: Palgrave Macmillan Australia, 2009, pp. 142–58, specifically pp. 147–48.

18 Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492–Present*, London/New York: Longman, 1980 and subsequent editions; Mary Grabar, *Debunking Howard Zinn: Exposing the Fake History that Turned a Generation Against America*, Washington, DC: Regnery History, 2019.

By contrast, the ‘Three Cheers’ view of history looks at Australia’s past as a series of achievements, and emphasises events from history that Australians should apparently be proud of.<sup>19</sup>

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The question remains: in what ways did the Ryan–Clark controversy fit into the ever-changing complexion of the Australian History Wars? These had been rumbling away since at least 1900 when G. Arnold Wood (1865–1928), the history professor at the University of Sydney, came under fire from politicians and sections of the media for his stances during the Boer War.<sup>20</sup> Wood’s tribulations have been discussed by Max Crawford, who himself had his loyalty questioned in the 1950s on grounds of pro-Soviet sympathies.<sup>21</sup> By then, in the context of continuing Cold War anxieties, the front widened to include politically unacceptable academics being excluded from university positions.<sup>22</sup> In another permutation, the Australian History Wars received impetus, in early 1992, when the recently installed prime minister, Paul Keating, took the contest in new directions and to new levels of discord by repudiating deference to British heritage and announcing his vision for a republican nationalism, engagement with Asia and Aboriginal reconciliation. Henceforth, a key element in the interpretation of the nation’s past would be ‘a frontline struggle over identity’ and what it meant to be Australian. As journalist Paul Kelly observes:

19 Meg Foster, ‘Drawing the Historian Back into History: Creativity, Writing, and *The Art of Time Travel*, *Re-Thinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2018, pp. 137–53, specifically p. 149 n.24, doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2017.1421119.

20 John A. Moses, *Prussian–German Militarism 1914–18 in Australian Perspective: The Thought of George Arnold Wood*, Bern: Peter Lang, 1991, pp. 40–42.

21 R.M. Crawford, *A Bit of Rebel: The Life and Work of George Arnold Wood*, Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1975, pp. 150–259; Fay Anderson and Stuart Macintyre, ‘Crawford as Controversialist’, in Stuart Macintyre and Peter McPhee (eds), *Max Crawford’s School of History*, Melbourne: History Department, University of Melbourne, 2000, pp. 89–112.

22 Hugh Stretton, ‘Brenner and the University of Adelaide’, *Vestes*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1961, pp. 5–12, available at: www.aur.org.au/archive/1960s; Hannah Forsyth, ‘The Russel Ward Case: Academic Freedom in Australia during the Cold War’, *History Australia*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2014, pp. 31–52, doi.org/10.1080/14490854.2014.11668530; Doug Munro, ‘George Rudé—Communist Activist and Inactivist’, *Working USA*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2016, pp. 147–62, specifically p. 155, doi.org/10.1111/wusa.12234.

Among Australian historians and academics, there had been differences over history for some years, often branded a culture war. But it was Keating's intervention that implanted this debate in the centre of politics.<sup>23</sup>

Such was the immediate History Wars context of the Ryan–Clark controversy.

Keating credited himself for having ‘pressed the starter’s pistol on the history wars, no doubt about that’.<sup>24</sup> Actually, he reignited it, in early 1992, when he launched a ferocious attack in parliament on ‘betrayals’ by Britain (the fall of Singapore and entry into the Common Market) and accusing the Opposition of being stranded in the mindset of the 1950s—that land of lost opportunity and subservience when Robert Menzies kow-towed to Britain.<sup>25</sup> His was a party-political narrative: ‘By arguing that the values and tradition of the Labor Party were one and the same with Australia’s, Keating was essentially constructing a partisan national identity’.<sup>26</sup>

Keating's attempts to socially engineer a less derivative and more distinctive national identity, and one that acknowledged the wrongs inflicted on Aboriginal people, also resulted in the Australian History Wars being conducted across an ever-broadening front, embracing such issues as republicanism, multiculturalism (and increasing engagement with Asia), untying the apron strings of the British connection, disparagement of the Menzies years, as well as native title and Aboriginal reconciliation. Ryan, whose allegiances by then were firmly with the political right, found much that was ‘unpalatable’ with Keating.<sup>27</sup> Clark was the opposite and, moreover was perceived as a cheerleader and a sort of brains trust upon whom Keating drew for ideas and inspiration.<sup>28</sup> In the process, the largely left-leaning historical profession came under attack from politicians and

23 Paul Kelly, *The March of Patriots: The Struggle for Modern Australia*, Melbourne: MUP, 2009, p. 632 n.1. Here is an example of the term ‘Culture War’ being used when it would be better to say ‘History War’.

24 Quoted in Kelly, *The March of Patriots*, p. 65.

25 *Hansard* (House of Representatives), 27 February 1992, pp. 373–74; Macintyre and Clark, *The History Wars*, pp. 124–25.

26 Anna Clark, ‘Politicians using History’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2010, pp. 120–31, specifically p. 125, doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8497.2010.01545.x.

27 John Tidey, *Ryan’s Luck: A Life of Peter Ryan MM*, Melbourne: Arcadia, 2020, pp. 102–3.

28 Mark McKenna, “‘I wonder whether I belong’: Manning Clark and the Politics of Australian History 1970–2000”, *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 34, no. 122, 2003, pp. 364–83, doi.org/10.1080/10314610308596260.

large sections of the media, whose rhetoric ‘posits the university as a site of disloyalty, self-indulgence, wilful obscurity, enforced conformism and intolerance’.<sup>29</sup>

As such, the History Wars were a series of arguments that both reflected and brought out drastically different views of Australia as a society.<sup>30</sup> These differences in outlook might have influenced historiographies in other settler societies. What is more certain is the renewal of the right-wing challenge to values that seemed in the late twentieth century to have become settled orthodoxies following the end of the Cold War. It created a sea change—or what some might see as the depressing effect of the resurgence of the right and the retreat of the left in the Reagan–Thatcher years. Seen in that light, the Ryan–Clark controversy was an early indicator that all was not as it seemed, and it exemplified the points at issue among opposing conceptions of Australian identity and Australian-ness itself.<sup>31</sup>

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29 Stuart Macintyre, ‘The History Wars and the History Profession’, *History Now* (Christchurch), vol. 11, nos 1–2, 2005, pp. 31–36, specifically p. 33. An account by the quarry of a press campaign is: Lyndall Ryan, ‘Reflections by a Target of a Media Witch Hunt’, *History Australia*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2003, pp. 105–9, doi.org/10.1080/14490854.2003.11828260.

30 See Bain Attwood, ‘Denial in a Settler Society: The Australian Case’, *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 84, 2017, pp. 24–43, doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbx029.

31 I am grateful to John G. Reid for these suggestions.

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