

SENATE EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND
EDUCATION COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Submission by Keith Windschuttle, Editor, *Quadrant* Magazine, October 9 2008

Postmodernism and the Fabrication of Aboriginal History

History is an intellectual discipline that goes back to the ancient Greeks. The first real historian, Thucydides, did a remarkable thing. He set out to distance himself from his own political system and to write a work that examined critically what happened to Greece in the Peloponnesian Wars. He not only told of his own side's virtues and victories but of its mistakes and disasters. Thucydides also distanced himself from his own culture and religion. Instead of the mythical tales that all previous human societies had used to affirm their place in the cosmos, he faced the fact that the Greek oracles could not foretell their future and that the Greek gods could not ensure their fortunes. In short, what was remarkable about Thucydides, and all those who have followed him, was that they made a clean break with myths and legends. Instead, they defined history as the pursuit of truth about the past.

The ability to stand outside your own political system, your own culture and your religion, to criticise your own society and to pursue the truth, is something we today take so much for granted that it is almost part of the air we breath. Without it, our idea of freedom of expression would not exist. We should recognise, however, that this is a distinctly Western phenomenon, that is, it is part of the cultural heritage of those countries — Europe, the Americas and Australasia — that have evolved out of Ancient Greece, Rome and Christianity. This idea was never produced by either Confucian or Hindu culture. Under Islam it had a brief life in the fourteenth century but was never heard of again. Rather than take the idea of history for granted, we should regard it as a rare and precious legacy that is our job to nurture and to pass on to future generations.

Until about fifty years ago, the overwhelming majority of the history books written in the West were about two subjects: politics and warfare. The main characters who bestrode the historical stage were those men who ruled the political systems and who commanded the armies and navies. The reason was that history was written largely as a narrative of causes and consequences. Readers wanted to know how kingdoms, empires and republics had come into being, and why many of them had subsequently gone out of existence. Historians saw the social life of ordinary people as something that could flourish only under organized systems of political authority. They also recognized that successful warfare could expand a particular form of social life well beyond its origins, as happened under the Roman Empire, but also that military defeat could snuff out a social system and a culture literally overnight. So the writing of history was largely about trying to understand the major causes that operated in the human world, and these major causes were seen as politics and warfare.

In the last few decades, all of this — the entire intellectual heritage of history writing — has come under challenge within our universities. Academic historians have argued that the attempt to distance themselves from their own political system cannot be done. According to many, history is “inescapably political”. In tandem with this has come the notion that history cannot be objective because there are no independent vantage points from which one can look down on the past. We can only see the world through the lenses of our own culture, so what we see is inherently subjective. And if that is so, then the pursuit of something as objective as the truth becomes a mere pipe dream. And we have to give up the idea of truth as an *absolute* concept and substitute a *relative* idea of truth. Under this notion, different cultures and even different political positions each have their own truths, even if they are incompatible with the truths of other cultures. This stance generally goes under the name of postmodernism.

Along with this critique has come a reconfiguring of the subject matter of history. In most university history departments, political and military history are now minor parts of the curriculum. The pre-eminent position is now held by the new field of social history, which celebrates the achievements not of great men but of ordinary people, especially those minority or disadvantaged groups supposedly outside the mainstream such as women, homosexuals, blacks and immigrants.

Overall, then, in the writing and teaching of history today, the views that are in the ascendancy are those that support a skepticism about the pursuit of objectivity and truth, and those that want to replace political and military history and their focus on great men, with social history and its focus on minority or disadvantaged groups.

I want to argue that the direction history is now taking is a big mistake.

