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**Abstract:** This paper considers the interplay of history, culture and a sustainable environment through the lens of Australian national identity and Indigenous presence. In part 1 it revisits the so-called "history wars and considers the construction of a binary view of history and analyses this. It argues that a critical issue is the constructed national identity as a tool of social control for the ruling elite and that the threatened loss of that national identity and control it affords is feared more than the realities of Frontier history. Racism, murder and dispossession have never worried controlling elites. Part 2 indicates how the binary of Keith Windschuttles work may be used as a catalyst to embrace complexity, a new way of shaping Australian environmental self as interconnected with reshaping Australian history. It indicates why complexity is important for the national being and environmental well-being. Through this the paper suggests moving beyond the revisionist history to a new genre, a - History of Reconciliation-. Such a history would open opportunities for attempting to understand the complexity of the frontiers cultural, environmental and spiritual (national) self and context in which we are still embraced. This vision of national story moves necessarily beyond mere sustainability as a way forward.

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Title: The Value of Keith Windschuttle in promoting a sustainable culture and environment: a benevolent analysis.<sup>1</sup>

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Theme: culture and a sustainable environment

This paper is the writing of a non-Indigenous Australian. It considers the interplay of Frontier history, culture and, latterly, a sustainable environment through the lens of Australian national identity. It argues that a reformulation of the Frontier pioneer identity is necessary to a sustainable culture and environment. It puts the case that coming to terms with non-Indigenous and Indigenous Frontier history is part of this. It revisits the so-called 'history wars' and considers the concept of 'war' was a negative construction that has reinforced a public binary view of Indigenous/non indigenous history that has continued in politics. Broadly this binary was one group who accepted that Indigenous people were dispossessed and subjected to brutal treatment; and a second group who considered that frontier men were largely noble and while there may have been a bit of 'messy stuff' on the Frontier it was best not dwell on it. The politics of these two views, as played out in the public arena, has been confrontational. Windschuttle's (2000, 2002/03) written work, and more importantly his skills in promoting the position of a benign frontier in the media, was the catalysis in promoting the binary into a 'war'. The paper argues that the way forward is to move beyond this binary in history and politics and that key to this is a more mature understanding of the constructed myth of the 'noble pioneer'.

The concept of 'history wars' (Macintyre with Clarke 2003/4) arose out of a rediscovery of the brutal actions on the Frontier. Many writers have assisted this unravelling. Broome (2003:88) considers Rowley (1970), who wrote about the dispossession and brutality towards Aboriginal people, was the 'father' of this genre, but certainly Reynolds (eg. 1972, 1973, 1981/82 and 1989) was a significant uncle, particularly his, *The Other Side of the Frontier*. Other key writers of this unveiling of what Stanner (1968) termed 'The Great Australian Silence' about Indigenous issues include Beatty (1962); Moorehead (1966); Plomley (1987); Blomfield, (1981/1988); Elder, (1988); Read, (1988); Haelich (2000)). These writings have been termed 'revisionist history' (to distinguish them from the historical writings since the 1880s where emphasis was on the white explorer mastering the land - the 'noble pioneer' (see White, 1981 for a discussion of this term)) but this term has also been applied to Windschuttle's work

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<sup>1</sup> Identity is a politics, I try to address 'Whitefella' business. I use 'Whitefella' as despite the limitations of this descriptor of non-Indigenous Australians; it has simplicity as recognised elsewhere (e.g. Reynolds (2000: iv).

<sup>2</sup> Many thanks to Sue O'Donoghue and Sue Tomasson from Bellingen Library who assisted locating books and with internet access.

(Atkinson (2003:113). Manne (2003:3) describes the genre as 'new historians of the dispossession'. Yet these writings were more 're-discoveries' than 'new' and the term 'revisionist' could be regarded as a slur as it was after all simply an expanded history. The term 'Frontier' is applied to the expanded history in this paper.

