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REF: **Massacre in Tasmania? How Can We Know?**

Introduction

In his book, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History,* Keith Windschuttle takes historian Lloyd Robson to task for his account of an alleged massacre of up to seventy Aborigines near Campbell Town in the eastern midlands of Tasmania in the late 1820s (Windschuttle 2002: 146-149). He alleges that Robson appears to support a hearsay account of the incident at the expense of two others, one of whom had visited the site the next day with the leader of the alleged perpetrators who told him they had been 'out a long time and had done nothing'. The other said the hearsay account was 'utterly ridiculous' because 'no bodies were found' (Windschuttle 2002:147). Windschuttle concludes: Robson's 'objective is not to show that this is a disputed story. On the contrary, his rhetorical intent is to lead the reader to conclude there were some colonists who were so shameless they would not only lie about a serious matter but would also attempt to trivialize the murder of Aborigines as "ridiculous"'(Windschuttle 2002: 147). Robson's point, however, is that the incident 'illustrates the difficulty of getting to some of the truth about the war, for if ever there was a case of the victors writing history, this is it' (Robson 1983:217).

Windschuttle's allegation that historians appear to have been far too willing to accept hearsay accounts of massacre on the Australian colonial frontier lies at the heart of the debate known as the Aboriginal history wars (Windschuttle 2000, Ryan 2001, Windschuttle 2002, Manne 2003). Central to this debate is the status and interpretation of sources: how can the historian decide the veracity of allegations about massacre which took place so long ago? Two historians Keith Windschuttle and Jacques Semelin have developed models of analysis to assist historians in their investigations. This paper compares the characteristics of each model and then applies them to an investigation of

the alleged massacre that Robson and Windschuttle dispute. The investigation suggests that that there were probably not one but two incidents of massacre that were covered up at the time.

Windschuttle' s Forensic Model

Windschuttle's interest in the subject of massacre began with his belief that most accounts of massacre on the Australian colonial frontier were either exaggerated or invented (Windschuttle 2000:9). To make his case he developed what he calls a forensic model to investigate five well-known incidents of massacre on the Australian frontier:

> Historians should only accept evidence of violent deaths, Aboriginal or otherwise, where there is a minimum amount of direct evidence. This means that, at the very least, they need some reports by people who were either genuine eyewitnesses or who at least saw the bodies afterwards. Preferably, these reports should be independently corroborated by others who saw the same thing. Admissions of guilt of those concerned, provided they are recorded first-hand and are not hearsay, should also count as credible evidence. (Windschuttle 2000:13)

From its application he concluded that two of the incidents were legitimate police actions, another was invented by a missionary and that only two could be properly called massacre (Windschuttle 2000: 9-13). However, when I investigated one of the 'legitimate police actions', known as the Waterloo Creek Massacre, I found that he discounted the evidence of the sergeant who was in the thick of the fray which lasted several hours and who said: 'From what I saw myself, I should say that from forty to fifty blacks were killed'; and preferred that by the senior officer who was not present when the mounted police drove the Aborigines into the river, but admitted seeing two Aborigines being shot, trying to escape and at most three or four Aborigines dead. This led me to conclude that Windschuttle only applied his model when it suited him to do so (Ryan 2003:37-38). .

Since then he has clarified the model:

> …the standard of proof required for the writing of history is not legalistic but journalistic. That is, for a claim of killing to be credible it needs either first-hand reports from eye-witnesses, second-hand reports from those with direct contact to the participants, or accounts by those who saw the bodies afterwards. These reports should be reasonably contemporary with events and provide specific details like names, dates, places and numbers. The informants should be credible witnesses. Anyone with an obvious agenda to mislead should be treated skeptically. In most cases, criteria of this kind would satisfy normal historical enquiry. In some cases, where there are contrary accounts of the same event, the balance of probability of the evidence should decide things. In a small number of contentious cases, a more exhaustive survey of the forensic evidence would be needed. But even here, historians do not need proof beyond a reasonable doubt (Windschuttle 2002:165).

Semelin's Typology of Massacre

Semelin's interest in the subject of massacre stems from a decade of investigation into its incidence world wide. He points out that, while massacre has taken place throughout history, the act of massacre and the word itself has no legally binding description, although there is an understanding that it involves the savage and deliberate killing of a defenceless civilian population by an armed group (Semelin 2001:378-380). Nor is there any agreement about the minimum number of people that need to be killed to constitute massacre, although there seems to be an informal understanding among scholars that it lies between three and ten (Semelin 2001: 379). More importantly, however, he suggests that wherever massacre occurs, it appears to conform to a set of characteristics.

