

A preference for forgetting: some reflections on publishing *Looking for Blackfellas' Point: an Australian history of place*

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This paper briefly canvasses some of the more casual and everyday (although no less revealing) responses to my recent book, Looking for Blackfellas' Point, a history of south-eastern NSW which is narrated against the backdrop of the politics of Australian history. In light of the Windschuttle saga, I explain how my book was received, critique Windschuttle's concept of history, and offer some thoughts on the way in which we, as historians, might respond. I also argue that the culture of forgetting is deeply embedded in Australian society. To introduce the theme of forgetting, I begin, by way of comparison, recalling a personal experience in Germany.

In October 2002 I visited Berlin. Twenty years ago, between late 1982 and early 1984, I lived in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), otherwise known as East Germany. The Communist regime that ruled the country was, relative to other East European states, economically successful and politically efficient. It infiltrated the daily life of every citizen to a degree unthinkable for most Australians.

Throughout the 1980s, every member of the family I had lived with was under surveillance by the Stasi – East Germany's secret police. Today, although the Stasi files are open and accessible, my close friend in Berlin still refuses to read her file for fear she might discover that her best friends were her informers. This history she can live without. She prefers not to know.

Berlin overflows with memorials – some intended some unintended. The building in which I lived twenty years ago, now renovated, appears little different today from any of the modern apartment buildings in Berlin. Fresh paint and geraniums in every window box. Windows and doors where there were once none. The ubiquitous café and bakery on the street below. The visual memory of the East has been quickly erased.

But next door, rimmed by barbed wire and a 2-metre high steel fence, stands the two-storey building that once housed a preschool and kindergarten. It is as I remember it: the most inappropriate structure imaginable for a preschool but nonetheless consistent with the stereotypical images of the GDR – imposing dark Gothic grey. Because the original owner of the building is still to be found, or perhaps because legal proceedings are still under way, the building remains unrenovated and unoccupied. Gazing

through the barbed wire I had the feeling I was looking directly at the wreckage of the GDR. In a manner typical of Berlin, the built environment suggests a constant struggle between remembering and forgetting.

During my visit I walked along a section of the Berlin Wall that is now retained as a memorial. A plaque on the wall bore the following inscription:

In remembrance of the division of the city
 August 13 1961 – November 9 1989
 And in memory of the victims of Communist tyranny¹

Certainly there were many victims of the regime, prisoners of conscience, those who died trying to escape, those who suffered recrimination in their workplace or home life because of their political views. Now that the communist regimes of Eastern Europe have crumbled, liberal democracy can remember their history as one in which oppressive regimes ruled an innocent people in waiting for their deliverance to capitalist liberal democracy. As if the people of East Germany had always been capitalists at heart – victims of Communist tyranny. But the East Germans I had known did not see themselves in this light. They believed Communism had failed the socialist ideal.

Just as the past injustices of fascism became one of the primary legitimising forces of communist East Germany (*niemals wieder fascismus*), now the memory of the injustice of communist dictatorship becomes, together with the denunciation of fascism, the legitimising force of a liberal-democratic and reunited Germany. Different politics demand different memories.

The three main themes of this brief German travelogue – the overwhelming desire of human beings in certain circumstances to prefer not to know, to forget and 'move on', the constant struggle in public culture between coexisting narratives of acknowledgement and denial, and the intensely political nature of public remembering – all surface in settler Australia.

In Germany, remembering the past has often entailed revolutionary shifts in the language of history and politics. Superficially at least, in the language of the public culture, the past is constantly being severed from the present, constantly being rewritten and remembered anew. It is precisely revolutionary shifts such as these that Paul Connerton has described in *How societies remember* as creating the material basis for the myth of a historic beginning.²

For Europeans in Australia, 1788 constituted a historic beginning of sorts. From the moment of first contact, a narrative was required that interpreted the invader's presence and legitimacy in relation to an Aboriginal presence. An explanation was required. The

1. The inscription can be seen on the sections of the Wall that remain at Bernauer Strasse and reads:

Gedenkstätte Berliner Mauer
 In Erinnerung an die Teilung der Stadt
 vom 13. August 1961 – 9 November 1989
 und zum Gedenken
 an die Opfer kommunistischer Gewaltherrschaft
 Errichtet durch die
 Bundesrepublik Deutschland und das Land Berlin

