

**Responding to Windschuttle: A note on child abduction, Aboriginal peoples and the aftermath of empire in Australia**



**Gil Hardwick 2011**

## Responding to Windschuttle: A note on child abduction, Aboriginal peoples and the aftermath of empire in Australia

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This paper arose from discussion and review of claims made by Keith Windschuttle in the third volume of his 2003 *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*,<sup>1</sup> most specifically seeking to refute arguments about the treatment of Aboriginal peoples outlined in the 1997 *Bringing Them Home Report*,<sup>2</sup> and in particular rejecting the direct likening of the forced removal of children from their families to the practices of Nazi Germany.

This paper is not and will not be distracted by his reference to some racial policy of eugenics as may or may not have been practiced under Adolf Hitler. Rather it will be argued that Windschuttle's historiography is prejudiced in its assumptions, narrow in its analysis, and legally blinded by his refusal to admit first-hand testimony.

Instead, a broader historical frame will show that the forced displacement of Aboriginal peoples arose rather from the nationalist industrial economy that emerged following the American Civil War and adopted widely, not only in the United States and Great Britain but throughout the then British Empire. This economy was subsequently and only partially adapted by Germany and Japan to their own purposes. This new economy fundamentally and often brutally changed relationships as did the agrarian revolution centuries before and subsequently did not impact merely on the Australians, but on landed peoples everywhere.

This is in great contrast to Windschuttle's argument, in his unreasoning insistence on the use of narrowly formal academic historiography derived *a posteriori* from State

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<sup>1</sup> Windschuttle, Keith. *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Vol. Three, The Stolen Generations 1881-2008*, Paddington NSW: Macleay Press, 2009

<sup>2</sup> *Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, Commonwealth of Australia, 1997

archives. In short, he relies upon the written submissions and reports of State functionaries and others already employed within the system of welfare which was put in place to provide some sort of care after the fact, to those people who were already disenfranchised and displaced by their policies, and who were racially discriminated against under the Australian Constitution itself.

Not only are his sources a biased selection, Windschuttle argues at some length, and conspicuously from a social evolutionary perspective, placing “*our freedom of expression . . . part of the cultural heritage of those countries – Europe, The Americas and Australasia – that have evolved out of Ancient Greece, Rome and Christianity,*” against what he sees in stark contradiction as some sort of post-modernist fabrication of history.<sup>3</sup>

This paper places Windschuttle’s impulse to narrow and ideological reportage against two other frames – a wider historical perspective and the immediate testimony of witnesses. That is, real life-histories supported by ethnohistoriographic field evidence that these removals and displacements did in fact take place as reported lies primarily in the first hand witness statements cited by the *Bringing Them Home Report*. Secondly, the marks of systematic philosophical imposition are also evident in the Australian physical landscape.

Direct comparisons can be made with similar actions against indigenous peoples in other countries simultaneously taking place throughout the same period. Good comparison need not be made simply with Nazi Germany, but with the global circumstances of that period in history acknowledged by Windschuttle along with everyone else drawing attention to the Aboriginal circumstance.

To begin looking at Windschuttle’s historical viewpoint in his ongoing public argument on Aboriginal affairs is to review the way he constructs academic categories. While it was indeed Aboriginal people who had complained about the way they were being treated historically, for example, that does not create something else that he called ‘Aboriginal History’, separate and distinct from something else again called ‘Australian History’.

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<sup>3</sup> Windschuttle, Keith. *Postmodernism and the Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Lecture to the NSW Higher School Certificate History Extension Conference, Tom Mann Theatre, Sydney, May 30 2007, <http://www.sydneyline.com/Postmodernism%20and%20Fabrication.htm>, accessed 27 December 2010

The wider context being ignored in the construction of this simplistic adversarial dichotomy posing “Aboriginal” against “Australia”<sup>4</sup> is the great broad sweep of British imperialism, and the wider military-industrial colonial purpose in which Great Britain was so profoundly and comprehensively immersed.

The global circumstances being faced by the British, dating from the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and the Zulu War of 1879, included the fundamentally acquisitive role they played in what became known in history as the ‘Scramble For Africa’, culminating in the Berlin Conference of 1884 which formalised the European slicing up of the entire continent.

