

*'The long shadow of remembrance':
Remembering the debate about massacre in the Black War in Tasmania*

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Abstract: The Black War in Tasmania 1823-1834, is widely accorded by historians as one of the best documented of all Australia's colonial frontier wars. Yet debate still rages about whether massacre was its defining feature and whether it accounted for the deaths of many Aborigines. As Keith Windschuttle pointed out in 2002, 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.

To understand how the debate took shape and where it stands today, this paper reviews its origins in 1835 and then shows how it was played out over three historical periods: 1835-1870; 1875-1939; and 1948-2008; by focussing on the key protagonists and how they used the available sources and methods and explanatory frameworks to make their case. The paper 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 doctrine of the self-extinguishing Aborigine. In the third period however, the protagonists engaged in a fierce contest for control of the debate. One side argued for massacre denial, based on the belief that more settlers than Aborigines were killed in the Black War while the other argued for the opposite case, based on the belief that the evidence for massacre was now too overwhelming to be dismissed.

The paper concludes 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 as a hunter gatherer people. Above all it reflects the reluctance of many white Australians today, to come to terms with incontrovertible evidence about our violent past and to seek reconciliation with the Aboriginal survivors.

Keywords: Tasmania, massacre, memory, historians, Aborigines

Introduction

In 2002, historian Keith Windschuttle claimed that, from 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 (Windschuttle 2002: 131-166). In making these claims, however, 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 investigate these questions, this paper has selected for analysis the arguments made by the key historians who have shaped the debate over the last 173 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 human evolutionary science 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 there were few Aborigines at the war's outset, then how had they managed so effectively to terrorise the colonists for so long? If, however, there were many more, how had their numbers declined so rapidly? Faced with this moral dilemma, historians looked to the colonists for some explanations.

Henry Melville a radical journalist and newspaper editor set the parameters of the debate. Arriving in Tasmania during the war's second phase in 1827 or 1828 he quickly found employment on the leading opposition newspaper. Some of his articles and reports which were based on interviews with settlers in the war zones and discussions with the professional elite in Hobart, became the basis of his own account of the Black War, published in 1835 (Mackaness 1965).

Melville 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' (Mackaness 1965:71) 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' (Mackaness 1965:79).

However 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 'real' evidence would lead a later generation of historians to question his conclusions.

John West faced a similar problem. A Congregational minister and also a journalist he arrived in Tasmania four years after the war had ended and quickly realized 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 however, he championed the colony's future at the expense of its violent past. In *The History of Tasmania* published in 1852, he was ambivalent about the use and extent of massacre in the Black War. He offered four examples of how it probably happened and like Melville, believed that it was inappropriate to identify the perpetrators and witnesses, let alone the dates and places where the massacres took place. He explained his decision to take this approach in the following way:

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 (Shaw 1971:283).

He admitted that massacre had been an unfortunate component of the war, but he also firmly believed that it was more useful for the colonists to 'move on' from the horrors of the past to prepare for a rosy future of self-government where the Aborigines, which he now believed were on 'the brink of extinction' could be conveniently forgotten (Shaw 1971: 285).

James Bonwick disagreed. An evangelical schoolteacher, he had arrived in Tasmania in 1842, eight years after the war had ended, and like West was also surprised to find that memories of the war, dominated the colonial psyche. He began to interview settlers and stock-keepers about their experiences and when he moved to Victoria in 1849, collected even more accounts from colonists who had left Tasmania in the mid 1830s and who were it seems, anxious to recall 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.

At the end of this 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. By the time Bonwick's work was published in 1870 however, memories of the

war were beginning to fade and some colonists were disturbed that his book had generated international interest in the war and in the fate of 'the last of the Tasmanian Aborigines'. With Tasmania's violent past returning to haunt them, some colonists sought their own champion who would 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 became firmly committed to the settlers' determination to transform Tasmania into a vast sheepwalk. Determined to restore the colony's reputation, that he believed had been tarnished by Bonwick's work, he located the 'nineteen awful volumes' of official archival sources of the war in the Colonial Secretary's Office in Hobart and found a very different story of the Black War from Bonwick's account. 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' (Calder 1875:7). He continued:

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] (Calder 1875:8).

Furthermore, he argued, the Aborigines were responsible for their own demise. They had died, not from mass killings by the colonists, but from intertribal wars and 'to 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 (Calder 1875: 25-7).

From that moment, massacre denial took hold. Based on the doctrine of Aboriginal self-extermination, Calder's work absolved the colonists from responsibility for the past. Indeed massacre denial had some interesting spin offs. In 1898, James Backhouse Walker suggested that at the colony's founding massacre at Risdon Cove in 1804, the cannon, which every one agreed had been fired at the Aborigines, may have been 'loaded with blank cartridge' rather than 'grape', because 'we have no means of deciding' (Walker 1973: 52).

By the end of nineteenth century the massacre debate appeared to have been resolved, with a resounding victory for the massacre denialists. This is not surprising. The era was dominated by the doctrine of Aboriginal self-extermination, derived from discourse of scientific racism which placed the Tasmanian Aborigines at the lower end of the human evolutionary scale where they were considered as far too primitive to withstand British

colonisation. By World War II this discourse had relegated the Black War to a melancholy footnote in Tasmania's history in which the Aborigines had simply 'faded away' (Giblin 1939: 20).

1948-2008

At the end of World War II however the debate was rekindled. Clive Turnbull, a war correspondent who was imbued with 'the long shadows of massacre remembrance' handed down by his own family which had settled in Tasmania in the 1820s, produced his powerful text, *Black War: the extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines*. From his exhaustive search of the newspaper and official published sources of the war he was in no doubt that massacre played a key role in the extermination of the Aborigines. He claimed that in 1828, 'the wiping out of the Aborigines began in earnest' (Turnbull 1965: 80) and that most massacres had probably occurred during the martial law phase, between November 1828 and January 1832 (Turnbull 1965: 97). But he could find little real evidence for the fragmentary accounts of massacre in the published sources were too garbled to make sense of. Perhaps his experience as a war correspondent enabled him to read between the lines.