2. Connerton 1989.

future narratives of contact history, diverse as they were, were embedded in the seed of the original narratives of discovery, exploration and settlement – narratives of settler purpose that generally assumed the inferiority and expendability of Aboriginal people and their culture. Of course few settler historical narratives fail to be infiltrated in some way by Aboriginal narratives. Many relied on the retelling of stories originally told by Aboriginal people or at least claimed to rely on the evidence of Aboriginal people. Alternatively they juxtaposed their own presence, however momentarily, against that of a transient and uncivilised indigenous presence. In this sense there was never, and can never be, a settler narrative that is entirely *non-Aboriginal*.

In *Looking for Blackfellas' Point*, I have tried to show how narratives of acknowledgement have continued to coexist with narratives of denial, forgetting, and evasion in settler culture. Although traditional settler narratives were not seriously undermined by historians until the 1960s, the notion that the so-called Great Australian Silence has been shattered once and for all in the last three decades of the twentieth century needs considerable qualification.³

Australia is a nation without a historic founding myth such as the French Revolution or the American War of Independence, a fact which probably makes it less able to accept histories that are critical of myths of national progress and achievement. It is a nation that has, to date, resisted the formulation of a contemporary founding myth, a myth of historic beginning based on the acknowledgement and recognition of the history of the frontier, dispossession and Indigenous rights.

Both in the theatre of federal politics and in the area of NSW that I have studied closely, the far south coast, the struggle to assert critical narratives of Australia's past continues. A preference for forgetting on both a local and national scale remains. This is something that has become even clearer to me since *Looking for Blackfellas' Point* was published in September 2002. It was evident both in the intellectual and political climate that prevailed at the time, and the way in which this climate influenced the reaction to the book, particularly in media interviews and on-the-ground in local communities.

It is interesting to reflect on what happens when a book dealing with frontier violence and the culture of forgetting in Australia is published in the context of the so-called 'History Wars' and the nationwide publicity attracted by Keith Windschuttle's *The fabrication of Aboriginal history*.

Which camp are you in?

When journalists interview me about *Looking for Blackfellas' Point*, I am usually confronted with a standard leading question: 'Mark, do you see your book belonging to the black armband camp or the white blindfold camp?' I now have a standard reply. It is in neither camp, and the more that the media continue to accept uncritically this absurd binary division, itself a creation of the current crop of conservative pundits that have dominated Australian public debate in the last decade, the more impoverished our sense of history will become.

³ McKenna 2002: 202–7.

Listening to much of the so-called 'history wars' debate I am often frustrated and annoyed. There are many examples of historians writing subtle and sensitive accounts of frontier history that displayed empathy for every historical figure – whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. But these books never seem to be discussed in the media. Instead, much of our public culture prefers tabloid dualities – massacres or humanitarian concern – shame or pride – guilt or denial. This is one reason that I wanted to write history in a way that did not test the past against the language of contemporary politics and in a manner that did not seek to condemn with moral outrage. It is also why I set out to write a history that might be read as a conversation of hope.

A conversation of hope

What do I mean by 'hope'? I mean a history that seeks to understand the importance of the frontier in Australian consciousness, not by focusing purely on violence nor on the denial of violence. But instead by writing a history of relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in which religion, the environment, the economy and all aspects of social and cultural history have a place. In other words to connect the frontier to the crucial question of explaining who we are and who we have become as a nation and as a people.

Since the publication of *Looking for Blackfellas' Point*, I have had several people on the south coast and in the ACT make remarks along the following lines. 'Mark, have you heard of the new book on Aboriginal history by Wind someone or other, a lot of these stories about how bad our history was aren't true you know. We didn't kill all the Aborigines. You should read the book.'

I should 'read the book' and I have, but equally I'm sure that they haven't read the book. I repeat this anecdote because it raises the question of the levels at which the cultural impact of Keith Windschuttle's *The fabrication of Aboriginal history* is felt most profoundly – at an everyday conversational level.