First, it tends to be carried out in secret; and it tends to suppose a relationship of proximity between the assassin(s) and their victims (Semelin 2001:378-9). Second, it has two objectives: to impose political domination by submission, and/or to eliminate or eradicate the group in and of itself (Semelin 2001: 381). Third, the act of massacre is not

so much the expression of power by a strong regime but an expression of a position of weakness that is subsumed by the recourse to massacre which is ‘a quick means of appropriating the riches of the massacred group and/or to take control of the territory on which it lived’ (Semelin 2001:381). Fourth, the occurrence of the massacre is usually related to or the outcome of a certain political event, such as the killing of prominent person, or the unlawful appropriation of property. The people are thus called to seek vengeance for the murder of these men and women amongst their supposed enemies (Semelin 2001:383).

Because the massacre usually takes place out of sight, it is here, Semelin points out, that the key question of a witness arises. If no witness is intended or present, who will be believed? (Semelin 2001:385) This problem is of central importance to historians. The nature of the event, often leads to silence in the immediate aftermath. However witnesses and perpetrators sometimes speak about the massacre, long after it is over, when they are immune from prosecution or removed from fear of reprisal from other perpetrators. For this reason, Semelin concludes, historians must not only immerse themselves in ‘the collective representations of the groups in conflict’, but also understand the ‘weight of fear and the imaginary that seem to be ever present before the massacre, thus encouraging the perpetration itself, because the role played by fear and the imagination are obviously correlated’ (Semelin 2001:384).

Comparison between Semelin and Windschuttle

In comparing the two models, two key points of divergence should be noted. First, Windschuttle appears to focus on the massacre site as a crime scene and the clues that immediately emerge, while Semelin appears to be more interested in the conditions that lead to massacre, its purpose and its long term effects. Second, Windschuttle accepts statements of denial that immediately follow the incident as objective fact, while Semelin is more likely to accept the evidence of those who speak out long afterwards.

Let’s apply the models to interrogate the evidence about the incident that Robson recorded and Windschuttle disputes.

The Evidence

The evidence that Robson considers in relation to the incident near Campbell Town in Tasmania in the late 1820s is drawn from the three accounts presented to the Aborigines Committee in March 1830 and published in *British Parliamentary Papers* in 1831. The first account, by Gilbert Robertson, district constable at Richmond presented hearsay evidence:

> great ravages were committed by a party of constables and some of the 40th Regiment, sent from Campbell Town; the party consisted of five or six; they got the Natives between two perpendicular rocks, between which there was a sort of shelf on which the Natives got; has heard and does believe that 70 of them were killed by that party; believes five or six men could destroy 70 of the Natives; the party killed them by firing their ammunition upon them, and then dragging the women and children from the crevices in the rocks, and dashing out their brains; the Natives watch to recover the dead bodies of such as are killed on those occasions, and put them in hollow trees; believes, from Dugdale's account, who was one of the party, that the whole tribe was destroyed. Grant could give some clue to these murders; believes that there was provocation, that two whites had been previously murdered; Morley, as well as Dugdale, was with the party; never heard this great slaughter mentioned by the Natives (*BPP* 1831:48).

Robertson's account offers no date for the incident. But he does offer a reason or provocation for the massacre: the murder of 'two whites' by Aborigines; who the perpetrators were: 'a party of constables (including Dugdale and Grant) and some of the 40th Regiment'; where it took place: 'a sort of shelf on which the Natives got'; what happened: 'the party killed them by firing their ammunition upon them, and then dragging the women and children from the crevices in the rocks, and dashing out their brains'; how many were killed: 'does believe that seventy of them were killed'; who told him: Dugdale, a constable who was one of the party; and what happened to the bodies:

‘the Natives watch to recover the dead bodies of such as are killed on those occasions, and put them in hollow trees’.

