

The Black War: Fear, Sex and Resistance in Tasmania

by Nicholas Clements

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Nicholas Clements' debut volume *The Black War* offers an innovative approach to understanding the origins of Tasmania's historical identity. His book is not the first to attempt such a task. It is not even the first to bear such a title. The journalist, biographer and historian Clive Turnbull published his *Black War: The Extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines* (1948). This was the first major survey of the impact of British settlement on Tasmanian Aborigines since a flurry of nineteenth-century publications by James Bonwick (*Daily Life and Origin of the Tasmanians* (1870), *The Last of the Tasmanians* (1870), *The Lost Tasmanian Race* (1884)), and James Erskin Calder (*Some Account of the Wars, Extirpation, Habits etc. of the Native Tribes of Tasmania* (1875)). Importantly, Turnbull's work followed a period working as a wartime press officer for Australian Associated Press. No doubt influenced by this experience, Turnbull was the first to draw a comparison between British efforts to exterminate Tasmanian Aborigines and the genocide of Jews by the Nazis.

Genocide in Tasmania has emerged in recent decades as perhaps the most contentious subject of debate on Tasmania's recent history. The supervisor of Clements' PhD, from which *The Black War* is drawn, was Henry Reynolds. Having published extensively on the Tasmanian experience, Reynolds' book *An Indelible Stain?: The Question of Genocide in Australia* (2001) backed away from the appropriateness of the term in the Tasmanian context. Reynolds argued that the absence of government directives to exterminate the Indigenous population makes use of the term 'genocide' imprecise, and that while the effect of colonial actions in Tasmania may have had a genocidal effect, there is not evidence to conclude a genocidal intention.

Clements, perhaps unsurprisingly, seems to concur with this conclusion. The significance of the author's position can be understood best in light of attacks made by Keith Windschuttle on a range of Australian historians in his book *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (2002). Windschuttle was intent on dismissing the promulgation by Australian scholars of the idea of genocide in Tasmania. At stake was the international reputation of Australia and the task of historians to provide a narrative that served the national interest as understood by the country's conservative right. This required countering not only direct claims by historians such as Lyndall Ryan, who argued in her influential book *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* (1981) that genocide did occur on the island, but also a widespread acceptance of this in the Australian media throughout the 1970s. Importantly, this view was commonly used to invoke a sense of national shame, with Tasmania the crucible of colonial guilt.

Windschuttle's approach was to assuage the national conscience by redressing this popular perception of genocide in Tasmania as the product of a sloppy and partisan academy. His methodology simply excluded all evidence inconsistent with his desired narrative, and generated a vast polemic that dominated the Australian media for most of the next decade. Reynolds' placement at 'ground zero' in the ensuing History Wars was ironic given that he had never argued for genocide in Tasmania. In fact, he had sought to ameliorate the perceived fatal impact of settlers on Aborigines, arguing instead that it was more important to understand Aboriginal resistance to British occupation as sophisticated and intentional; responding to a series of unfulfilled treaties offered by the governor. Nevertheless, Windschuttle was critical of Reynolds for making such concessions, asserting instead his scientific racist argument that Tasmanian Aborigines were inherently dysfunctional and self-destructive.

Henry Reynolds writes in his foreword to *The Black War*, 'Nicholas Clements has written a book that, while reflecting upon the History Wars, has transcended their angry contention and has, consequently, brought them to an end' (p. x). To this extent, Clements' book represents an important legacy to the now-retired Reynolds' distinguished career – a desirable end to an undignified, hostile and often destructive national debate. Clements' approach to this task is a dignified one. In promoting his book, the author has been at pains to emphasise that he has sought to avoid the polemics that came to dominate the History Wars.

Interestingly, Clements is also happy to declare 'quite a lot of respect' for his mentor's critic. He explained this to *The Australian* (26 April 2014) with reference to Windschuttle's argument that historians had sought to portray European settlers unfairly. The book's preface offers a key insight into Clements' method. In it he reveals a eureka moment while reading *The Palestine–Israeli Conflict: A Beginner's Guide* (2008), co-written by Israeli and Palestinian scholars

Dan Cohn-Sherbok and Dawoud El-Alami. Clements recognised that an account 'from both sides' would enable him 'to weave the vastly different experiences of Aborigines and colonists into one volume' (p. xiv).