But what is often ignored in this debate is the emergence of the United States onto the world stage from the mid-nineteenth century, under their self-formulated ‘Manifest Destiny’, following the Mexican-American War of 1848 which quickly replaced their earlier post-Napoleonic, isolationist stance.<sup>5</sup> Subsequent actions by the invigorated United States included the blockade of Tokyo Harbour by Commodore Matthew Perry forcing Japan out into the modern world, and not least the American Civil War of 1861-65 which for the first time replaced traditional agrarian plantation or estate economies with the modern military-industrial juggernaut.

The point being made here is that Imperial policy movements were less concerned with indigeneity or Aboriginality as such, but with landed economies everywhere. In South Africa the British actions were not only against Zulu, but against landed Afrikaaners of old Dutch stock known as Boers. In North America, aside from the Southern plantation owners wishing to secede from the Union, in the aftermath the Plains Indian nations were subdued and herded onto reservations. In Australia, allowing for delays brought by the Constitutional convention and lead-up to Federation, it was not only Aboriginal peoples but extensive pastoral landholders branded “squatters”, anathema to the burgeoning mass industrial economy since controlling such large areas of pastoral land that was subsequently subdivided into square mile (640 acre) blocks to feed burgeoning cities.

The visual evidence that these historical phenomena were a systematic impost is that the breakdown of productive landmass, in the aftermath of imperial conquest, used survey points of latitude and longitude calculated from trigonometric stations scattered throughout

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<sup>4</sup> Windschuttle. *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, opera citatum*, p. 42ff

<sup>5</sup> These global events are legion, commonplace and certainly well-known to an accomplished historian such as Windschuttle. They need not be referenced separately here.

the landscape, conspicuously in India, Southern Africa, North America and Australia. This is in sharp contrast with the earlier setting of borders and boundaries along such natural features as rivers, catchments and mountain ranges. In the context in question, anyone flying over Australia's productive agricultural land, for example, has revealed to them its square, patchwork layout in small, relatively unproductive blocks. They were designed to keep a single family - white, government-sponsored, ex-soldier or group settler, tenured by freehold entitlement, and keeping others off regardless of what crops were planted and regardless of what farming operations were carried. It is plain from such direct observation that the process of conquest and colonisation had taken place rationally, methodically and completely. This abstracted methodology is quintessential to high industrial modernity, leaving no patch of land anywhere unsurveyed and unclaimed,<sup>6</sup> often against fierce local resistance.<sup>7</sup>

Why does a historian of Windschuttle's standing show no awareness of this knowledge and information? Only a few hours' drive in and around Sydney especially and he like the rest of us can see for himself what Australian colonial history was all about. It seems plain enough that the reason for his repetitive and emotive over-reaction to the findings of the *Bringing Them Home Report* is that he recognises their inherent truth but unable for some reason to acknowledge them. Being an old Canterbury Boys' High school-mate of ex-Prime Minister John Howard, a notorious ally of Tony Blair and George W. Bush, may have something to do with the position he has taken on these issues.

While Windschuttle calls this whole debate a fabrication of 'Aboriginal history', prejudged by his political constructing of something else called 'Aboriginality', it is a somewhat disreputable tactic simply to mobilise on the basis of race an ongoing, historically deep-rooted bias against British subjects and Australian citizens who did and do have a legitimate claim to redress.

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<sup>6</sup> See also, for example, Johnston, Frederick Marshall. *Knights and Theodolites: A saga of surveyors*, Sydney: Edwards & Shaw, 1962; Rogers, Barbara. *White Wealth and Black Poverty: American investments in South Africa*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976; Wolf, Eric R. *Europe and the People Without History*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982; Levy, Norman. *Men for the Mines: The Foundations of the South African Cheap Labour System*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982

<sup>7</sup> Morris, Donald R., *The Washing of the Spears*, London: Sphere Book Ltd, 1968; Reynolds, Henry. *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia*, Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books Ltd, 1982 Blood on the Wattle

It is further invalid to demonise the Nazis in order to eulogise the British heritage. It becomes further plain that the distraction making reference to Nazi Germany is also unwarranted and irrelevant. The Germans did not invent this system of total, finely detailed and executed colonisation of "empty lands" to extract their natural resources, but like the Japanese merely borrowed the modern national-socialist industrial economy from the British and Americans, trying to catch up with them in the midst of global depression following their humiliation by the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. The Germans neither invented mass industrialisation, and nor did they invent concentration camps, which were then and are still today of quintessentially English design.