The second account was by a settler Doctor Adam Turnbull, who lived in the area where the incident took place. He told the Aborigines Committee that he had:

> heard about two years ago that Mr Robertson’s hut was robbed, (not far from Campbell Town), by 25 or 30 Natives; it was immediately afterwards reported that 100,70,40,50, and then 17 of them had been killed; did not believe any of them had been killed; no bodies were found; believed that the report was utterly ridiculous; the report was at first partially believed, but afterwards utterly disbelieved; heard that they were killed in a place like that described by Mr Gilbert Robertson, said to be at the back of Mr. Hugh Murray’s farm at the Western Tier; it was said two parties fired upon the Natives, and killed them by a cross-fire; but that some of them ran off. (*BPP* 1831:49)

Turnbull’s account suggests that there were two incidents. The first took place ‘two years ago’ (that is, in 1828) and the reason for it: ‘Mr Robertson’s hut was robbed, (not far from Campbell Town), by 25 or 30 Natives’; and that immediately afterwards ‘it was reported that 100, 70, 49, 50 and then 17 of them had been killed’, but that ‘no bodies were found’. The second appears more like the incident described by Gilbert Robertson. In this case Turnbull named the site: ‘it was said to be at the back of Mr Hugh Murray’s farm at the Western Tier’; and what happened: ‘it was said that two parties fired upon the Natives, and killed them by a cross-fire; but that some ran off’. However, Gilbert Robertson’s account mentioned only one party of constables and soldiers. Hugh Murray’s farm was also in the Eastern not the Western Tier. I suggest that this is a misprint on the part of the clerk who took down the evidence.

The third account was provided by a merchant, Mr William Robertson who also had property in the Campbell Town area. He said that he:

> Has seen the place where about two years ago the Natives were said to have been attacked; it was a very deep gully, on the east end of which there were precipitous rocks and hills on each side of the gulley (sic). I went there the next day after the attack was said to have taken place with the party; they said they had killed seven of the Natives, but appeared disinclined to go into the gulley. I told the corporal (40th Regiment) that I would go into the gulley; we went, but found no bodies, and he then said, 'to tell you the truth, we did not kill any of them, we had been out a long time and had done nothing,' and he said it in bravado. Dugdale and Morley were with the party, but they said nothing; there were the bodies of three dogs lying near three small fires; there was plenty of room for the Natives to have escaped in every direction; there was a thick scrub on the north-east side; this was at the very time there was a rumour that 70 Natives had been killed the day before at that place; I saw no blood in the gulley (BPP 1831: 49).

This account also appears to match the incident described by Gilbert Robertson and the second incident described by Turnbull. He noted the same 'precipitous rocks and hills on each side of the gulley', agreed with Gilbert Robertson that members of the 40th regiment and the two constables, Dugdale and Morley were present and agreed with the rumour 'that 70 Natives had been killed the day before at that place'. However, he also visited the gully the next day and found no bodies and saw no blood. He was told by the corporal of the 40th regiment that 'to tell you the truth, we did not kill any of them, we had been out a long time and had done nothing' and that Dugdale and Morley said nothing.

Applying Windschuttle's Forensic Method

Of the three accounts of the alleged massacre, that by Gilbert Robertson contains the most information. It identifies the names of three perpetrators Dugdale, Grant and Morley, in the party of five or six, the others being soldiers from the 40th Regiment. It also states that Dugdale was the informant. He said that 'the party killed [the Aborigines] by firing all their ammunition upon them, and then dragging the women and children from the crevices in the rocks, and dashing out their brains' and 'that the whole tribe was

destroyed' and 'that there was provocation, that two whites had been previously murdered' (*BPP* 1831:48). So while Gilbert Robertson's account is second hand, he named his source, one of alleged perpetrators, the reasons for the massacre and how it was carried out.

Dr Turnbull's account is also hearsay. It identifies the site, 'at the back of Mr Hugh Murray's farm at the Western Tier; it was said two parties fired upon the Natives, and killed them by a crossfire; but that some of them ran off' (*BPP* 1831:49).

William Robertson's account said that he visited the site the next day with the perpetrators, who initially told him that they had 'killed seven of the Natives, but appeared disinclined to go into the gulley (sic)'. But Robertson found no bodies and then the corporal of the 40th regiment said, "to tell you the truth, we did not kill any of them, we had been out a long time and had done nothing", and he said it in bravado.' William Robertson also said that Dugdale and Morley also accompanied him into the gully 'but they said nothing'. He did, however, find 'the bodies of three dogs laying near three small fires' and noted that 'there was plenty of room for the Natives to have escaped in every direction; there was thick scrub on the north-east side' and he 'saw no blood in the gulley' (*BPP* 1831: 49).

