

2. 'Hard evidence': the debate about massacre in the Black War in Tasmania

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The Black War in Tasmania 1823–1834, is widely perceived by historians as one of the best documented of all Australia's colonial frontier wars. Yet debate still rages about whether massacres were a defining feature and whether they accounted for the deaths of many Aborigines. As Keith Windschuttle has pointed out, this is an important debate because it reflects on the character of the Australian nation and the behaviour of its colonial forbears in seizing control of Aboriginal land.

This paper reviews the debate from its origins in 1835 to where it stands today. It largely concerns the issue of 'hard evidence' and how it was used. To explore the conduct of the debate and how the key protagonists used the available sources, methods and explanatory frameworks to make their case, the paper is divided into three historical periods: 1835–1870; 1875–1939; and 1948–2008. It finds that in the first period, the belief in widespread massacre dominated the debate, drawn from oral testimony from the victorious combatants. In the second period, the belief in massacre denial took hold, based on the dominance of archival sources and the doctrine of the self-extermimating Aborigine. In the third period the protagonists engaged in a fierce contest for control of the debate based on different interpretations of the sources. One side argues for massacre denial, based on the belief that more settlers than Aborigines were killed in the Black War while the other argues that in applying new methods of interpretation, the 'hard evidence' for massacre is now overwhelming and that its incidence was widespread.

The paper concludes that the concern with 'hard evidence' indicates that the massacre debate today is a microcosm of the wider debate about the impact of settler colonialism on indigenous peoples; and in particular about the humanity of the Tasmanian Aborigines. Above all it reflects the reluctance of many white Australians even today, to come to terms with incontrovertible evidence about our violent past and to seek reconciliation with Aboriginal survivors.

Introduction

In 2002, historian Keith Windschuttle claimed that, from his search for ‘hard evidence’ in his own ‘exhaustive’ reading of the sources relating to the Black War in Tasmania (1823–1834) he could find only rare incidents of massacre and that overall, more settlers than Aborigines were killed in the conflict.¹ In making this extraordinary assertion he was simply the latest in a long line of historians to enter the massacre debate which has dominated the historiography of the Black War since 1835.

The debate is central to understanding the wider debates about settler colonialism and how Australian historians have framed the past. How then did the debate begin, how did it develop and where does it stand today? To explore these questions, this paper selects for analysis the arguments made by the key participants, largely historians, who have shaped the debate over the last 174 years. To understand how they have used the available sources and methods and explanatory frameworks to make their case, the discussion focuses on three historical periods: the first from 1835 to 1870 when the Black War was still vivid in colonial memory; the second from 1875 to 1939 when the ideas and beliefs of scientific racism dominated the debate; and the third period from 1948 to 2008 when competing views about settler activism and Aboriginal resistance almost took the debate to an impasse. In taking this approach the key components of the debate can be identified and their impact on the debate today can be assessed.

1835–1870

The massacre debate took off at the end of the Black War, when historians were confronted with the grim statistic that fewer than 250 Aborigines had survived. What had happened to the rest? If few Aborigines had lived in Tasmania at the war’s outset, then how had they managed so effectively to terrorise the colonists for so long? If there had been many more, as many settlers had believed, how had their numbers declined so rapidly? Faced with this moral dilemma, historians looked for some explanations.

Henry Melville a radical journalist and newspaper editor set the parameters of the debate. Arriving in Tasmania in 1827, during the war’s second phase, he quickly found employment on the colony’s leading opposition newspaper. Some of his published articles and reports which were based on interviews with settlers in the war zones and discussions with the colonial elite in Hobart became the basis of his own account of the Black War, published in 1835.²

1 Windschuttle 2002: 131-166.

2 Mackaness 1965.

He was in no doubt that when the war escalated in late 1826, the Aborigines were 'massacred without mercy'. 'At this period', he wrote, 'it was common for parties of the *civilized* portion of society to scour the bush, and falling in with the tracks of the natives, during the night to follow them to their place of encampment, where they were slaughtered in cold blood' and that the effect of martial law, which was in operation from November 1828 to February 1832, 'was to destroy, within twelve months after its publication, more than two thirds of these wild creatures, who by degrees dwindled away till their populous tribes were swept from the face of the earth'.³ But the conflict was far too fresh in popular memory for him to identify the perpetrators let alone the dates and locations of their awful deeds. The 'failure' to produce 'hard' evidence would lead a later generation of historians to ignore his conclusions.