As Tom Griffiths has written, in small communities 'oral sources are often regarded as the pre-eminent means of access to the local past'.⁴ The intimate and personal delivery of oral history gives it a more authentic and truthful ring. The teller is strangely free of the need for verification, yet somehow, as the custodian of folklore, even more authoritative as a result. Today this is true of narratives which seek to acknowledge frontier violence as well as those which seek to deny or marginalise it.

At the same time, any attempt to detach oral history from other forms of history is problematic. Especially in the period between 1960 and 2000, settler and Indigenous oral history frequently inform 'documentary' history. In turn, historical research ultimately becomes part of settler and Indigenous social memory, just as the stories in my book, for some, will soon become part of the fabric of social memory. But on the south coast of NSW, the world view and political beliefs of different social groups are reinforced more by oral history than scholarly history. 'Alternatives' and 'greenies' commonly repeat tales of colonial violence or massacres. (Some, for example, having heard about my book rather than having read it, have told me that my book has only confirmed what they 'knew all along'.) In a similar fashion, farmers and long-standing

⁴ Griffiths 2003: 141.

residents repeat laconic tales of the pioneer past that validate their own right to belong. Many people do neither, happy to live without history, reflecting on the past as little as possible, preferring not to know, a fact that reminds us that the need to acknowledge history is one historians are often too keen to ascribe to others.

In a manner consistent with the force of oral history in local communities on the south coast and elsewhere in Australia, the impact of Windschuttle's polemic is most in evidence in what is said, heard, and written about the book in the media, on the street and in private conversation. It is not Windschuttle's schoolmasterly checking of historians' footnotes, his assertion of the narrative framework of the rule of law, or even his exposure of mistakes by other scholars which makes his book significant in the discourse of our public culture. Instead it is the allegation that Aboriginal history has been fabricated – that three decades of historical scholarship can be characterised in the grab language of the media – like a trailer for *Sixty Minutes*. To quote Windschuttle, Aboriginal history is all 'smoke and mirrors', an 'exercise in white vanity', 'mythologies designed to create an edifice of black victimhood and white guilt'. And to paraphrase Windschuttle, genocide is a lie, frontier warfare is a lie, Aboriginal societies were primitive, we did the best we could in difficult circumstances. We owe them nothing. We were and are an honourable and decent people. We should be proud of our achievements.⁵

Empathy with the predicament of Aboriginal people in colonial Australia is not feasible for Windschuttle. He writes from and for the white side of the frontier. As he tellingly remarked in a recent interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald* – 'you can't really be serious about feeling sympathy for someone who died 200 years ago'. On another occasion, participating in a discussion on ABC Radio National's *Late Night Live* in late 2003, Windschuttle quipped that 'you would have to be mad' to want to write three volumes of Aboriginal history.⁶ Such subject matter is not worthy of a scholar of his stature.

Windschuttle *is* a denialist, not so much because of his meagre count of the Aboriginal dead, but because he denies Aboriginal people their humanity, denies them ownership of land, denies them political objectives, denies them 'collective interest of any kind', and denies them the ability to feel compassion for others. Moreover, he denies history, as a discipline, the possibility of understanding the frontier except as a juridical presentation of evidence.

These are the condensed historical narratives of denial promulgated by Windschuttle that seep into our communities with barely disguised political intent, creating a polarised and adversarial climate and giving succour and reassurance to those who believe that the dispossession of Aboriginal Australia is a 'history' that can be explained away. Inevitably the weaker elements are overpowered.

⁵ Windschuttle 2002: 1–10, 398–406, 412–16. Also see my review of this book in the *Age*, 25 January 2003 Saturday Extra: 9.

⁶ Cadzow 2003: 24. *Late Night Live*, Radio National Discussion broadcast September 3 & 4 from the State Library of Victoria in Melbourne shortly after the launch of Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark's *History Wars*, 2003.

Having set out to explain the origins of the culture of forgetting in Australia in *Looking for Blackfellas' Point*, I have watched with interest as the practice of forgetting, so deeply embedded in Australian society, has been re-enacted with Windschuttle's encouragement.

Australian historians in the early twenty-first century are presented with a political confrontation the resolution of which is imperative – Why can our present not be separated conveniently from our past? – Why should we continually remember the critical narratives of Australian settlement? When responding, perhaps we should do so not simply by emphasising (or denying) frontier violence, but by explaining how the dispossession of Aboriginal people, both historically and in the present day, lies at the heart of Australian consciousness and identity, and is connected to *every* aspect of our past.