There was a very slow penetration of the Frontier history into schools and universities; this was despite the evidence being available and mounting through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. This failure to penetrate the academy (see Macintyre with Clark, 2004:174-190, 194-198 on schools & the 2000 debate on the National Museum) and thus deficit in public knowledge can be linked to the vested conservative and economic interests of pastoral elites (typically associated with the Liberal/Country political parties) and mining interests (e.g. Brennan (2004); Macintyre with Clark (2004:143)). Yet National identity rather than vested interest was held up as the public face as to why the 'new' Frontier history was not 'true'. While nationalism had a role that role was politicised, exaggerated and used to divide the nation. The binary was established in the politicisation of that history and the vested interests were able to hide behind the face of nationalistic debate. In the debate the 'noble' national father was owned by one group and that same national father was disowned by the second group. In short complexity was largely disowned particularly in the media discussions of these issues.

The politicisation of Frontier history into a nationalist debate meant land rights were constructed as a personal economic threat (as well as a threat to the national economic well-being) and the debate focused on law, rather than to justice. Former Prime Minister, Howard not very cleverly (but very successfully) characterised that to believe our brutal history towards Indigenous Australians was a slur on the nation, and importantly a slur on 'our' national self.

Ironically, Australian national identity kicked in and the 'noble pioneers' on both sides of a nationalistic divide came into their own. The underdog 'Frontier' history fought with the spirit of the noble pioneers whose presence they refuted. Those who denied the brutality of the past and advocated that the pioneers had been noble demonstrated a meanness of spirit supposedly absent in that same 'pioneer'. On both sides the issue became politicised and media-rised as a difference of 'truths' and a schism.

The binary politics made it difficult for complexity to be engaged with. Yet some of the key writers on the Frontier past for the nation, such as Reynolds, often evidenced complex portrayals of 'settler/invader/Indigenous contact and understandings and misunderstandings as well as abuse (Krygier & Krieken (2003) also make this point). But as time moved on the politics and the politics of history allowed less for public discussion of complexity; for example, Reynolds had to substantiate invasion by the British and resistance by the Aboriginal people in Court cases to gain land rights. Complexity, in that negotiation and accommodation with Aboriginal people also took place, were largely lost in the public debate. The politics of the binary was taking an even greater hold during the Prime ministership of John Howard. Prior to that there was some movement to justice (e.g. the Mabo High Court victory and the associated Native

Title Act 1993), but with Howard everything became more tattered. There followed the Native Title Amendment Act 1998 undermining the so-called 'Mabo' High Court victory (see Behrendt, 2006).

A sequence of writings followed which highlighted the story of the history - invasion and resistance but not the understanding of the history (e.g. Manne et al (2003)). Another part of the binary was that writings highlighting Indigenous people's roles in the struggle for justice (e.g. Attwood and Marcus (1999) & Curthroys (2002)). This was a necessary documentation but in an era where the more recent publications are often constructed as most up to date there was a down-playing of the role of non-Indigenous people in advocating for justice. This silencing of white roles was an (understandable) attempt at balance. It was also the reversal of an earlier and still ongoing prejudice against, and construction of, Indigenous people.

Enter Keith Windschuttle (2002/3) the book contained some truths. These few 'truths' (amid the hubris of often barely disguised racism) became a cornerstone to give the book a public credibility. In fact the few 'truths' reflected the whole adversarial structuring of Frontier history writing and debate. Windschuttle's few valid criticisms tended to be dismissed by academics with the totality. For example, Windschuttle pointed out that some Frontier academics did not reference correctly (which was valid). He pointed out that claims of fact were fictions, another valid point. Elder's book (1988/1998) was voted the 10<sup>th</sup> most influential work of non-fiction in Australia by the SMH and The Age Poll of 1999. Windschuttle pointed out that the book was not non-fiction but non-fiction that was embellished with imagination and this was correct. Windschuttle was also justified in questioning the estimates of Indigenous people who died and to highlight that these were questionable. Broome (2003:97) in his response to used terms such as 'guesstimates' of Aboriginal deaths but he did not acknowledge that some writers in the Frontier history had used Reynolds' 'guesstimates' about the numbers of Aboriginal deaths as facts. Windschuttle's point was again a valid one.