The Quaker missionary James Backhouse, who made two extended visits to Tasmania in the later stages of the war between 1832 and 1834, was also in no doubt that the colonists had shot many Aborigines, 'sometimes through fear, and there is reason to apprehend, sometimes through recklessness'.⁴ But he too was reluctant to offer 'hard evidence'. Rather he believed that the few surviving Aborigines should be grateful for the opportunity offered by the colonial government to adopt British ways and convert to Christianity. In this way, the settlers would be redeemed for their misdeeds.

John West faced a similar problem. A Congregational minister and journalist he arrived in Tasmania four years after the war had ended and quickly realised that it had been a defining moment in the colony's history. As a leading opponent of convict transportation and an ardent advocate of colonial self-government, he championed the colony's future at the expense of its violent past. In *The History of Tasmania* published in 1852, he was in no doubt that massacre had been practised during the Black War and suggested four different ways in which it had happened. But he did not believe that it was appropriate to identify known perpetrators and witnesses, let alone the dates and places where the mass killings took place:

It would be a waste of time even to condense, in the most succinct relation, all the incidents that occurred. Narrative is tedious by the monotony of detail, and the events themselves were recorded by those who witnessed them, with ominous brevity. Such crimes were of daily occurrence; perhaps sometimes multiplied by rumour, but often unheard and unrecorded ... the poet of the Iliad did not describe more numerous varieties, in the slaughter of his heroes.⁵

3 Mackaness 1965: 71, 79.

4 Backhouse 1967[1843]: 79.

5 Shaw 1971: 283.

He admitted that massacre had been an unfortunate component of the war, but he also believed that it was imperative the colonists must 'move on' from the horrors of the past to prepare for self-government. In this new environment, the Aborigines, who he now believed were on 'the brink of extinction', could be conveniently forgotten.⁶

James Bonwick disagreed. An evangelical schoolteacher, he arrived in Tasmania in 1842, eight years after the war had ended and like West, he was also surprised that war trauma continued to dominate the colonial psyche. He interviewed many colonists about their wartime experiences and when he moved to Victoria in 1849, collected more accounts from colonists who had left Tasmania in the mid 1830s and who were it seems, even more anxious than their counterparts who had remained in Tasmania, to testify about their involvement in some of the war's more shocking incidents. In *The Last of the Tasmanians*, published in 1870, he furnished in some cases enough clues for the reader to identify the informant, the date of the specific incident and the place where it happened. In all he mentioned 16 instances of massacre, with a combined loss of at least 300 Aboriginal lives. If any reader was in doubt that massacre was widely used to dispose of hundreds of Aborigines in the Black War, then Bonwick's account appeared to offer more than enough evidence to dispel it.⁷

At the end of the first period, the debate appeared to have been resolved in favour of widespread massacre. This is not surprising. The Black War was still a vivid memory for many colonists in Tasmania and Victoria and stories of massacre were pervasive in both colonies even if the actual details were difficult to obtain. By the time Bonwick's work was published in 1870 however, war trauma was beginning to fade and some colonists were disturbed that his book had generated international condemnation about the fate of 'the last of the Tasmanian Aborigines'. With Tasmania's violent past returning to haunt them, some colonists sought a new champion to make the past more palatable.