All three accounts acknowledge that an affray took place. The two hearsay accounts say that Aborigines were killed, while the third account denies that any were killed (*BPP* 1831:49). Each account is remarkably similar, but reaches different conclusions.

In his investigation, Windschuttle prefers the account by William Robertson who he says, 'was actually at the scene. He went to the site after hearing a rumour that seventy natives had been killed the day before' and persuaded the soldiers to show him the gully where the killings took place' (Windschuttle 2002:148). They initially told Robertson that they had killed seven, but when they found no bodies, admitted that they did not kill any of them, but had said it 'in bravado'. Windschuttle sums up:

> Plainly, the evidence of someone who had gone to the site of an alleged massacre, but had seen neither bodies nor blood, and who had extracted a confession that the story had been invented, should have been reported by any historian who wanted to tell the whole truth about this incident. This is particularly so when it confirmed other evidence that Dr Turnbull had given the committee, the details of which Robson had omitted (Windschuttle 2002:148).

He then reproduces the account by Turnbull who said that 'the report was first partially believed, but afterwards utterly disbelieved' (Windschuttle 2002:148). But a close reading of the text indicates that in this case, Turnbull was referring to another incident entirely. Robson has picked this up but Windschuttle has not. While Windschuttle's model could be useful in interrogating the evidence, he appears unable to properly apply it himself.

Applying Semelin' s typology

Semelin suggests that in order to understand massacre, it is critically important to establish context before an examination of the sources.

Context

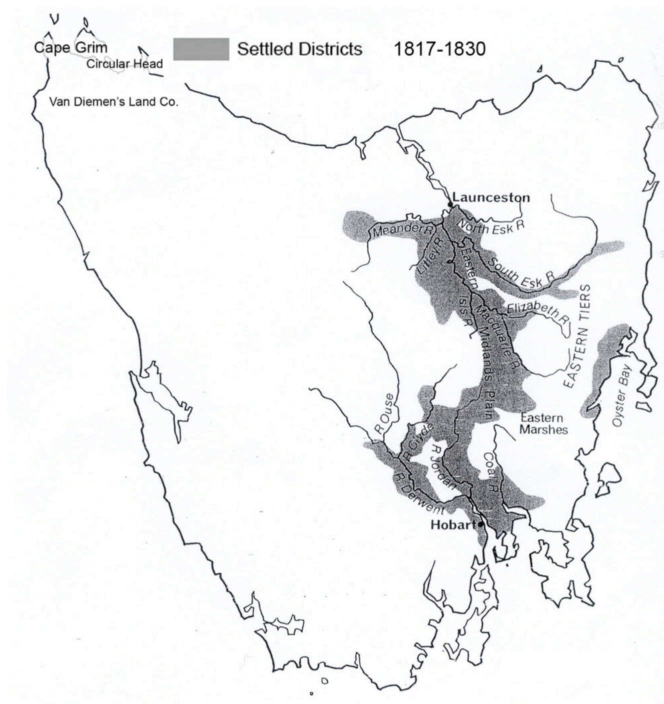
The incident or incidents appear to have taken place following a Government Notice of 29 November 1826 which implemented British Colonial Office policy of treating Aborigines, who attacked settlers and their property, as 'open enemies' (*HRA,* I, xii, 21). The Order accorded settlers the right to arm and join the military to drive off with force any Aborigine who was about to attack, rob, or murder colonists or about to commit a felony:

> When a felony has been committed, any person who witnesses it may immediately raise his neighbours and pursue the felons, and the pursuers may justify the use of all such means as a constable might use. If they overtake the parties, they should bid or signify to them to surrender; if they resist, or attempt to resist, the persons

