Over the past thirty years, university-based historians of Aboriginal Australia have produced a broad consensus. They have created a picture of widespread killings of blacks on the frontiers of settlement that not only went unpunished but had covert government support. Some of the Australian colonies engaged in what the principal historian of race relations in Tasmania, Lyndall Ryan, has called ‘a conscious policy of genocide’. In Queensland, according to the University of Sydney historian, Dirk Moses: ‘the use of government terror transformed local genocidal massacres by settlers into official state-wide policy’. The expatriate Australian Ben Kiernan, who is director of the genocide studies program at Yale University, writes that nineteenth century Australian colonists mounted numerous punitive expeditions against the Aborigines in which they committed ‘hundreds of massacres’. In Central Australia, Kiernan claims, between 1860 and 1895, no less than forty per cent of the indigenous population was shot dead. In north Queensland, he says the Aborigines ‘were hunted like wild beasts, having lived for years in a state of absolute terror of white predators’.

For most of my adult life I was a true believer of this story. I had never done any archival research in the field but nonetheless used the principal historical works of Henry Reynolds, Lyndall Ryan, Charles Rowley and others in lectures I gave in university courses in Australian history and Australian social policy. I used to tell students that the record of the British in Australia was worse than the Spaniards in America. However, in 2000, I was asked to review a book by Perth journalist Rod Moran about the infamous Forrest River Massacre in the Kimberley in 1926. Moran convinced me that there had been no massacre at Forrest River. There were no eyewitnesses and no bodies found. The charred remains of bones at first thought to be of Aborigines shot and cremated turned out to belong to kangaroos and wallabies. So-called ‘massacre sites’ were nothing but old Aboriginal camp sites. A list of Aborigines gone missing from the local mission, and suspected to have been murdered, turned out to be a fake, concocted by the white clergyman running the mission. Many of those on his list were recorded alive and well years later.

On reading this I decided to investigate the overall story I had long accepted by checking the footnotes of the principal authors. I started with Henry Reynolds’s claim in *The Other Side of the Frontier* that ten thousand Aborigines had been killed in Queensland before federation. The reference Reynolds provided for this was an article of his own in an anthology called *Race Relations in North Queensland*. This was a typescript publication held by only a few libraries, but I found a copy and read it. To my surprise, it was not about Aboriginal deaths at all. It was a tally of the number of whites killed by Aborigines. Nowhere did it mention an Aboriginal death toll of ten thousand. Reynolds had provided a false citation of his evidence.

In the three years since then I have been checking the footnotes of the other historians in this field and have found a similar degree of misrepresentation, deceit and outright fabrication. The project began in Tasmania, or Van Diemen’s Land as it was known until 1855, about which I originally expected to write a single chapter. However, in going back to the archives to check what happened there, I found such a wealth of material, including some of the most hair-raising breaches of historical practice imaginable, that Van Diemen’s Land has become the subject of the first of what will eventually be a three-volume series entitled *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*.

Van Diemen’s Land is widely regarded as Australia’s worst case scenario; indeed, one of the few cases of outright genocide in the British Empire. International writers now routinely compare the British in this colony with the Spaniards in Mexico, the Belgians in the Congo, the Turks in Armenia and Pol Pot in Cambodia. Tasmania’s ‘Black War’ from 1824 to 1831 and the ‘Black Line’ of 1830 are two of the most notorious events in the history of the British Empire.

However, after examining all the archival evidence and double-checking the references cited by the best-known academic historians of the subject, I have come to the conclusion that most of the story is myth piled upon myth. Here are some of the transgressions by its leading historians.

Lyndall Ryan cites the *Hobart Town Courier* as a source for several stories about atrocities against Aborigines in 1826. However, that newspaper did not begin publication until October 1827, and the other two newspapers of the day made no mention of these killings.

Ryan cites the diary of the colony’s first chaplain, Rev. Robert Knopwood, as the source for her claim that between 1804 and 1808, the colonists killed one hundred Aborigines. The diaries, however, record only four Aborigines being killed in this period.

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4 Cited ibid., 4, 12-14.
5 All examples here and in footnotes 10-17 are from Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, cited by ibid., 135-7.
6 Windschuttle, *Fabrication*, 49.
Ryan asserts: ‘Even if only half the stories [George Augustus] Robinson heard were true, then it is possible to account for seven hundred shot’. However, Robinson’s diaries record a total of only 188 Aborigines killed by whites, and many of them are dubious claims.

Ryan says that the documentary evidence shows 280 Aborigines were ‘recorded shot’ and that unrecorded killings would bring the total to seven hundred. However, she provides no sources for these figures. Brian Plomley did a survey in 1992 but could find records of only 109 Aborigines killed. I could find records for only 118.