1875–1939

If the hour produces the man, then James Erskine Calder, the colony's former surveyor general, filled the breach. He had arrived in the colony at the height of the Black War in 1829 and through his survey work had helped fulfil the settlers' dream of transforming Tasmania into a vast sheepwalk. Anxious to restore the colony's tarnished reputation he searched for other sources of evidence that he believed would be more reliable than Bonwick's unnamed informants. He searched for the official sources of the war and located what he called the 'nineteen awful volumes' of papers in the vaults under the Colonial

6 Shaw 1971: 285.

7 Bonwick 1970[1870].

Secretary's Office in Hobart. They provided a very different story of the Black War. Instead of reports of massacres he found instead, numerous accounts of 'fictitious fights', which 'though still repeated by lovers of the marvelous and horrible, were found to be utterly false on investigation'.⁸

I know of no trustworthy record of more than one, two, three or at most four persons being killed, in any one encounter. The warfare, though pretty continuous, was rather a petty affair, with grossly exaggerated details – something like the story of the hundred dead men, reduced, on inquiry, to three dead dogs ... Up to the time of their voluntary surrender ... the [Aborigines] not only maintained the ground everywhere ... they had by far the best of the fight; ... and as far as I can learn, at least five of the [settlers] dying for one of the [Aborigines].⁹

This finding led him to conclude that the Aborigines were responsible for their own demise. They had died, he contended, not from mass killings by the colonists, but from intertribal wars and 'the prevalence of epidemic disorders; which, though not introduced by the Europeans, were possibly accidentally increased by them ... and their own imprudence' in refusing to use European remedies to treat them.¹⁰

From that moment, massacre denial took hold. Based on the doctrine of Aboriginal self-extinction, Calder's work absolved the colonists from responsibility for the past. By the end of nineteenth century the massacre debate appeared to have been resolved in resounding victory for the massacre denialists. Their beliefs matched another aspect of the doctrine of Aboriginal self-extinction, the discourse of scientific racism which placed the Tasmanian Aborigines at the lower end of the human evolutionary scale. In this position, they were believed to have been far too primitive to withstand British colonisation. This discourse dominated scholarly research on the Tasmanian Aborigines until the outbreak of World War II. By then the Black War had been relegated to a melancholy footnote in Tasmania's colonial history and the Aborigines had simply 'faded away'.¹¹

1948–2008

The debate was rekindled after the War by journalist Clive Turnbull in his powerful text, *Black War: the extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines*. Written in the shadow of his experiences as a war correspondent in Europe and Asia, it was imbued with 'the long shadows of massacre remembrance' that had

8 Calder 1875: 7.

9 Calder 1875: 8.

10 Calder 1875: 25-27.

11 Giblin 1939: 20.

permeated his own family in Tasmania since the 1820s. It was also the first text to draw an analogue between the Nazis' attempts to exterminate the Jews and British attempts to exterminate the Tasmanian Aborigines. From his exhaustive search of the colonial newspapers as well as the official account of the Black War published in *British Parliamentary Papers*, Turnbull was in no doubt that massacre played a key role in the extermination of the Aborigines even though neither source offered hard evidence to support his case. He believed that 'the wiping out of the Aborigines began in earnest' in 1828 and that most massacres probably occurred during the martial law phase, between November 1828 and January 1832.¹² But the absence of 'hard' evidence of specific incidents left his account open to question. Perhaps his experience as a war correspondent enabled him to read between the lines.

The problem of evidence also concerned Brian Plomley, the editor of the Tasmanian journals of the conciliator, George Augustus Robinson.¹³ As a physical scientist and imbued with the beliefs of scientific racism, he could not believe that massacres were widespread during the Black War even though Robinson had recorded several instances of them in his journal. He was particularly concerned that Bonwick's accounts of massacre, which were once again attracting international scholarly attention in the aftermath of the Holocaust, should be contested. In his *Annotated bibliography of the Tasmanian Aborigines*, published in 1969, he disputed

Bonwick's uncritical acceptance of the stories told him by 'old hands' [which] has reduced their value considerably. Bonwick's statements, if not confirmed from primary sources, should largely be considered as suspect, and opened to doubt in great or small degree. Many of his informants had little or no understanding of the events they witnessed, if indeed they themselves witnessed them.¹⁴