I’ll start with the postmodernist view of historical truth and quote one of its advocates, the Manning Clark Professor of History at the Australian National University, Anne Curthoys, who has written:

Many academics in the humanities and social sciences ... now reject ... the notion that one can objectively know the facts. The processes of knowing, and the production of an object that is known, are seen as intertwined. Many take this even further, and argue that knowledge is entirely an effect of power, that we can no longer have any concept of truth at all.¹

There are two things wrong with this view. First, if we can no longer have any concept of truth, that is, if there are no truths, then the statement “there are no truths” cannot itself be true. It is an obvious self-contradiction. Second, this is a silly thing to say because we have very good knowledge not only about some things that happened in history but of tens of thousands, perhaps even millions of things. For instance, we know all the names of all the leaders of all the nations for at least the past two hundred years and most of the leaders for many centuries before that as well. We know for certain the historical fact that John Howard has been Prime Minister of Australia since 1996 and that John Curtin was Australia’s Prime Minister for most of World War II.

We have the same degree of certainty about a great many of the events of history. For example, the statement: “The United States and its allies defeated the Japanese in World War II” is true. It is not a statement about which there can be any doubt at all. The Japanese not only signed a

¹ Ann Curthoys, ‘Unlocking the Academies: Responses and Strategies’, *Meanjin*, Vol. 50, No. 2/3, 1991, p 391

surrender in 1945 but the world would not be the way it is today if this statement was not true. Moreover, this is not a statement that is dependent upon some particular cultural vantage point. It is true in American culture, Australian culture, Japanese culture, indeed in every culture on the planet. There is nothing relative about historical truths of this kind.

Let me now turn to the rise of social history and use as an example the National Museum of Australia, which opened in 2001. It was always going to be a museum of history but in the debates over what its contents should be, the view that won out was that it should be a museum of social history. One of its most influential documents argued:

The impact of postmodernism has meant that ... triumphalist stories of national progress are no longer intellectually tenable. Many museum practitioners now see their work as a critical practice, committed to drawing out the ways in which constructions of race, class and gender (and sometimes sexuality and age) have shaped national histories.²

The result is that most of the people celebrated in the museum's exhibits are those who fit within the categories of "interest group" politics, that is, the politics of feminism, gay liberation, radical environmentalism, and the politics of Aborigines and ethnic groups. The white males who established Australia's political, legal and educational institutions and those who played major roles in building our economy barely rate a mention. The museum has a big electronic map showing the historical spread of introduced pests like rabbits, foxes and prickly pear. But there is no map of the spread of farming, grazing, mining or industry. One of the museum's exhibits celebrates a man who designs dresses for the Gay Mardi Gras in Sydney. Others include environmental activists, anti-nuclear campaigners and the trade unionists who vandalised Parliament House during a riot in 1996. Responding to criticism that the nation had better heroes than these to commemorate, the director took a relativist position: "Heroism," she said, "is in the eye of the beholder."³

There are very good reasons, however, why history once paid only a small degree of attention to many of the groups the museum now celebrates, and why it focused so much attention on Anglo-Celts of the male sex. To show why their society took the form it did and how it responded to its major challenges, historians once invoked causes of a political, military, economic and legal nature. Most of the now favoured sexual and ethnic identity groups played only small roles in this account. This was because for most of the time most of these people were not *causally* effective: they were the objects rather than the agents of history; they were on the receiving end of major historical events, not their instigators.

Now, none of this is meant to argue that you cannot write acceptable histories of women or ethnic groups. It is perfectly legitimate, for instance, to write an account of the history of the domestic activities of Australian women in the First World War, even though those women did not determine the outcome. Similarly, ethnic histories are obviously important to members of those ethnic groups and there is nothing inherently unscholarly about producing them. However, for a *national* history or a *national* museum obliged to tell a national story, the social history approach has serious drawbacks.