Ryan claims that in 1826, police killed fourteen Aborigines at Pitt Water. However, none of the three references she provides mention any Aborigines being killed there in 1826 or any other time.

Ryan claims that hostilities in the northern districts in 1827 included: a massacre of Port Dalrymple Aborigines by a vigilante group of stockmen at Norfolk Plains; the killing of a kangaroo hunter in reprisal for him shooting Aboriginal men; the burning of a settler’s house because his stockmen had seized Aboriginal women; the spearing of three other stockmen and clubbing of one to death at Western Lagoon. But not one of the five sources she cites mentions any of these events.

Between 1828 and 1830, according to Ryan, ‘roving parties’ of police constables and convicts killed sixty Aborigines. Not one of the three references she cites mentions any Aborigines being killed, let alone sixty. The governor at the time and most subsequent authors regarded the roving parties as completely ineffectual.

Ryan says the ‘Black War’ began in the winter of 1824 with the Big River tribe launching patriotic attacks on the invaders. However, all the assaults on whites that winter were made by a small gang of detribalised blacks led by a man named Musquito who was not defending his tribal lands. He was an Aborigine, originally from Sydney, who had worked in Hobart for ten years before becoming a bushranger.

In 1841, after they accompanied George Augustus Robinson to Victoria, five Tasmanian Aborigines attacked several shepherds and looted their huts in the Western Port-Dandenong districts. Ryan claims: ‘Their tactics had all the marks of sustained guerrilla resistance to white settlement.’ However, these so-called ‘guerrillas’ were in what was to them a foreign country where they were intruders just as much as anyone from England. The notion that they were offering ‘resistance’ to white incursions of the tribal lands of Victorian Aborigines, with whom they had no cultural, linguistic, tribal or kin connections of any kind, is utterly absurd. Yet this is what passes for historical analysis in the book described by Henry Reynolds as ‘by far the best and most scholarly work on the Tasmanian Aborigines in the twentieth century’.

Lloyd Robson, author of the two-volume History of Tasmania, claims the settler James Hobbs in 1815 witnessed Aborigines killing three

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9 ibid., 284-5.
10 ibid., 361-4, 387-97.
11 ibid., 134-7.
12 ibid., 139-43.
13 ibid., 149-58, 166.
14 ibid., 65-72.
hundred sheep at Oyster Bay and the next day the 48th Regiment killed twenty-two Aborigines in retribution. However, it would have been difficult for Hobbs to have witnessed this in 1815 because at the time he was living in India. Moreover, the first sheep did not arrive at Oyster Bay until 1821 and in 1815 the 48th Regiment never went anywhere near Oyster Bay.

Robson and four other authors repeat a story that seventy Aborigines were killed in a battle with the 40th Regiment near Campbell Town in 1828. However, all neglect to say that a local merchant told a government inquiry that he went to the alleged site with a corporal on the following day but could find no bodies or blood, only three dead dogs. ‘To tell you the truth’, the corporal then confessed, ‘we did not kill any of them’.

Both Lloyd Robson and Lyndall Ryan claim settlers killed Aborigines by giving them poisoned flour. Their sole source for this is a diary entry by George Augustus Robinson in which he recorded a conversation between a superintendent of the Van Diemen’s Land Company and his convict shepherds after these men asked him for some poison. He asked them why they wanted it: ‘They said: “Oh sir, we will poison the natives’ dogs”. Mr R took it away with him, their object, he said, being to poison the natives by putting it in their flour &c.’

This is the only evidence either Robson or Ryan offers for this claim. It was nothing more than the superintendent’s interpretation of what was, at most, an ambiguous statement of what his convict shepherds might do, not anything they actually had done.

Both Robson and Ryan also repeat the story of the heroic Aboriginal resistance fighter, Quamby, after whom the peak known as Quamby Bluff is supposedly named. They claim Quamby disputed the land occupied by the colonists near Westbury and repelled them, although he was later shot dead. However, Quamby Bluff was not named after an Aboriginal person at all. The first account of how it got its name appeared in the Hobart Town Courier in March 1829. A party of white kangaroo hunters came across a lone Aborigine who fell to his knees crying ‘Quamby, Quamby’ meaning ‘mercy, mercy’. In other words, ‘quamby’ was not the name of a man but an expression of the language. More than a year later George Augustus Robinson invented the story about the Aboriginal resistance leader, which academic historians now repeat as if it were true.