As the leading scholar of the Tasmanian Aborigines, Plomley's extraordinary attack was taken very seriously by the next generation of historians like me. Embarking on my own research into the history of the Tasmanian Aborigines, I largely avoided Bonwick's work. In my own book, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, I argued that Aboriginal resistance rather than settler activism was the key feature of the Black War and believed that most Aborigines were probably killed in ones and twos although at four times the rate of the settlers. While I did record six instances of massacre, I did not believe that they had any real impact on the war's outcome.¹⁵

12 Turnbull 1965: 80, 97.

13 Plomley 1966.

14 Plomley 1969: 14–15.

15 Ryan 1981: 174.

Lloyd Robson, the leading historian of Tasmania, disagreed. Like Turnbull he was also a Tasmanian 'native son' and 'the long shadows of massacre remembrance' loomed large in his historical consciousness. In *A History of Tasmania Volume I*, he noted at least eleven incidents of massacre during the Black War and made special mention of an incident reported in great detail by a settler to a government inquiry in 1830 but which was quickly denied by two others. This kind of contested evidence he said, 'illustrates the difficulty of getting some of the truth about the war, for if ever there was a case of the victors writing history, this is it'. He was the first historian to contest the absence of hard evidence and to suggest that new methods were needed to interpret disparate data.¹⁶

His call for new methods fell on deaf ears. With the resurgence of the modern Aboriginal community in Tasmania and their claims for the return of 'stolen' land, historians whose families had arrived in Tasmania before the Black War became concerned to show that its outcome was not their fault. They argued that rather than settler activism, it was key Aboriginal leaders and government agents who had had betrayed the Aboriginal people into surrendering to a ruthless colonial governor. By the end of the 1980s the Black War was represented as an encounter between two well armed groups in which the settlers rather than the Aborigines were lucky to survive.¹⁷

In 1992, Brian Plomley re-enforced this emerging belief when he published *The Aboriginal/Settler Clash in Van Diemen's Land 1803-1831*. Designed as the last word on the Black War, the publication was an exhaustive survey of the colonial newspapers and official archival sources of the war. In presenting what he called the 'written record' as 'hard evidence', he expected that readers could now objectively reach their own conclusions about the conduct of the war:

So far as the official record is concerned, it is on the whole a factual one because it is based on statements by the magistrates of the various districts. The errors here lie chiefly in the exaggerations of the informants, who striving to present their cases in the best possible light claimed that larger bodies of Aborigines were involved, or were killed, and that greater damage was done.¹⁸

In adopting a class based approach to the official record, Plomley seemed unaware that some magistrates had much to hide about their violent attacks on the Aborigines and that some of the convict 'informants' might indeed have been telling the truth as they saw it. Nor did he convey much respect for the integrity of some of the contemporary newspapers such as the *Colonial Times*, which Melville had worked for, because they 'not only paid as much attention to rumour as to events, but commented freely upon the situation. Rumour

16 Robson 1983: 217.

17 Rae-Ellis 1981, 1988; Pybus 1991.

18 Plomley 1992: 7.

sometimes led a newspaper to proclaim atrocities in one issue and refute them in the next'.¹⁹ He concluded that 'wanton attack and ill-treatment by the settlers was confined to a few individuals' and only sometimes 'by the mob', although he did acknowledge that the 'Ku Klux Klan type mob who hunted down and killed parties of Aborigines is on record in Robinson's journals, but as might be expected was never the occasion for comment.'²⁰

Had he followed up GA Robinson's reports of massacre with accounts in the colonial press and settler reports in the official archives, he might have substantiated Robson's conclusion that it is the victors who write history. As it was, Plomley's unrivalled reputation as the leading scholar of the Tasmanian Aborigines elevated his conclusions and the methods he used to reach them to a realm beyond scholarly criticism. Sadly, in this case, it conferred on this particular work the status of an objective historical document.