It is moreover untrue that Aboriginal people were only recognised as Australian citizens by the 1967 referendum, and by implication that the federal government has no responsibility for anything that happened before that. Throughout the long period of British colonisation and conquest, the peoples of Australia had never been formally designated Aboriginal but were always legally, like everybody else, British subjects. It is not as if they were foreign nationals! This common law status did not change in fact until the 1948 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting sought to rationalise the question of nationality and citizenship throughout the post-WWII British Commonwealth, resulting in Australia in the *Nationality and Citizenship Act 1948*, which came into force on Australia Day, 1949.

Prior to 1949, then, all Australians were British subjects, and after that date all native-born Australians automatically and regardless of racial origin became Australian citizens. Again in Australian terms, this latter move came in the wake of the earlier *Nationality Act 1920* which sought to codify the idea of the British subject in Australian Law, but had neither sought to make any distinction toward or to discriminate against Aboriginal peoples.

It was only the Australian Constitution itself, dating from Federation in 1901, which made this distinction. It argued wrongly and unlawfully that while the Federal Government had the power to make laws with respect to people of any race, other than the Aboriginal people of any state, it was further necessary to make special laws with respect to said Aboriginal peoples. It went on to state that Aboriginal peoples were not to be counted in reckoning the numbers of population. The Constitution had to be changed. It was invalid *ab initio*, from its inception, yet these two clauses were only removed finally following the

referendum on the *Constitution Alteration (Aboriginal People) 1967*, which with the approval of over 90% of the Australian people became law on 10 August 1967.

Objectively, and reasonably, it is not at all difficult to grasp the fact that the Australian Federal Government after 1901, despite its own laws in 1920 and 1949, through its constitutional powers had set itself up to discriminate against British subjects and in turn Australian citizens with the power to vote in State and federal elections, solely on racial grounds. As indicated above it was an excuse to take up their traditional lands or to move them without rights onto government-run reserves, or by default cattle stations and pastoral leasehold entitlements which had already taken up traditional lands.

Except for the hugely disproportionate increase in Aboriginal unemployment following the 1967 referendum, as people were being turned off stations because their entitlement to proper pay and working conditions could now be enforced by the Commonwealth, how the Australian Constitution and by corollary Federal government policy differed in any significant way from the racist policies of Stalinist USSR or Nazi Reich is difficult to grasp, except that it lasted a lot longer here

Windschuttle's position defies overwhelming historical evidence. Post-WWII reconstruction, the re-invigoration of Germany and Japan, and the crisis of the formation of the European Community,<sup>8</sup> led in Australia to a fundamental querying of our relationship with Great Britain. It led to an emergence in this country, as in others, of what became known as post-colonial and post-modern thought. Despite W's claim, that does not render the change of relationship to be a false, post-modernist, radically adversarial fabrication of history of Australia, merely a more complete rendering of the history of this country.

It is no surprise that post colonial thought would hear voices previously suppressed or ignored. With young Aboriginal people, like the rest of us, proceeding by this time into higher education, it became inevitable that their voice too would be heard. The new generation emerging from the post-WWII reconstruction and growing up during the Cold War and the threat of global nuclear holocaust broke through the stagnation finally. The fact that their emerging voice was strident and bitterly angry, where all things being equal it may have added positively and intelligently to discourse on the hugely varietal

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<sup>8</sup> See Wilkes, George (ed.). *Britain's Failure to Enter the European Community 1961-63: The enlargement negotiations and crises in European, Atlantic and Commonwealth relations*, London: Routledge, 1997

foundation of Australia, is in itself evidence of the previous discrimination against them and suffering they'd endured which led to such formal enquiries that produced such public documents as the 1997 *Bringing Them Home Report*.

*Bringing Them Home* was not the only such report emerging from this period. The 2004 *Forgotten Australians* report on the fate of institutionalised children generally,<sup>9</sup> the NSW *Wood Royal Commission (1997)*,<sup>10</sup> and the WA *Kennedy Royal Commission (2004)*,<sup>11</sup> all reveal widespread systemic corruption and abuse, not only against these Aboriginal children but against anyone considered peripheral to the modern urbanised, bureaucratic military-industrial system. As shown in the global perspective above, this system had been in place in this country for a very long time; in Western Australia alone dating back to the origin of the Swan River colony in 1829.<sup>12</sup> These Royal Commissions and other such enquiries did not invent this history, they simply described it.