The pre-historian and archaeologist, Rhys Jones, reports the following catalogue of horror:

The atrocities committed by sealers and convicts and reported to the 1830 committee included rape, flogging of women, burning with brands, roasting alive, emasculation of men, cutting flesh off and feeding it to dogs, dashing out the brains of children and kicking off a baby’s head in front of its mother.

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16 Windschuttle, *Fabrication*, 144-6.
17 ibid., 146-9.
18 ibid., 273-4.
19 ibid., 280-1.
20 *The Last Tasmanian*, script by Rhys Jones and Tom Haydon, produced and directed by Tom Haydon (Sydney: Artis Film Productions, 1978).
However, if you read the source Jones claims for his information, the evidence to and report of the 1830 committee into Aboriginal affairs, you find that hardly any of these events are mentioned. There is a report of one Aboriginal woman being thrown onto a fire – that one is probably true – and another of an incident near Campbell Town where children were supposedly dragged from rocks by soldiers and had their brains dashed out – we know that one is definitely false. However, there is not even one mention in any document before this committee of burning with brands, flogging of women, emasculating men, cutting flesh off and feeding it to dogs or kicking off a baby’s head in front of its mother.\textsuperscript{21} This last act, if you think about it, is technically impossible anyway. Kicking a baby in the head might crush it and break the neck but would never decapitate it. But the main point is that Jones has invented all these latter atrocities. Not one word about them was ever mentioned to the 1830 committee.

Henry Reynolds claims the chief agent of the Van Diemen’s Land Company, Edward Curr, was one of the settlers making ‘increased demands for extermination’ of the Aborigines.\textsuperscript{22} The full text of the statement Reynolds cites, however, is Curr’s pessimistic prediction of what might possibly happen if Aboriginal violence continued, not an advocacy of their extermination. Curr wrote: ‘I am far from advising such a proceeding … My own hands however shall be guiltless of blood, and I shall discountenance it as far as my authority extends, except under circumstances of aggression or in self defence’.\textsuperscript{23}

Reynolds also writes: ‘Sometimes openly, sometimes privately, the Tasmanian settlers toyed with “the dreadful alternative … of a general extermination by some means or other”’.\textsuperscript{24} He attributes this last quotation to the Launceston brewer, William Barnes, in March 1830. But if you read the very document Reynolds cites, you find Barnes describing in detail his plan not for the extermination but for the conciliation of the Aborigines. Barnes wanted some of them captured and:

\begin{quote}
I would then propose that they should be treated with every possible degree of kindness to convince them of the sincerity of our views – they should be made to understand most fully that the object of bringing them in, is not to punish or injure them, but to prevent any further acts of hostility between them and the whites … [The government should then] dismiss a few of them and their families with presents to join their tribes, to whom they will communicate what they had been told and how they had been treated.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

Now, while Barnes’s plan may certainly be labelled naïve, it was nonetheless the opposite of what Reynolds claims, that is, a proposal to exterminate the Aborigines.

\begin{footnotes}
25 Barnes to Aborigines Committee, 16 March 1830, Archives Office of Tasmania, CSO 1/323/7578 299, 302.
\end{footnotes}
Reynolds claims Lieutenant-Governor Arthur recognized from his experience in the Peninsular War against Napoleon that the Aborigines had adopted Spanish tactics of guerrilla warfare, in which small bands attacked the troops of their enemy. However, during his military career Arthur never served in Spain. The full text of the statement Reynolds cites talks not about troops coming under attack by guerrillas but of Aborigines robbing and assaulting unarmed shepherds on remote outstations.

Arthur inaugurated the ‘Black Line’ in 1830, Reynolds claims, because ‘he feared “a general decline in the prosperity” and the “eventual extirpation of the colony”‘. That last phrase is presented as a verbatim quotation from Arthur. However, Arthur never said this. Reynolds altered his words. When confronted by journalists of the *Sydney Morning Herald* with this charge from my book, Reynolds replied: ‘I’ve never said that. That’s quite, quite misleading. How could the Aborigines destroy the colony?… Nowhere did I suggest that Arthur thought they could wipe out the colony. That would be a silly thing to say’. However, six days later, after journalists sent Reynolds the page in his book *Frontier* where he did quote Arthur saying exactly that, he finally agreed to what he had done. He said: ‘It’s a bad mistake. I obviously didn’t know it existed, far from it that I had done it deliberately to distort the story … All historians are fallible and make mistakes’.