² Darryl McIntyre and Kirsten Wehner, 'Overview', *National Museums: Negotiating Histories*, National Museum of Australia, 1999

³ Keith Windschuttle, 'How Not to Run a Museum: People's History at the Postmodern Museum', *Quadrant*, September 2001

Histories of this kind are never, in themselves, sufficient to provide a complete explanation of the lives of the people discussed. Minority groups do not live in cocoons of their own making. Their lives are governed by the great political, legal and economic structures of Australian society. Any attempt to tell a national history, in either a book or a museum, is obliged to explain these major influences on the lives of *all* the nation's members. This means focusing on these major structures and the key decision-makers who brought them into being or changed their direction.⁴

When historians indulge in the politics of their favoured minority groups by far the worst outcome is that they abandon the very objective that history was founded to pursue: the search for the truth.

Most of the authors who have written Aboriginal history in Australia over the past thirty years have not been overt postmodernists. Nonetheless they have accepted that history is “inescapably political” and they have taken the view that evidence can be treated in a cavalier fashion and that what matters is the ‘big picture’ or the political ends served. Authors like Henry Reynolds and Lyndall Ryan have dedicated their work to what they see as Aboriginal political interests, especially the justification of Aboriginal political sovereignty.

In her book *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* Lyndall Ryan claims that British colonists killed 100 Aborigines in Van Diemen's Land between 1804 and 1808.⁵ Yet in an interview on Channel Nine's program *Sunday*, Ryan confessed she didn't have any evidence for the figure. I had pointed out that the source her book quoted, the diary of the colony's chaplain Robert Knopwood, only recorded four Aboriginal deaths.⁶ Ryan, however, admitted that footnote was a mistake and said her real source was a report by the explorer John Oxley in 1810. But if you look up Oxley's report, there is no mention in it anywhere of 100 Aborigines being killed. Pressed on the issue by journalist Helen Dalley, Ryan said: “I think by the way Oxley wrote that he seemed to think there had been a great loss of life from the Aborigines.” Helen Dalley then asked: “So, in a sense, it is fair enough for [Keith Windschuttle] to say that you did make up figures? You're telling me you made an estimated guess.” Ryan replied: “Yes, but historians are always making up figures.”⁷

Like everything else Ryan has said on this subject, however, this statement was not true either. All historians do not make up figures. To do so is a corruption of their profession. Historians must have evidence for their claims. And if they can't produce evidence they shouldn't produce figures. Ryan would have been more accurate if she had said: the historians of Aboriginal Australia are always making up figures. That statement would have been true.

The biggest single invention was made by Henry Reynolds in his book *The Other Side of the Frontier*. He claimed that 10,000 Aborigines were killed in Queensland before federation.⁸ The source he provides is an article of his own called “The Unrecorded Battlefields of Queensland”, which he wrote in 1978.⁹ But if you look up the article you find something very strange. It is not

⁴ Keith Windschuttle, ‘The Problem of Democratic History’, *The New Criterion*, June 1998

⁵ Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, 2nd edn., Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1996, p 77

⁶ Mary Nicholls (ed.), *The Diary of the Reverend Robert Knopwood 1803–1838*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1977; Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One, Van Diemen's Land 1803–1847*, Macleay Press, Sydney, 2002, p 49

⁷ TCN-Channel 9, Sydney, *Sunday*, 25 May 2003, http://sunday.ninemsn.com.au/sunday/cover_stories/transcript_1286.asp

⁸ Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia*, (1981), Penguin, Ringwood, 1982, pp 122, 201, 246

⁹ Henry Reynolds, ‘The Unrecorded Battlefields of North Queensland’, in Henry Reynolds, ed., *Race Relations in North Queensland*, James Cook University, Townsville, 1978

about Aboriginal deaths at all. It is a tally of the number of *whites* killed by Aborigines. Nowhere does it mention an Aboriginal death toll of 10,000. Reynolds invented this figure and then gave a false citation to disguise what he had done.

For most of my adult life I was a true believer of the story of Aboriginal genocide and frontier warfare. 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 on forensic examination not to be of human origin. They probably belonged 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.¹⁰

On reading this I decided to investigate the overall story I had long accepted by checking the footnotes of the principal authors.

Since then I 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 the multi-volume series entitled *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*.