What follows is the division of each chapter of *The Black War* into sections marked 'Black' and 'White'. With this approach, the author attempts to construct a social history of the attitudes and actions of both parties to the conflict. He does this with extensive reference to an impressive array of primary sources, drawn from Tasmania's rich colonial archive. This formulaic approach has not appealed to all readers I have surveyed. For some it proved to be a laboured structure, imposing itself on the narrative flow, rather than facilitating it. For others it may offer a simple means of seeing past the complex of ambiguity and contradiction that inevitably besets any attempt to make a fair and inclusive social account of entrenched human conflict.

The success of Clements' approach ultimately depends on the quality of his insight into the context of the many lives to which his book refers. Such an aspiration is, however, too ambitious to succeed entirely. The most obvious obstacle is that there are no first-person accounts by Aborigines of events described in each of the 'Black' sections. Both 'Black' and 'White' must be read through the lens of a non-Aboriginal commentator, inescapably enmeshed and inevitably partisan. The author acknowledges the problem as a limitation of the archive, but I am not sure that this is enough to surmount the moral and ethical dimensions of this challenge. The Palestinian–Israeli inspiration for his approach involved two authors, each contributing perspectives, interpretations and standpoints to their respective accounts. Without an intimate knowledge of the distinct social and cultural characteristics of the Tasmanian Aboriginal experience and its heritage, can *The Black War* hope to successfully model the approach of Cohn-Sherbok and El-Alami?

It might also occur to readers that the convenient division of perspectives into a dichotomy of 'black' and 'white' runs the risk of missing more nuanced influences on events and attitudes in the colony. Many individuals and philosophies were at play in the colony that are not so easily pigeonholed. Those Tasmanians of mixed-descent are a case in point. The few references made to this rapidly growing population acknowledge the origins of today's Aboriginal community, and the vigorous campaigns for justice that continue. But there is no suggestion that such people might have played a meaningful role in the milieu of events discussed in the book. Similarly, there were many Aboriginal people who either temporarily or permanently abandoned tribal life to achieve varying degrees of integration during the period covered. These constitute a critical 'grey area' in Clements' racially based structural analysis. A compelling hint of this was successfully imagined through the depiction of Black Bill in Rohan

Wilson's historical fiction novel *The Roving Party* (2011). Wilson posed multiple questions about the agency of mixed-race individuals in colonial conflict, none of which are touched on in *The Black War*.

Those seeking a rigorous contribution to the question of genocide in Tasmania will not find it in *The Black War*. A few critical contributors to the debate are briefly dismissed in favour of Reynolds' conclusions, without reinforcing argument or discussion. In fairness, Clements makes it clear that his volume is not the place for 'delving deep into government policy' (p. 56). Rather, he argues the use of genocide because there was no ideological basis for the killing of Aborigines by colonists. 'Those who participated in the violence did so largely out of revenge and self-preservation' (p. 57), writes Clements, appearing to ignore their desire for securing land for economic interests.

Clements effectively transforms Reynolds' idea of Aborigines as a proactive resistance, into one where they formed a determined aggressor no more or less guilty of genocide than the colonists. The disproportion of power, resources and population disappears as a factor in such an analysis. As 'an eighth generation Tasmanian (whose) ancestors lived through and participated in the conflict of the 1820s' (p. xi), Clements' book certainly constitutes a significant chapter in Australia's ongoing History Wars. It makes sense of his respect for Keith Windschuttle and undoubtably seeks to relieve some of the weight of Aboriginal extermination from his professed settler ancestors. However, his 'even-handedness' is compromised by the absence of an unmediated Aboriginal voice. Clements' version of *The Palestine-Israeli Conflict: A Beginner's Guide* is derived entirely from Israeli sources. As such it is unlikely to mark an end to the History Wars.

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