However, anyone who reads the offending page in his book *Frontier* will struggle to understand how it could be merely a mistake. In the same paragraph there are five other truncated quotations that appear to support the same false claim that the colonial authorities thought the Aborigines threatened the very survival of the colony. One of them was made by the editor of the *Hobart Town Courier*, James Ross, who said at a public meeting in 1830 that if Aboriginal violence was not stopped they would ‘come and drive us from this very Court room and compel us to take refuge in the ships’. Reynolds presents this statement as if it were a common fear at the time. But he neglects to say that as soon as Ross said this, Robert Lathrop Murray, the editor of the rival newspaper, *The Tasmanian*, got to his feet and said:

No doubt that they are enabled to commit many atrocities, most frequently by the exercise of that cunning by which all savages are distinguished, but to talk of six dozen miserable creatures, and never was a larger body seen assembled than 72, driving us from this room, is of course a joke.

Reynolds knew full well that Murray had made this statement but he deliberately kept it from his readers in order to falsely portray all the settlers as quaking with fear. This omission is just as much a distortion of

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32 *Colonial Times*, 24 September 1830, 3.
the truth as Reynolds’s original alteration of Lieutenant-Governor Arthur’s words. None of this is an accident or a mistake. Indeed, Reynolds claims such fears were common throughout Australia. He writes: ‘many pioneer towns – including Perth and Brisbane – were to experience moments of equal anxiety during the half century after 1830’.  

This whole case is not just a fabrication, it is a romantic fantasy derived from academic admiration of the anti-colonial struggles of the 1950s and 60s. The truth is that in Tasmania more than a century before, there was nothing on the Aborigines side that resembled frontier warfare, patriotic struggle or systematic resistance of any kind. The so-called ‘Black War’ was a minor crime wave by two Europeanised black bushrangers, followed by an outbreak of robbery, assault and murder by tribal Aborigines. All the evidence at the time, on both the white and black sides of the frontier, was that their principal objective was to acquire flour, tea, sugar and bedding, objects that to them were European luxury goods.

The full-blood Tasmanian Aborigines did die out in the nineteenth century, it is true, but this was almost entirely a consequence of two factors: the ten thousand years isolation that had left them vulnerable to introduced diseases, especially influenza, pneumonia and tuberculosis; and the fact that they traded and prostituted their women to convict stockmen and sealers to such an extent that they lost the ability to reproduce themselves.

Despite its infamous reputation, Van Diemen’s Land was host to nothing that resembled genocide, which requires murderous intention against a whole race of people. In Van Diemen’s Land, the infamous ‘Black Line’ of 1830 is commonly described today as an act of ‘ethnic cleansing’. However, its purpose was to remove from the settled districts only two of the nine tribes on the island to uninhabited country from where they could no longer assault white households. The lieutenant-governor specifically ordered that five of the other seven tribes be left alone.

Henry Reynolds claims that throughout the 1820s, the free settlers spoke about and advocated the extermination of the Aborigines. However, only a handful of settlers ever advocated anything like this. They spoke of it not throughout the 1820s but only in the immediate aftermath of Aboriginal killings of whites in 1830 and 1831. The historical record shows this prospect divided the settlers deeply, was always rejected by government and was never acted upon.

In the entire period from 1803 when the colonists first arrived, to 1834 when all but one family of Aborigines had been removed to Flinders Island, my calculation is that the British were responsible for killing only 120 of the original inhabitants, mostly in self defence or in hot pursuit of Aborigines who had just assaulted white households. In all

34 Windschuttle, Fabrication, 116-29.  
35 ibid., 372-86.  
36 ibid., 172-4.  
37 Ibid., 301-50.
of Europe’s colonial encounters with the New Worlds of the Americas and the Pacific, the colony of Van Diemen’s Land was probably the site where the least indigenous blood of all was deliberately shed.38

Since the publication of my book last November it has been the subject of an almost continuous debate in the press. Let me point out how our academic historians have responded.

In the February edition of Australian Book Review, Alan Atkinson of the University of New England described an article of mine in the Australian (9 December 2002) as ‘heart-sinking’. That article was largely a list of examples of the abuse of scholarship that I have just given, showing invented incidents, concocted footnotes, altered documents and gross exaggeration of the Aboriginal death toll. What made Atkinson’s heart sink, however, was not this catalogue of misconduct. Instead he was dismayed that my critique was based on such an outdated concern as getting the facts right. He lamented: ‘Windschuttle aims to take the discipline of History back to some golden age when it was all about facts’.

Atkinson is one of the contributors to the National Museum of Australia’s book Frontier Conflict launched last month.39 That book’s contents come from a conference staged in December 2001, after I had pointed out that the centre-piece of the museum’s exhibits, the Bells Falls Gorge Massacre, which supposedly occurred near Bathurst in the 1820s, was a mythical event for which there was no contemporary evidence, and that other exhibits were either grossly inaccurate or one-sided.