Australians anxious to avoid the emergence of post-colonial history, like Windschuttle, refer to the large system of poor relief maintained on behalf of Aboriginal peoples. On the other hand, Australia maintained another large system of widespread abduction, transportation and institutionalising of children that did not come about through any overtly charitable generosity on the part of governments, but in response under considerable moral and political pressure to do something about the devastating effect of their colonising economic strategies that displaced entire populations, rendering them landless and unable to support themselves. Windschuttle himself acknowledges from his own digging through State archives that the children were being removed from camps and government reserves specifically set aside for Aboriginal peoples,<sup>13</sup> and not from otherwise prosperous and self-contained communities.

Aboriginal children were being removed from their families merely in order to “eradicate their Aboriginality”. At the time it was considered that “full-blood” people were

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<sup>9</sup> Community Affairs Reference Committee. *Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children*, Commonwealth of Australia, August 2004

<sup>10</sup> *Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service*, Final Report, The Government of New South Wales, 1997

<sup>11</sup> *Royal Commission Into Whether There Has Been Corrupt or Criminal Conduct By Any Western Australian Police Officer*, The Government of Western Australia, January 2004

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Hetherington, Penelope. *Paupers, Poor Relief and Poor Houses in Western Australia 1829-1910*, Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 2009

<sup>13</sup> Windschuttle, *Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, *opera citatum*, passim

already deemed to be progressing toward extinction, while mixed race children were being “rescued” from such a fate. Other options may have been that those children were instead taken back to their home lands and restored to their own traditional inheritance, or offered matriculation standard education and placed in university to help fill the desperate shortage of doctors and lawyers, or even nurses and midwives. All those options were possible at the time. Instead, these children were being abducted, reduced, institutionalised, and systematically retrained as domestic servants and farm labourers.

It is not necessary to engage argument about the beneficent latter day philosophy of ‘eradicating Aboriginality’ in these children. These later token efforts to “save” some of their children on the basis of mixed race and remnant white genetic inheritance, was directed towards rendering them as cheap domestic and farm labour to the white people who had taken up their land. It was said to have been sort of preparing them for citizenship, whatever that is supposed to mean. They were native-born anyway, and by virtue of that fact alone subjects of the Crown and citizens with full voting rights as adults. ‘Eradication’ was already well established. That widespread and genocidal extermination of Aboriginal peoples in Australia was already well under way, and had been since the early colonial period, is already established fact.

The clear policy of government as a whole throughout this period is as easily summed up in the words of the then New South Wales Aboriginal Protection Board’s Chief Inspector, Robert Donaldson, when he wrote:

*'[t]here is no difference of opinion as to the only solution of this great problem - the removal of the children... In the course of the next few years there will be no need for the camps and stations; the old people will have passed away, and their progeny will be absorbed in the industrial classes of the colony'*

And further, as the Chief Secretary in 1915 told parliament:

*'At the present time the law is that the state can take control of neglected children, but under the law these children cannot legally be called neglected... If the Aboriginal child is decently clad and apparently well looked after, it is*

*very difficult indeed to show that the half caste or aboriginal child is actually in a neglected condition, and therefore it is impossible to succeed in court.'*<sup>14</sup>

Government and its agencies and employees were rubbing salt into the festering wound. First, Aboriginal peoples had already been cleared off their land into government-run camps and reserves to make way for extensive alienation of entire landscapes into freehold title. Under the various soldier and group settlements schemes set up in the aftermath of the Great War of 1914-18, government sought to create 'living space' (or in German, *lebensraum*) for white Europeans. The reserves sought to create a dying space, a place to live out their days before inevitably dying off as a race.<sup>15</sup> That intent too is irrefutable. Whether governments get rid of people they don't want through gas chambers and mass crematoria in Nazi-occupied Poland, mass starvation in the Ukraine, or herding into camps and denied basic needs including decent food, housing, health care and education in Australia, is six of one and half a dozen of the other.