History has the potential to be literary in the best sense of the word – open to all aspects of human experience, especially the personal experience of the writer. Open not only to the document, that which is tangible, but to what is intimated, to the silences and absences as well. This openness creates a history rich with possibility. It is precisely this view of history that those such as Windschuttle are eager to ridicule and dismiss. Let me give two examples.

History?

I recently had the privilege of visiting Davidson's whaling station on the southern side of Twofold Bay in NSW, a 'historic site' close to the Eden woodchip mill and a naval munitions depot, now managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service and currently under review. There will soon be a new 'Conservation Management and Cultural Tourism Plan' for the site.

Imagine a small timber cottage, a cleared setting close to the water, old fruit trees and garden flowers overlooking a large inlet, where the Towamba River, the same river that flows through my land, finally reaches the sea. A short walk from the cottage, through columns of towering coastal grey box, some hundreds of years old, you reach a high point from which you look across the south side of the bay. The view is dream-like, mythical. You are elevated partly because beneath your feet is a vast midden. The shells crush easily, splintering with every step you take. Only a few beaches away to the east, but fortunately out of view, the mechanical drone of the chip mill and the long arm of the new naval wharf promise to obliterate history – Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal.

The whaling station site was an Aboriginal special place and Aboriginal heritage long before it became part of the settlers' heritage. Looking through a wide-angle lens, the whaling industry barely registers in the history of human habitation in the area. To appreciate this, you only have to stand on the midden, looking out to the mouth of the Towamba River. Aboriginal historical association with this place runs deep. It touches the ground lightly yet it weighs heavily. Comparatively, the history of the whaling station is slight. But it touches the ground much more obviously, and so to us it is more accessible as history.

Absence

The fragility of our sense of belonging in Australia is borne out by the strangeness and difficulty settlers faced in grafting the European faith in Christianity on colonial soil.

Without the architectural scaffold of faith – the cathedrals and churches that we now find in the cities of Australia – settlers struggled to believe, struggled to find their God in a country where civilisation had yet to gain a foothold. I was reminded of this recently.

One day last September I was at home alone. Looking out towards the front gate, a distance of 70 metres or so, I saw three women in Sunday best walking along the drive towards the house. Outside, the wind tore at everything that dared to stand. The sky filled with leaves and dust. The bush swayed violently. As the women came closer, I could see that one of them was carrying a Bible. They were Jehovah's Witnesses. I opened the door and greeted them. They immediately spoke some comforting words on the current 'war against terror'. All had been predicted. All would end well. All would be forgiven for those who embraced the word of the Lord. One woman began to read aloud from the book. Raising her voice slightly she spoke the words piously – 'And the meek shall inherit the earth'. Behind her the wind bayed. The tops of the gums bent over as if in pain. Her words fell away, stories from another place and time, nostalgic almost, falling now on fallow ground.

I felt then that I understood why many settlers longed for the permanence of the church and its ministers. I also understood why many Bishops in the colony had refused to consecrate wooden churches – because the bush would devour them. Only within walls of stone was faith safe and belief still possible. Without these protective edifices the bush seemed to strip every social ritual and meaning bare – exposing them as little more than social constructs. How much more threatening then is the settler's confrontation with Aboriginal people – a people who were connected intimately with the land, for whom the land was not an enemy but the source of life – the essence of every aspect of their culture?

Responding

I have argued in the conclusion to *Looking for Blackfellas' Point* that the history we remember creates the framework within which our politics takes place. One of the most fundamental tasks for historians is to continue to confront the ever-present need (on both a local and national level) for a history of pieties and comfortable reassurance. But this confrontation involves much more than merely repeating the sorry tale of dispossession. It also involves explaining how and why this selfsame tale can be sensed and interpreted in so many aspects of our social and cultural experience.

To do so is to take our audience beyond the documentary record. Beyond the letter of history, as if it were an article of law to be tested in the courts or placed on media trial, and beyond statistics and tidy calculations. We might then communicate a vision of history that is open to oral sources, to fable and myth and to human emotion and human psychology.

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