In this guise it was then used without equivocation by several historians. In 1995 for example, Henry Reynolds used it as the key source of evidence for his argument that in the Black War 'the numbers [of Aborigines] actually killed by Europeans may have been less than is generally supposed', that the massacres that Robinson recorded along the Meander River 'were rare in Tasmania' and that 'the mortality rate on each side was more even: perhaps somewhere between 150 and 250 Tasmanians were killed in conflict with the Europeans after 1824 (with another 100 or 150 dying before that date), while they killed about 170 Europeans'.²¹

Reynolds' extraordinary conclusion inadvertently set the stage for Keith Windschuttle's entry into the debate in 2002. He also used Plomley's *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, and then manipulated Reynolds' statistics to make the astonishing claim that twice as many settlers than Aborigines were killed in the war. He then further claimed that the settlers by virtue of their Britishness could not have engaged in the kinds of brutal and violent warfare that had been advanced by Robson and that most of the massacres noted by Robson and myself, were either exaggerations or outright fabrications.²²

Windschuttle's idiosyncratic approach to the investigation of eleven alleged incidents of massacre was based on what is known as report discounting: the exclusion of every piece of known evidence except the one piece that denied it had happened.²³ Yet rather than shutting down the debate, as he had expected to do, he opened it up to new methods of investigation.

19 Plomley 1992: 8.

20 Plomley 1992: 9.

21 Reynolds 1995: 51, 79, 82.

22 Windschuttle 2002: 131–166.

23 Windschuttle 2002: 131–166.

Since then new methods and typologies of massacre developed by the French sociologist Jacques Semelin have been applied to investigating its possible incidence in the Black War. He argues that hard evidence for massacre is constrained by the fact that it tends to be carried out in secret, that the physical evidence is usually quickly removed, that no witnesses are intended to be present and that if they are, then they are usually afraid to speak out until long afterwards either to escape retribution from the perpetrators and/or prosecution by the authorities. He concludes that historians must employ new interpretive methods to understand the context of massacre and to look for disparate forms of evidence to comprise the hard evidence to make their case.²⁴

There is no doubt that Semelin's methods have revolutionised the way historians investigate massacre on the Tasmanian colonial frontier today. Recent research into the Black War includes the investigation of specific incidents of massacre using a wide array of disparate evidence, a survey of the way the war was conducted in each particular phase and nuanced studies of the ways Aborigines and colonists in specific regions in colonial Tasmania experienced the conflict.²⁵ From these findings the view is emerging that massacre appears to have been used as a deliberate strategy by the colonial government to destroy targeted groups of Aborigines in particular areas of Tasmania during a specific phase of the Black War.²⁶

Conclusion

In 2009, the massacre debate in Tasmania has turned full circle from its origins in 1835. The concern about 'hard evidence' that has bedevilled the debate from the outset now appears to have moved into a new trajectory. The most recent findings appear to offer the clearest explanation yet for the grim statistic that historians first confronted in 1834 that fewer than 250 Aborigines had survived the Black War.

The massacre debate is by no means settled. The impact of introduced disease still awaits resolution and Indigenous scholars have yet to enter the debate. Yet in its current trajectory it has opened up new understandings of how frontier wars were conducted and reported in colonial Australia before 1850 and in other comparable settler societies in the nineteenth century.²⁷ Whatever the findings that new research might reveal, the fate of the Tasmanian Aborigines will continue to attract international attention. For the terrible story of their

24 Semelin 2007.

25 Breen 2001; Boyce 2003, 2008; McFarlane 2003, 2008; Tardif 2003; Kiernan 2007; Madley 2008; Ryan 2006, 2008a.

26 McFarlane 2008; Ryan 2008b.

27 Keirnan 2007; Madley 2010; Ryan 2010.

near demise remains a microcosm of the wider story of the settler colonial encounter with indigenous peoples worldwide. In this story, the determination by so many historians to misunderstand what massacre is and the context in which it occurs has played a critical role in perpetuating massacre denial.

The massacre debate today is a microcosm of the wider debate about the impact of settler colonialism on indigenous peoples and in particular about the humanity of the Tasmanian Aborigines. Above all it reflects the reluctance of many white Australians even today, to come to terms with incontrovertible evidence about our violent past and to seek reconciliation with Aboriginal survivors. I would like to hope that this review of the massacre debate in the Black War in Tasmania will take Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians closer to reaching that outcome.

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