Allow me to restate the larger contextual movements that were at work, for reasons I will soon name. Both agrarian and Aboriginal peoples everywhere were considered to be in the way of industrial progress. The issue in Germany was only that in the face of punitive war reparations compounded by the Wall Street Crash of 1929, they were in severe shortage of commodities and raw materials. The Australian economy suffered quite as much, affected further from the long War Drought of 1938-1945, except here the British were able to claim large land areas while the Empire's mass of unemployed and impoverished industrial city dwellers, like shell-shocked Great War veterans before them, were either officially relocated or simply went bush of their own accord.

Australia was certainly little different from Germany during the post-WWI, pre-Depression years. Australia's inherited Westminster system of parliament only later allowed the economic pressures and the extreme military-industrial political stance of the late Depression years to be relieved. The Nationalist Party under Billy Hughes (1915-1923) and Stanley Bruce (1923-1931) was replaced by the more liberal and broadly collaborative United Australia Party under the Prime Ministership of Joseph Lyons (1932-1939), and Robert Menzies (1939-1941).

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<sup>14</sup> Both cited by the journalist Peter Reid in his own rebuttal to Keith Windschuttle, <http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/37108.html>, 15 February 2008, accessed 27 December 2010

<sup>15</sup> One of the first to point this out was Dr Charles Duguid, in his *No Dying Race*, Adelaide: Rigby, 1963

So, Australia began to find its way out of the socio-economic morass only in what became the lead-up to World War II. In Germany, by further contrast, the simple demand for personal loyalty to the Führer himself, in the person of Adolf Hitler, destroying all political opposition and foregoing all grounds of moderation and appeal, led them both down the road to ruin.

The difference with the Third Reich, in this respect, is thus a matter of degree, not kind. Certainly the 1920s and early 1930s in Germany and Australia differed very little. The terms of the Australian Constitution in these circumstances deliberately absolved the Commonwealth from any responsibility for the way in which children were being treated, leaving it up to the states to bend the law as they would in seeking to resolve their perceived dilemma.

Here is why this comparison matters.

Throughout his copious writings Windschuttle distances the Australian racial policies of the period from comparison with Nazi Germany. As a professional historian he must be well aware of the living conditions in those government-run camps and reserves, and of the vast and comprehensive documentation on Aboriginal affairs in this country. Yet he chooses to bicker over obscure points of eugenics, and seeks to defend the ongoing behaviour of Australian police and welfare bureaucrats as noble and charitable.

He prejudges and misjudges the original status of Aboriginal Australians, when he might acknowledge what was set right again by the 1967 Referendum finally. He might further acknowledge a second substantive shift in the status of these peoples, in the 1992 High Court of Australia *Mabo Decision*.

The *Mabo Decision* was not as many believe an issue in Australian Land Law, but a judicial interpretation of Common Law. Recall, above, that Aboriginal citizenship as British subjects was a given of Imperial Common Law. *Mabo* acknowledged that Aboriginal peoples were in fact resident on the continent of Australia and its surrounding islands prior to European colonisation. As such, what in the outcome became known as Native Title is not a form of freehold entitlement, but radical entitlement or Sovereignty. In practice, what has transpired in the interim is a widespread recognition of Aboriginal co-sovereignty with the Australian States and Commonwealth of residual crown lands. Land alienated into freehold title is under Land Law, not Common Law. They are two very different things.

It need not have happened this way at all. There is nothing inevitable about this kind of imperial invasion and intervention. Aboriginal identity in Australia is not racially-based but kinship-based. 'Aboriginal' is a collective racial term assigned from the outside. From the inside they are extended families, not a 'race'. Australian indigenous identity arises from specific places carrying extended systems of kith and kin, from both ownership and custodianship of land, and not least from the stories told and cultural artefacts produced in perpetual re-creation of this sense of belonging.<sup>16</sup>

Within those systems of kinship, to reinforce the point, is a place for Europeans. Provided they comply with the core rules of kinship and land-use as they emerge from time to time and place to place, they can be welcomed. This welcome-facility arose quite as much in order to negotiate with neighbouring Aboriginal bands and families who had their own distinct language and culture to manage change as local populations wax and wane, and in particular as children come of age and take their place in the wider society.<sup>17</sup>

It is also been argued as 'inevitable' that for many of the children their removal represented an improvement on their condition. Certainly today there are many recidivist Aboriginal men especially who commit petty crimes in order to be imprisoned, where they can live in a clean, safe environment with three square meals a day, and further to support their kinsman already incarcerated. That contemporary circumstance does not however explain the situation of the many who now complain of their past treatment. It does need to be asked by all enquiring minds how did those people end up in that condition in which some saw their being abducted as children as an improvement?