Frontier historians and sympathisers typically dismissed Windschuttle's work in entirety and ultimately weakened their own position in the media skirmishes as Windschuttle clearly had some valid points

### **Further examples of the binary**

Windschuttle (2003:399 & 184,-186) explained away the impossibility that people on the frontier people were unjust towards Aboriginal people because of the ruling ideas of Christian enlightenment that prevailed at the time and that British attitudes and laws had evolved so highly as to make violence to Aboriginal people an impossibility. It was a spurious argument that the British could not have killed or behaved badly or unjustifiably due to 'law' when the American law could not prevent the abuses in Abu Ghraib and could legalise torture (Otterman, 2007). Windschuttle's patched eye ignored even the simplest challenge of his contention, such as the harsh and brutal reality of convict ships and convict labour. Equally, Windschuttle dismissed claims of a guerrilla war

conducted by Aboriginal people in Tasmania by saying they lived in a 'savage state' (Windschuttle, 2003:399). He wrote as if colonisation was a period of beneficence and not of itself a form of savagery where force was used to take land and, indeed, as if warfare itself were not a form of savagery.

Reynolds' (2003) response reflects the other polarity. He berated Windschuttle's failure to accept Aboriginal warfare was 'guerrilla-style'. Reynolds (2003:127) notes the Aboriginal Tasmanians were 'not criminals but noble and warlike' as if nobility and warlikeness are a kind of benign bread and butter inseparably linked. Reynolds construction of war is very much in the Anzac tradition. Thus in such discussion the concept of Indigenous 'difference' is submerged.

The binary is also illustrated in a structure of texts written in response to Windschuttle. Attwood & Foster (2003) brought together on their side the voices of key writers in their edited text including Atkinson, Broome, Mulvaney, Reynolds and Ryan (but had the grace to include Windschuttle). Robert Manne (2003) edited another text with a slightly overlapping group of writers and came in swinging with vitriol was almost on a par with Windschuttle's. Manne (2003:6) could not resist a 'bitch' criticism, albeit bracketed, which reflected the tone of much of his 'Introduction', when he remarked, 'Windschuttle, who had at the time had done no systematic research on settler-indigenous relations (or anything else)'. Manne (2003:11) stated his book provided a 'thorough and 'expert' discussion of Windschuttle's book which was 'so ignorant, so polemical and so pitiless...'. Thus Manne and many of the contributors to his book bought into the war. For example, Krygier & van Krieken (2003:81) commence their article with a comment that Windschuttle's book is a 'tubby tome' and then a 'fat book' (twice on page 83), equating size with badness before pursuing any argument. For the most part the writers in Manne's book are self-congratulatory assuming they are on the side of 'good'. The editor set the tone of a 'punch out'. The few articles that step outside of this style include Krygier & van Krieken (2003) who after the initial pages of vitriol specifically address the complexity of the Frontier. Some of Macintyre's (2004) style is in the same genre as he starts in chapter 2 requesting for pity and sympathy for historians up against a war with Windschuttle such an adept media player as if academics were some delicate species.

In summary where critical skills are applied in one context they are dis-applied in another in the history wars. The history wars were a barren area.

### **The reactive & adversarial binary**

Historians and academics recognise that history is a product of the times in which they were written (for example, White (1981) noted that the myth of the National Father and its consequential concept of Australian manhood were accepted uncritically until the 1950s). It must have been very exciting re-discovering the story of Australia's 'settlement' and expanding that narrow history using documents that had languished for so long and perhaps surprising that it was undermined. The re-discovered Frontier

history was increasingly written in a reactive and adversarial style. But this style was shared by both sides of the binary, a point Windschuttle failed to make.

The Frontier generation historians writing responded to the hostility met those seeking to continue the silence the history with their own silences: a silence to undo a silence - the censorship of war if you like. The silence of criticism within the 'Frontier' school complimented the attempted silencing of that history as criticism could and would be taken up by the 'other side' as an attempt to undermine the obvious evidence. Texts that penetrated the conscience of the Australian public were not harshly peer reviewed; for example, Elder's (1988/1999) book (as discussed). Equally the issue of numbers of Indigenous people killed was unquestioned until Windschuttle's work. It was an error to assume that 'worse is better' or that exaggerated non-fiction would survive as credible and it belied that the history on the frontier was brutal enough, as is the history until today (recognised as meriting a formal national apology). Exaggeration was not necessary, perhaps, but it appeared to assist the history being heard so perhaps had a role then.