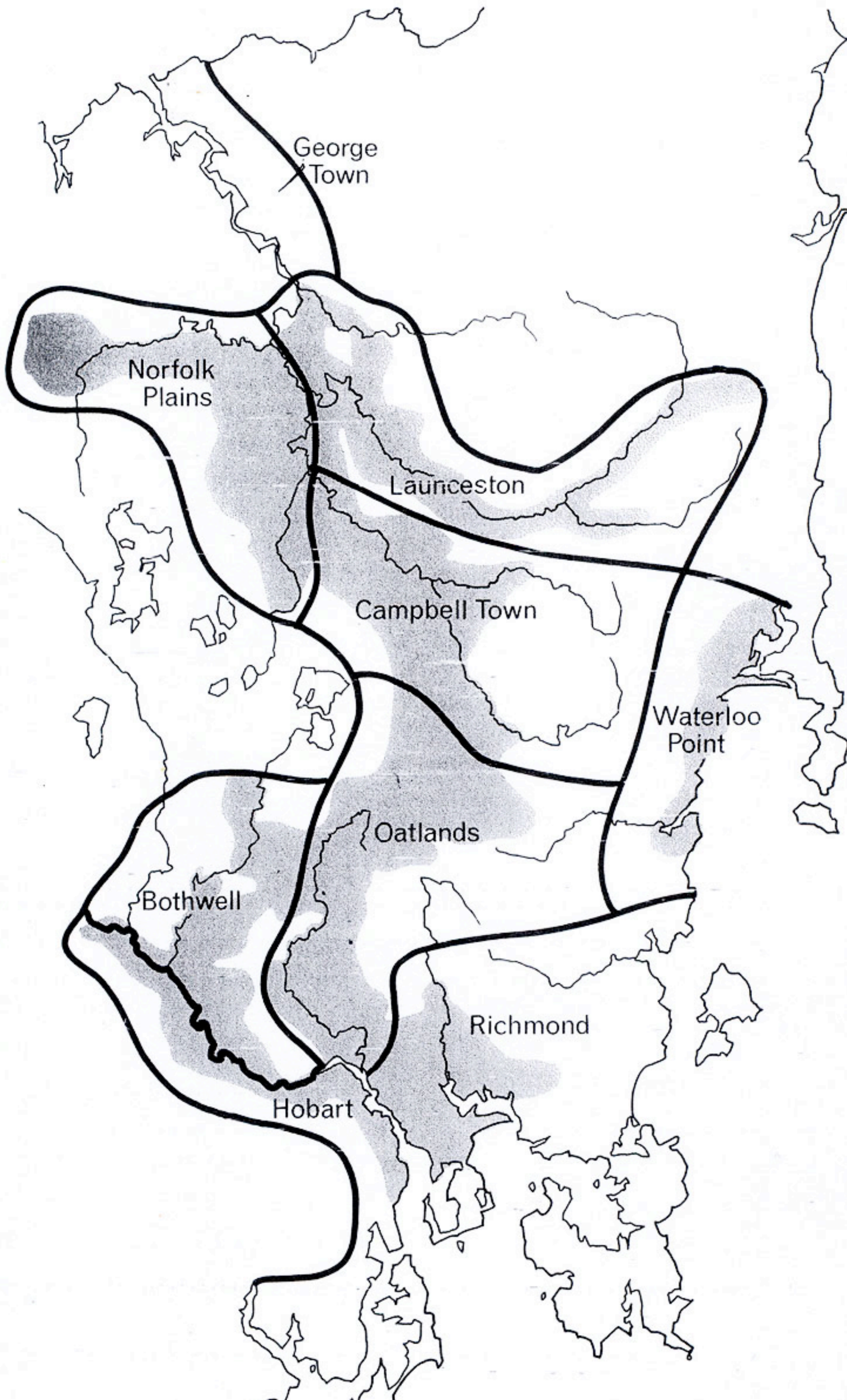
> pursuing may use such force as is necessary; and if the pursued fly, and cannot otherwise be taken, the pursuers may then use similar means (*BPP* 1831:21).

The Tasmanian frontier in 1827 was defined by the boundaries of the Settled Districts which comprised ten police districts, half of which had only been established the year before (*HRA,* III, vii, 608-12). Each police district was governed by a Stipendiary Magistrate who was supported by a detachment of military and field police and a district constable (*HRA*, III, vii, 693). The ostensible purpose of the police districts was to control the convict servants, but another was to respond more quickly to Aboriginal insurgency.