There are two central claims made by historians of Aboriginal Australia: first, the actions by the colonists amounted to genocide; second, the actions by the Aborigines were guerilla tactics that amounted to frontier warfare.

Lyndall Ryan claims that in Tasmania the Aborigines were subject to “a conscious policy of genocide”.¹¹ Rhys Jones in *The Last Tasmanian* labels it “a holocaust of European savagery”.¹² Ryan says the so-called “Black War” of Tasmania began in the winter of 1824 with the Big River tribe launching patriotic attacks on the invaders.¹³ However, the assaults on whites that winter were made by a small gang of detribalized 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. He had no Tasmanian tribal lands to defend. He was just as much a foreigner in Tasmania as the indigenous Hawaiians, Tahitians and Maoris who worked there as stockmen, sealers and whalers at the same time.¹⁴

¹⁰ Rod Moran, *Massacre Myth*, Access Press, Bassendean, 1999

¹¹ Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 255

¹² *The Last Tasmanian*, script by Rhys Jones and Tom Haydon, produced and directed by Tom Haydon, Artis Film Productions, Sydney, 1978

¹³ Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 115

¹⁴ Windschuttle, *Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One*, pp 65–73

Musquito's successor as leader of the gang was Black Tom, a young man who, again, was not a tribal Aborigine. He had Tasmanian Aboriginal parents, but had been reared since infancy in the white middle class household of Thomas Birch, a Hobart merchant. Until his capture in 1827, he was Tasmania's leading bushranger but, as with Musquito, his actions cannot be interpreted as patriotic defence of tribal Aboriginal territory.¹⁵

Ryan's account of the alleged abduction of Aboriginal children by settlers is replete with so much misinformation it is impossible to excuse it as error. In 1810, she claims, Lieutenant-Governor David Collins warned settlers against kidnapping Aboriginal children.¹⁶ However, there is no evidence Collins ever gave such a warning. None of Collins' orders in 1810, or any other reference cited by Ryan about the abduction of children, support her claim. Ryan footnotes the newspaper, the *Derwent Star* of 29 January 1810, as one of the sources she consulted. However, according to the Mitchell Library, that edition of the newspaper is not held by any library in the world. It has been missing since the nineteenth century.¹⁷

Ryan claims that in 1819, Lieutenant-Governor William Sorell issued an order about the abducted children. She says: "Sorell ordered that all Aboriginal children living with settlers must be sent to the charge of the chaplain, Robert Knopwood, in Hobart and placed in the Orphan School." However, the proclamation Ryan cites does not say that. It merely ordered magistrates and constables to count the number of native children living with settlers. Moreover, there was no Orphan School in Hobart in 1819 or at any time during Sorell's administration. The first such institution in the colony, the King's Orphan School, was not opened until 1828 and Reverend Knopwood was never involved in running it.¹⁸

Henry Reynolds claims Lieutenant-Governor Arthur recognized from his experience in the Spanish War against Napoleon that the Aborigines were using the tactic of guerilla warfare, in which small bands attacked the troops of their enemy.¹⁹ However, during his military career Arthur never served in Spain.²⁰ If you read the full text of the statement Reynolds cites, you find Arthur was talking not about troops coming under attack by guerillas but of Aborigines robbing and assaulting unarmed shepherds on remote outstations. Reynolds edited out that part of the statement that disagreed with his thesis.²¹

Reynolds claims that Arthur inaugurated the infamous "Black Line" in 1830 because "he feared 'a general decline in the prosperity' and the 'eventual extirpation of the colony'". Reynolds presents that last phrase as a verbatim quotation from Arthur. However, Arthur never said this. His actual words were "... the eventual extirpation of the Aboriginal race itself."²² Arthur's concerns were not about the survival of the colony but of the Aborigines. He was worried that if Aboriginal robberies, assaults and murders continued, settler retaliation could eventually get out

¹⁵ Windschuttle, *Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One*, pp 73–7

¹⁶ Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 78

¹⁷ Windschuttle, *Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One*, p 54