The papers in the museum’s book respond mainly to articles I wrote in 2000 and 2001, but they reflect the same attitude their authors have taken in the past two months to my own work The Fabrication of Aboriginal History. Few of them have been troubled by the malpractice of their colleagues. Instead, most have portrayed me as the bad guy for raising these issues. This ‘debate’ has been revealing about the standards now prevailing within university history departments.

Some non-academic commentators were concerned at my book’s findings – for instance, Michael Duffy wrote in the Courier Mail (14 December 2002) ‘allegations of scholarly fraud on this scale are virtually unknown’ – but academic historians tried to dismiss them as unimportant. Raymond Evans of the University of Queensland wrote in the Courier-Mail (20 December 2002) that all I had uncovered in the work of Henry Reynolds, Lyndall Ryan and Lloyd Robson was ‘a clutch of regrettable mistakes’, including no more than ‘half a dozen alleged gaffes’ in Ryan’s book The Aboriginal Tasmanians. Ryan herself in the Australian (17 December 2002) described these as ‘a few minor errors that can easily be rectified’.

However, as I’ve already indicated, Ryan’s book goes well beyond a few forgivable gaffes. There are at least seventeen cases where she either invented atrocities and other incidents or provided false footnotes, plus another seven cases where the number of Aborigines she claims were

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38 Ibid., 361-4, 387-97.
killed or captured is either outright false or exaggerated beyond belief. Lloyd Robson committed a similar degree of fabrication.

Ryan has had more than a year to answer my major charges, first made at the museum’s Frontier Conflict conference, which she attended. Yet her published conference paper avoids them entirely. Her principal response has been to retreat behind the postmodernist view of historical truth. She contrasts her view and mine about what happened in Tasmania: ‘Two truths are told. Is only one “truth” correct?’ She puts the word ‘truth’ in quotation marks to indicate it is only a relative concept. However, if two different interpretations of history are incompatible, as they are in this case, they cannot both be truths. The truth of one entails the falsity of the other. Ryan also writes (Australian, 17 December 2002): ‘responsible scholars realise that no one can claim a final and complete “truth”’.

It is not difficult, however, to show that there are some truths in this debate that can be very easily established as final and complete. For example, Ryan claims that Rev Knopwood’s diary recorded one hundred Aborigines killed between 1804 and 1808. Anyone can check this by going through his diary and making a count. If you do this you will find that I have told the truth when I say there are only four Aboriginal deaths recorded in the diaries in that period. Ryan’s figure of one hundred killed is definitely false. The same method can be applied to determine, once and for all, the truth or falsity of the other examples I gave earlier.

The overall conclusion I want to draw from the history of Tasmania is this: Tasmanian historians have pursued political ends. They have decided the big political goal they want to accomplish, which is Aboriginal sovereignty, and have then gone looking for evidence that fits that objective. However, the proper pursuit of history takes a different approach to evidence. While it is true that almost all historians begin their task with the aim of establishing a certain point, or of solving a certain problem, one of the most common experiences is that the evidence they find leads them to modify their original approach. When genuine historians go looking for evidence, most will find things they had not anticipated. If the historian is honest, then this unexpected evidence will suggest alternative arguments, interpretations and conclusions, and different problems to pursue. This is in contrast to the practice of politicised historians, whose aim is primarily to find evidence that fits their preconceptions. For the politicised historian, if the evidence poses problems for his/her conclusions, it is the evidence itself that has to be ignored, rejected or explained away. For the genuine historian, in the end it is the evidence itself that determines what case it is possible to make.

Let me finish by emphasising that all historians have a public responsibility to report their evidence fully and accurately and to cite their sources honestly. To pretend that facts do not matter and that acceptable interpretations can be drawn from false or non-existent evidence is to abandon the pursuit of historical truth altogether. Historians who do so betray their professional duty to preserve the integrity of the ancient discipline of history itself.
Unfortunately, this is what a number of the Australian academics who have written Aboriginal history have done. They have betrayed their profession and misled their country. The debate over what happened to the Aborigines is not only about the Aborigines. Ultimately, it is about the character of the Australian nation and the calibre of the civilisation that Britain brought to these shores in 1788. For some reason, the academic historians who dominate this field want to portray their own country as the moral equivalent of Hitler’s Germany or Stalin’s Russia. They are entitled to their opinion but they are not entitled to invent the facts on which that opinion is based. Nor are they entitled to deceive their students and the public at large as they have been doing for the past thirty years.

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