The trauma suffered by children forcibly removed from their parents and families, taken outside of their own habitual world-view and inter-subjective identity networks, is not only a loss of social situation and place leaving the person subjectively alone in the world,<sup>18</sup> it

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<sup>16</sup> Elkin, A. P. *The Australian Aborigines: How to understand them*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed., Sydney: Angus and Robertson 1961; Stanner, W. E. H. 'Aboriginal Territorial Organisation: Estate, range, domain and regime', *Oceania*, Vol. 26. No. 1, 1965; Stanner, W. E. H. 'Religion, Totemism and Symbolism', in R. M. and C. H. Berndt (eds), *Aboriginal Man in Australia*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1965; Peterson, Nicolas and Long, Jeremy. *Australian Territorial Organisation*, Oceania Monograph, University of Sydney, 1986; Berndt, R. M. and C. H. *The World of the First Australians: Aboriginal traditional life – past and present*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1992

<sup>17</sup> Swain, Tony. *A Place for Strangers: Towards a history of Australian Aboriginal being*, Cambridge University Press, 1993; Hardwick, Gil. *Totemic Power and Ritual Responsibility: Education in Traditional Aboriginal Australia*. Honours Dissertation, Anthropology Department, Faculty of Arts, University of Western Australia. 1989

<sup>18</sup> Durkheim, Emile. *Suicide: A study in Sociology*, New York: The Free Press, 1951

also represents a wider fracturing of family and community networks. White fathers failed to meet their kinship obligations, and failed to complete the symmetrical moiety relations between father's and mother's respective skin groups. Children everywhere are not simply parental dependents but have important social and economic roles to play within their respective networks of significant others.

Especially in traditional Australia where when each child is born substantial networks of nurturing and support for that child are negotiated within complex and highly intersubjective kinship systems, for every new child subsequently born even small children are charged with high levels of reciprocity and obligation toward them. Children also play key roles in daily foraging and gathering, and sharing of food and other resources. They act as messengers and intermediaries between groups. Quite as important, they represent a considerable investment in the long term viability of the extended family group itself. Even relatively minor diversion away from these complex interactions can have catastrophic effects not only on the child but on their kith and kin, and by corollary the wider intersubjective networks of reciprocity and obligation in which they are embedded.<sup>19</sup>

It is important to recall these immediate contexts of those who came to suffer these removals and losses. Their whole family group had been cleared off their land and herded into government run reserves, fringe camps and outstations. It is plain that the people were already traumatised and suffering considerable stress, reflected as even Windschuttle admits in high levels of violence, alcoholism and social breakdown with a dramatic effect on personal self-image and identity.<sup>20</sup>

For the children then to be further abducted by an invading enemy to its own purposes, within a wider global system of labour transportation serving the needs not of families and mutually supportive kinship networks but of global empire,<sup>21</sup> represented the final act of genocide executed through the planned and operative destruction not only of Australian

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<sup>19</sup> Hardwick, Gil. *Totemic Power and Ritual Responsibility*, opera citatum, 1989

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Sansom, Basil. *The Camp at Wallaby Cross: Aboriginal fringe dwellers in Darwin*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1980

<sup>21</sup> Throughout this entire period and beyond, whole convoys of ships carrying hundreds of thousands of men and occasionally women, as convicts, indentured labourers, skilled tradesmen, troops and engineers to every corner of the planet, was quintessential to the imperial enterprise. These facts too are legion.

Aboriginal peoples but of landed peoples everywhere.<sup>22</sup> Again, this process was carried out against British subjects and Australian citizens, not some alien species.

Even if the Australian peoples were in fact primitive, subhuman species, that still only partly explains the conduct of the government agencies involved. Legally these people were yet, like everyone else, British subjects. These same people were subsequently, like everyone else, citizens of the Commonwealth of Australia whose Constitution had also nonetheless set them aside on racial grounds for special consideration and denial of ordinary recourse in law. That situation cannot be explained away by some well-intended but misguided Aboriginal protection or welfare policy. The very agencies charged with protecting Aboriginal peoples were the ones carrying out the abductions, or at best finding some excuse for removing the children from their parents and more pointedly, when the excuse was no longer valid; when the child was hospitalised and cured of a disease for example, not returned to them. These are the very agencies whose records Windschuttle relies upon.