¹⁸ Windschuttle, *Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One*, p 56

¹⁹ Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1995, p 66

²⁰ A. G. L. Shaw, *Sir George Arthur, Bart, 1784–1854*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1980, pp 5–16

²¹ Windschuttle, *Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One*, p 96

²² Arthur, Memorandum, Sorell Camp, 20 November 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, Irish University Press, Shannon, p 244

of hand. Reynolds actually changed the words of one of the most important documents in Tasmanian history. Until I exposed this, no historian had ever reported what he had done.²³

Historians commonly describe the “Black Line” as an attempt to capture or exterminate all the Aborigines. Reynolds calls it an act of “ethnic cleansing”.²⁴ However, its true 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.²⁵

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 alleged killings.²⁶

Ryan claims that frontier warfare in Tasmania’s 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 when I checked her footnotes in the Tasmanian archives I found that not one of the five sources she cited mentions any of these events.²⁷

Between 1828 and 1830, according to Ryan, “roving parties” of police constables and convicts killed 60 Aborigines. Not one of the three references she cites mentions any Aborigines being killed, let alone 60. The governor at the time and most subsequent authors, including Henry Reynolds, regarded the roving parties as completely ineffectual.²⁸

Another academic historian, Lloyd Robson, claims the settler James Hobbs in 1815 witnessed Aborigines killing 300 sheep at Oyster Bay and the next day the 48th Regiment killed 22 Aborigines in retribution.²⁹ 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 1821.³⁰ It would have been a challenging task for the 48th Regiment to kill Aborigines in Van Diemen’s Land in 1815 because at the time they were on garrison duty in County Cork, Ireland.³¹

The whole case is not just a fabrication, it is a romantic fantasy derived from academic admiration of the anti-colonial struggles in South-East Asia in the 1960s, when its authors were young and when they absorbed the left-wing political spirit of the day. Reynolds claims accounts of the little violence that did occur “could have come from the manuals of guerrilla warfare that proliferated in the 1960s”.³² The truth is that in Tasmania more than a century before, there was

²³ Windschuttle, *Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One*, p 182–3

²⁴ Henry Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain? The Question of Genocide in Australia’s History*, Viking, Melbourne, p 76

²⁵ Windschuttle, *Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One*, p 173

²⁶ Windschuttle, *Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One*, pp 134–6

²⁷ Windschuttle, *Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One*, pp 139–43

²⁸ Windschuttle, *Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One*, p 149–58

²⁹ Lloyd Robson, *A History of Tasmania, Volume One*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne 1983, p 50

³⁰ Windschuttle, *Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One*, pp 143–6

³¹ T. C. Sargent, *The Colonial Garrison 1817–1824: the 48th Foot, the Northhamptonshire Regiment in the Colony of New South Wales*, TCS Publications, Canberra, 196

³² Henry Reynolds, ‘The Black War: A New Look at an Old Story’, *Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Papers and Proceedings*, 31, 4, December 1984, p 2

nothing on the Aborigines' side that resembled frontier warfare, patriotic struggle or systematic resistance of any kind.

The so-called "Black War" turns out to have been 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, sugar, tea and bedding, objects that to them were European luxury goods. We have statements to that effect from the Aborigines themselves.³³

Unlike Lyndall Ryan, Reynolds does not himself support the idea that the colonial authorities had a conscious policy of genocide against the Aborigines. Instead, Reynolds's thesis is that it was the settlers who wanted to exterminate them. He claims that throughout the 1820s, the free settlers spoke about and advocated extirpation or extermination.³⁴ However, even on the evidence he provides himself, only a handful of settlers ever advocated anything like this.

In 1830, a government inquiry into Aboriginal affairs conducted a questionnaire survey of the leading settlers to determine their attitudes. It was possibly the first questionnaire survey ever conducted in Australia. Reynolds knows this survey existed because he has quoted selections from the settlers' answers in at least two of his books. However, he has never mentioned the survey's existence in anything he has written. Why not? If his readers knew there had been a survey they would obviously want to know the results, that is, all the results not just a handful of selected quotations.