Twenty years later, however, Turnbull's claims were contested by Brian Plomley, the editor of the Tasmanian journals of the conciliator, G.A. Robinson (Plomley 1966). Despite the fact that Robinson had recorded several instances of massacre which had not previously been in the public record, Plomley was convinced that massacre was a rare event in the Black War. In his annotated bibliography of the Tasmanian Aborigines, published in 1969, he questioned in particular, Bonwick's claims about widespread massacre:

his uncritical acceptance of the stories told him by "old hands" 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 (Plomley 1969).

Plomley's attack was taken very seriously by younger scholars 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 (Ryan 1981:174). While I did record six instances of massacre, I concluded that they had little bearing on the war's outcome.

Lloyd Robson, Tasmania's leading historian, disagreed. Like Turnbull he was also a Tasmanian 'native son', brought up with 'the long shadows of massacre remembrance'. In *A History of Tasmania Volume I*, he made a particular study of at least eleven incidents of massacre during the Black War, based on his exhaustive reading of all the known sources (Robson 1983: 210-253). This damning evidence left Robson in no doubt that massacre was widely used to exterminate the Aborigines (Robson 1983:211-219).

At this point the massacre debate reached an impasse. The evidence appeared to support both points of view. What was needed now was an account which brought settler activism and Aboriginal resistance together.

However, this did not happen. A decade later, Plomley re-entered the debate. In his exhaustive survey of the newspaper and archival sources of the war, published in *The Aboriginal/Settler Clash in Van Diemen's Land 1803-1831*, he was determined to present what he called the 'written record' as unfettered data so that readers could, objectively, reach their own conclusions about massacre (Plomley 1992:7). He had particular respect for some of the archival sources:

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 (Plomley 1992:7).

But he little respected the integrity of newspaper sources, in particular the non-official press, which 'not only paid as much attention to rumour as to events, but commented freely upon the situation. Rumour sometimes led a newspaper to proclaim atrocities in one issue and refute them in the next' (Plomley 1992:8). Yet some of these 'rumours' of massacre were recorded as fact by G.A. Robinson in his journals.

Instead of following up the stories he contended instead, 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' (Plomley 1992:9). Furthermore, 'the decline in the population was, generally speaking, gradual, although more or less rapid at one time or another' (Plomley 1992:11) and that in 1824, there were only 600 Aborigines in the war zone of eastern part of Tasmania.

Yet none of the contemporary evidence supported this conclusion. Had he compared G.A. Robinson's reports of massacre with accounts in the colonial press and also the official sources, he might have reached a different conclusion. Plomley's unrivalled reputation as a scholar however, placed his findings beyond criticism and conferred on this particular work the status of an objective historical document.

In 1995 for example, Henry Reynolds used it as the key source to argue that 'the numbers [of Aborigines] actually killed by Europeans may have been less than is generally supposed' (Reynolds 1995: 51), that the massacres that Robinson recorded along the Meander River 'were rare in Tasmania' (Reynolds 1995:79) 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' (Reynolds 1995:82).

In removing massacre almost entirely from the Black War, Reynolds had, albeit unintentionally, established the pre-conditions for Keith Windschuttle to enter the debate in 2002. However, Windschuttle's idiosyncratic approach to the investigation of eleven alleged incidents of massacre, in which, like Plomley, he summarily dismissed or wilfully ignored just about every known piece of contemporary evidence (Windschuttle 2002: 131-166), led other historians to reach the opposite conclusion. They now considered that these incidents had probably taken place after all (Boyce 2003, McFarlane 2003, Ryan 2003).

Rather than shutting down the debate, as Windschuttle had expected to do, he has, perversely, opened it up new methods of investigation. Many recent studies of the Black War, including investigations of specific incidents of massacre and nuanced studies of specific regions in colonial Tasmania, have concluded that massacre was most likely to have been used as a deliberate strategy to destroy targeted groups of Aborigines in particular areas of Tasmania during specific phases of the Black War (Breen 2001, Ryan 2006, 2008, Kiernan 2007, McFarlane 2008, Madley 2008).

This new research leaves the reader in no doubt that the strategic use of massacre in the war resulted in the deaths of many hundreds of Aboriginal men, women and children. This evidence offers the clearest explanation yet for the grim statistic that historians first confronted in 1834, that fewer than 250 Aborigines had survived.

Conclusion

In 2008, the massacre debate has turned full circle from its origins in 1835. The long shadow of massacre remembrance, that informed the debate at the outset, only to be discarded in later periods, has gained new resonance. While the debate is by no means settled, more recent research suggests that it has already made the transition from its exclusively Tasmanian context to comparative trans national settings. In this new environment the massacre debate will, undoubtedly, take off into interesting and important new directions.

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Lyndall Ryan's long interest in Aboriginal history has contested two long held beliefs: that Aboriginal people did not resist colonial occupation of their lands; and that the colonists did not actively destroy them, rather they 'faded away' from introduced disease. In *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* (1981, 1996), she argued that contrary to widespread belief, the Tasmanian Aborigines had resisted colonial occupation and had not 'faded away' in 1876 or in any other period of human history. More recently, in articles published in *Journal of Genocide Research*, the *Australian and New Zealand Law and History Journal*, and in the entry on Tasmania in the *International Online Encyclopaedia of Mass Violence* she offers new evidence that colonial massacre played a significant part in rapid Aboriginal population decline in the 19th century.