The oft cited term by Blainey (1993) that Frontier history was a 'black armband' view had become the counter to Stanner's 'silence' in media debates of history, particularly by the then Prime minister. Yet it is worth stating that Blainey's term was a superficial rather than a research based one as his specialisation was largely outside that area of Indigenous/non-Indigenous conflict and relations and it was also a comment about degree and not content. Within the history discipline there was little refutation of the solid base of evidence of the re-discovered Frontier history.

It is therefore important to understand the context of the writings of the Frontier history as growing into more a binary when the 'revised' history failed to penetrate the academy and evolving eventually into a 'war'. The political context explains the emphasis and the reactive and adversarial writing style of some of the writers. The style embraced silence. Reynolds wrote about Indigenous resistance and accommodation of the Europeans but only certain aspects of this history only were needed for political purposes. Native title law demanded it was necessary to prove that Indigenous Aboriginal people resisted the invasion of their lands so aspects of invasion such as resistance were highlighted due to the prevailing politics.

The adversarial writing style and the silences are apparent and motivated by a sense of injustice. Broome (2001:9) suggests this 'noise' when he noted of his earlier writing (his book's first edition) 'a certain crispness and passion about the text' that he linked to his 'youth'. Titles chosen for books were designed for 'noise'. For example, Beatty (1962) *With Shame Remembered*; Breslin (1992) *Exterminate with Pride: Aboriginal-European Relations in the Townsville-Bowen Region to 1869*; Cribbin (1984) *The Killing Times: the Coniston Massacre (1928)* and Elder's (1988) *Blood on the Wattle: massacres and maltreatment of Aboriginal people since 1788*. The style had a role. It was important the nation hear her past. It was natural justice that the history be told. But the baggage that went with the telling and the establishment's attempts to silence it become problematic.

Windschuttle got his break because Frontier history was politicised and constructed as a binary. Indeed the few 'truths' Windschuttle pointed out were waiting to be identified, not because of their complexity, but because of brashness in the writing to promote non-Indigenous conscience about the Frontier history. It was unfortunate that it was a Windschuttle who decided to query the 'noise', but then it was also fortunate as he could not control his own 'noise' - his racism. Yet it could be no accident that he entered the adversarial ring with a politics to delight powerful mining and pastoral influences and, of course, to delight a Prime Minister, John Howard.

The other 'great' thing about Keith Windschuttle was that he could dance the media dance and in the media boxing ring the roly man turned out to be very light on his media foot and could 'dance like a butterfly and sting like a bee', and sting he did. He had a great right hook. Almost single handedly (of course he was supported by a larger politics) he created an adversarial history and binary into a 'war'. The "boys" of the Frontier school of 2003 and their mates responded. Manne (2003) and Attwood & Foster (2003) went on a on their Cooee March to recruit writers and edited texts of responses and along with Macintyre with Clarke (2003) in lads in the Anzac tradition went to war.

### **Beyond binary and war**

The noble pioneer image denies the realities of white occupation of this country which has been incredibly destructive to Indigenous people (as discussed). The related (and interwoven) damage to Indigenous people has been to the land of Australia, the environment (eg Slater, (1978); Smith, (1992); Barr, & Cary (1992); Conacher (1995); White, (1997 & 2000); Mercer (2000); O'Dowd (2006)). Non-Indigenous Australians need to achieve some reconciliation with our Frontier past in order to negotiate beyond our Frontier national present, reconcile with our history, and come to terms with the real actions of our 'noble' pioneer to Indigenous people and their land. The 'Noble Pioneer' as the national-self myth needs to be confronted as a more complex character of good and bad (drawing on knowledge of diverse disciplines including psychology, sociology, group behaviour insights peace and reconciliation studies). It is time for us to understand our history, not just tell the story. Wilfred Owen's First World War poem '*Strange Meeting*' is a realisation of the futility of war and the similarities of those constructed as other 'enemies' (sadly this realisation is in death).

*It seemed that out of battle I escaped  
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped  
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.  
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned...  
... one sprang up...  
"I am the enemy, you killed, my friend."...*

Ironically, Windschuttle shows us the Frontier we need to leave behind; he is too angry and denies too much. To try to move the war we need to meet the 'enemy' which ultimately is an aspect of our cultural self. This article suggests this as a step toward a possible sustainable culture and environment with Indigenous Australians.

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