I examine the full results in my book.³⁵ They show that in 1830, at the height of Aboriginal violence, very few of the settlers were calling for the extermination of the Aborigines. Some wanted to pursue a policy of conciliation towards the Aborigines. Others were against violence but wanted to remove the Aborigines to a secure location, such as a peninsula or island. Only two of them seriously advocated exterminating the Aborigines. But theirs were the only words that Reynolds quoted. The full historic record, not the selective version provided by Reynolds, shows the prospect of extermination 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 in Tasmania, 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 121 of the original inhabitants, mostly in self defence or in hot pursuit of Aborigines who had just assaulted white households. In these incidents, the Aborigines killed 187 colonists. In all 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.³⁶

Why, then, have the historians of Tasmania told this story about genocide, frontier warfare and widespread bloodshed. I suggest several of the reasons in my book: to make Australian history, which would otherwise be dull and uneventful, seem more dramatic than it really was; to assume the moral high ground and flatter their own vanity as defenders of the Aborigines; in some cases to pursue a traditional Marxist agenda or to indulge in interest group politics of gender, race and class. But the greatest influence on them has been not so much a commitment to any specific

³³ Windschuttle, *Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One*, pp 116–30

³⁴ Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?*, pp 71–2

³⁵ Windschuttle, *Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One*, pp 301–8

³⁶ Windschuttle, *Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One*, pp 387–97

political program but the notion that emerged in the 1960s that history itself is 'inescapably political'. This is a phrase Reynolds used in 1981 in the introduction to his book *The Other Side of the Frontier*. He also wrote in a journal article: "history should not only be relevant but politically utilitarian, ... it should aim to right old injustices, to discriminate in favour of the oppressed, to actively rally to the cause of liberation."³⁷

I completely disagree. That position inevitably corrupts history. Without it in Aboriginal history, there might have been less licence taken with historical evidence and a greater sense of the historian's responsibility to respect the truth. The argument that all history is politicised, that it is impossible for the historian to shed his political interests and prejudices, has become the most corrupting influence of all. It has turned the traditional role of the historian, to stand outside his contemporary society in order to seek the truth about the past, on its head. It has allowed historians to write from an overtly partisan position. It has led them to make things up and to justify this to themselves on the grounds that it is all for a good cause. No cause is ever served by falsehood because eventually someone will come along and expose you. Truth always comes out in the end, and when it does it discredits those causes that were built on lies.

The postmodernist position on truth is even worse. It says that each social group, each cultural group, each political group has its own truths, and we can never decide between them. The Aborigines have their own view of history and it is valid for them. The whites might have a different view, but that is just their way of looking at things. But what happens when we come to an issue like the Holocaust of World War II where there is now an overwhelming body of evidence about what happened. Do we say the Jews who were murdered in their millions have their own view, but the Nazis have their own equally valid perspective? Obviously not. There is a moral position to take about this: that the Holocaust was an absolute evil, and there is an empirical or factual position to take: that the figure of six million killed is correct. In matters of this kind, you cannot simply take refuge in postmodern relativism and say that everyone is entitled to their own point of view. In matters of this kind, historians have a public responsibility to uncover the truth, both the moral truth and the factual truth.

Historians cannot do this if they take sides and play politics. The role of the historian is to stand above politics, difficult though this always will be. Historians should assume a public responsibility to report their evidence fully and accurately, to footnote their sources honestly, and to adopt as objective a stand as possible. To pretend that acceptable interpretations can be drawn from false or non-existent evidence, whose only justification is that it is all in a good cause, is to abandon the pursuit of historical truth altogether.

³⁷ Henry Reynolds, *Other Side of the Frontier*, p 1; Henry Reynolds, 'Aboriginal-European Contact History', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 3, June 1978, p 64