In response to Windschuttle's concerns about left-wing academics, Marxists and French critical theorists pursuing what he rather oddly calls "Paris labels and designer concepts",<sup>23</sup> it should perhaps be mentioned here that this writer is derived from old Presbyterian pastoral stock, brought originally to Australia in 1840 from the English West Country and the south of Ireland by Governor Bourke to help establish agriculture in the then colony of New South Wales, and to displace reliance on convicts as the economic foundation of the colony.

Like Aboriginal peoples, today we too represent vastly extended family networks across the continent, and neither rely on academic historians or formal historiography to tell our story. We write our own, as we are fully entitled to do.<sup>24</sup> These histories are not mere hearsay or hand-me-downs but comprehensive and well-researched works by prosperous

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<sup>22</sup> Yet another example of this process on a global scale was the genocide through the state appropriation of all agricultural production within Stalinist USSR and resulting mass starvation of Ukrainian Kulaks, for example.

<sup>23</sup> Windschuttle, Keith. *The Killing of History: How a discipline is being murdered by literary critics and social theorists*, Sydney: Macleay Press, 1994

<sup>24</sup> See among others, for example, Hosking, Rex. *From Cornwall to the outback: a history of the Varcoe family and its activities*, Adelaide, South Australia: Hosking Publishers, 1987; Forrest, Laura and Phoenix, Jennie. *The Rawson Story*, Dubbo, NSW: Forrest and Phoenix, 2005

and highly educated, articulate people. To suggest a boorish and inadmissible hearsay, that we are infected with left-wing political activism in the process, is grievously insulting.

Reading through Windschuttle's various publications one is struck by his repetition and obsession with finely-detailed analysis of state archives, without ever arriving at whatever point he is trying to make. What is he saying, not just to Aboriginal people but to the rest of us, citizens alike, about the history of our country? Are we to believe that our own personal stories, and our sense of ourselves as Australians, can only be valid if transcribed and archived by some bureaucrat somewhere, for someone else to access to reinterpret after his own political leanings?

Direct, first-hand witness statements given under oath are fundamental to the practice of law and to court procedure, and valued especially in all of the human and social sciences. Their value is primary. On the other hand, the role of the historian is not to discover some sort of empirically grounded and objective truth, but to reveal in a disciplined way only very partial truths from at best second-hand sources.<sup>25</sup> The obligation of the professional historian especially is to collaborate with the many others in the rendering of a fair and just accounting of the human past.

For people like myself, moreover, to reflect on an early childhood growing up in the bush with Aboriginal children and later separated off, to be sent to state school and later boarding school to be offered a privileged position in Australian society, to discover later that our own childhood playmates and classmates had, merely because they are Aboriginal, been denied an education and carted off instead to some state-run institution somewhere, is the source of enormous grief and shame. These people were our friends, not mere objects of patently racist government policy. To later read these reports finally explaining to us the reason the women cried so much, and why the boys and men were so violently abusive toward us, is a source of outrage. What governments did to those people they did to all of us.

It is not only Aboriginal people with an interest and stake in resolving these many historic injustices meted out to Aboriginal peoples on the basis of their race, therefore, but all of us. What happened and continues to happen to Aboriginal peoples is shameful to Australia as a whole, and needs to be resolved finally.

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<sup>25</sup> Dray, William H. *Philosophy of History*, Foundations of Philosophy Series (Elizabeth and Monroe Beardsley (eds), Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1964

The *Bringing Them Home Report*, in my view, is rightful and correct in its intent and in its substantive content. Its comparisons with the worst excess of Nazi Germany are on the basis of evidence that is historically valid, reliable, and reasonably accessed. But the report falls short in its failure to see the force of wider British Imperial and Anglo-American industrial expansion of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Aboriginal and more broadly indigenous and other citizens' claims on the culpability of governments in their treatment of them throughout this period are actually much stronger than even the *Bringing Them Home Report* allows. Windschuttle and his fellow colonialists are not only blind to the evidence but blind to the context.

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