Map 1: The Settled Districts of Tasmania 1827



Map 2: The Police Districts of Tasmania 1827


George
Town
Norfolk
Plains
Launceston
Campbell Town
Waterloo
Point
Oatlands
Bothwell
Richmond
Hobart

Most of the settlers had arrived in the colony two to three years earlier and taken up land grants to run sheep for the production of wool for export. The Campbell Town Police District in particular had seen a dramatic increase in land alienation along the Elizabeth, South Esk and Macquarie River valleys and a dramatic expansion in sheep numbers from a few thousand in 1823 to more than one hundred thousand by the end of 1826 (*Hobart Town Gazette,* 28 August 1826, *HRA,* III, vi, 707-8; von Stieglitz1965:9; Ryan 1996:83-5,90-92). This area crossed the territories of the Oyster Bay, Ben Lomond and North Midlands Aborigines. Every autumn they moved east from the central plateau beyond the western border of the Settled Districts and crossed the eastern midland plain near Campbell Town along the Elizabeth and Macquarie River valleys into the Eastern Tiers to arrive at Oyster Bay where they spent the winter. They returned along the same route in spring (Ryan 1996:14-33). As more settlers and their stock-keepers, shepherds and sheep occupied the eastern midlands plain and the adjacent river valleys, seasonal conflict with the Aborigines for possession of the land increased. The Government Order of November 1826, which also ordered the deployment of more troops to the area, was a clear response to the settlers' predicament.

Was it, however, a pre-condition for mass killings of Aborigines? The *Colonial Times* believed that it gave the stock-keepers the right 'to take the law into their own hands, they tend to the destruction of the Natives and look upon it as empowering them to exercise their own judgement, which we must say it seem pretty generally to do, even to an educated reader.' 'With the murder of a Colonist still fresh in their memory, the people will kill, destroy, and if possible, exterminate every black in the island, at least so many as they fall in with' (*Colonial Times* 15 December 1826*)*.

This belief was articulated by an officer from the French expedition led by maritime explorer Dumont d'Urville which visited Tasmania during the summer of 1826-27. He wrote in his diary: 'A sort of war to the death ….has broken out between the English and the natives' (Rosenman 1987:192). It was further informed by the announcement in the *Hobart Town Gazette* of 24 February 1827, that 'several of the different outposts of military and field police, have been lately established, which will, we doubt not,

effectively prevent the future attacks of the natives upon the stock-keepers in the remote parts.'

Let us now examine the press and archival sources for this period.

The accounts by Gilbert and William Robertson and part of Dr Turnbull's, appear to match an incident reported in the *Colonial Times* of 4 May 1827, which said 'a mob of Black Natives' had attacked, raided and burnt down the hut belonging to the settler Walter Davidson at the Elizabeth River and then speared and killed Thomas Rawling, a free man and Edward Green, a convict. The report continued:

> Their bodies were found in a mangled state with spears still sticking in them. Several persons in the neighbourhood assisted by a small party of soldiers made immediate pursuit of the sable murderers and fortunately overtook them at a distance of about ten miles in a gulley (sic) opposite Mr. David Murray's farm, and where, for the first time, I believe, trusting to their numbers, [the Black Natives] contended a field of battle against …European arms and discipline. They made a most desperate attack on the party, with stones and spears which, [the party], protecting themselves, behind trees, received with *sang froid,* returning with well-directed shots of slugs. The Natives, thinking they had only the party in front to defeat, which was all they could see, continued their attack with savage fury when it was considered, from their overpowering numbers, time for the *corps du reserve,* which was judiciously placed in ambuscade in the rear, to operate some relief, and they commenced firing, with that coolness and precision, which reflected the greatest credit on them, and which ensured the preservation of their comrades which were in advance, from the inevitable destruction of which, but for this *ruse de guerre*, they would otherwise have been victims. The consequence of this spirited and well- conducted defence, was the immediate and complete rout of the Aborigines, who were dispersed in various directions, leaving behind them their spears and dogs. About 20 of the latter, were killed by the party; while the waddies and part of the spears were burned. Two or three hundred other spears

> and some knives were brought as trophies from the scene of the action, besides the waddies an immense quantity of blankets, rugs, and other articles of clothing were destroyed' (*Colonial Times* 4 May 1827).

However, the next day the *Hobart Town Gazette,* minimized the incident: 'following the discovery of the two bodies….Several persons assisted by a small party of soldiers made immediate pursuit' and that in the ensuing affray, 'a few' Aborigines were killed (*Hobart Town Gazette* 5 May 1827).

A week later the *Colonial Times* provided another account of the incident: '…in the affray not less than 30 of the blacks were shot dead; and that such was the powerful strength of the tribe, that the assistance of the Military was called to the spot where the skirmish took place, in the rear of David Murray's farm, at the Elizabeth River' (*Colonial Times* 11 May 1827). Two weeks later however, the *Colonial Times* published a letter signed 'A Settler'. It read:

> I have no doubt Mr Editor, your correspondent has given you a faithful account as delivered to him by the party who followed the Natives….but the truth of their statement of having killed twenty is justly suspected, where I assure you not a dead body or the least marks of blood, could be found on the following day, after a most diligent search for several hours, where the action is reported to have taken place. I believe not a single native was killed (*Colonial Times* 25 May 1827).

Could 'A Settler' have been William Robertson? The four accounts provide contradictory evidence of what was clearly an extraordinary incident in the gully opposite David Murray's farm on 12 April 1827. Following the first report of the alleged massacre, the *Colonial Times* addressed the issue more generally:

> …. There is a feeling of animosity implanted in the bosoms of the Blacks towards the Europeans, which will never be at an end but with life, and which will always be liable to break out while both inhabit the same Island. It is true, there appears very good grounds on their part for this animosity, when it is remembered, that we

> have taken possession of their country, and driven them from their native land, at least into the more remote parts of it. But still, when on the other hand, we consider that they made no use of it, and that being in a state of nature, they knew no rights, but the rights of nature, we cannot so decidedly condemn the action of taking possession of their country. …where there are no laws to govern the human actions, the only right is vested in power, i.e. strength…….the right of possession always lies in the strongest to possess….we may fairly consider, that as the Aborigines know no other than [the rights of nature, rather than the rights of man] that there is less injustice in driving them from their country than at first view may appear (*Colonial Times:* 11 May 1827).

It seems that this incident was so widely known at the time, that it provoked an editorial in the press. If this is the case, why weren't the alleged perpetrators arrested and an official enquiry held? I would argue that the Government Notice of November 1826 provided legal sanction for the magistrates to authorize the military and the field police to drive the Aborigines from the Settled Districts. Indeed I would argue that the sanctions were still in place a year later. Let us return to the other part of Dr Turnbull's account which said that:

> about two years ago …Mr Robertson's hut was robbed (not far from Campbell Town) by 25 or 30 Natives; it was immediately afterwards reported that 100,70,40,50 and then 17 of them had been killed; did not believe that any of them had been killed; no bodies were found; believed the report was utterly ridiculous; the report was first partially believed, but afterwards utterly dis-believed (*BPP* 1831:49).

The evidence appears to match a report in the *Hobart Town Courier* on 5 April 1828 which said that William Robertson's shepherd was missing 'and from finding his shoes and others parts of his dress scattered about the bush, we have every reason to believe him murdered.' When the body of shepherd William Beames was found, the local magistrate, James Simpson, ordered a party of stock-keepers, soldiers and field police to

pursue the Aborigines. In his report to the Colonial Secretary, he wrote: ‘it is believed that 17 were slaughtered’ (CSO 1/316:137).

The investigation finds that from the account of Dr Turnbull, not one but two incidents of massacre took place, one in 1827 and the other in 1828. However, Windschuttle’s reading of all three accounts leads him to conclude that there was only one incident, which he calls the ‘Campbell Town massacre’ of April 1828 (Windschuttle 2002:146). In this case he appears to have been mistaken.

Let us now apply Semelin’s typology. The incident in April 1827 appears to have been a response to a particular event: the killing of two stock-keepers in a remote stock-hut. The reports in the press at the time focused on the state of the men’s mangled bodies and represented them as innocent victims of unwarranted attack. Their mates, the stock-keepers, vowed revenge. It does appear that the reprisal party knew who the Aborigines were and where they were camped. It also appears that the objective of the reprisal party was not to capture the murderers but to eliminate the entire group. It would also appear that the reprisal was an expression of weakness in the settlers’ control of the territory and that it was carried out by a small group of constables and soldiers under the command of a corporal. But was it carried out in secret? Conflicting reports of the incident were reported in the press at the time. The first report suggests that it was a legitimate act of war, an engagement between two armed parties but no mention was made of the number killed (*Colonial Times* 4 May 1827). The report in the *Hobart Town Gazette* on 5 May said ‘a few’, another in *Colonial Times* on 11 May said that at least thirty, and the letter by ‘a Settler’ in the *Colonial Times* on 25 May mentioned twenty but then said that when he visited the site the following day he could find no bodies. A major military encounter with the Aborigines was reduced to nothing at all. Finally, the need for someone to tell, surfaces at the Aborigines Committee three years later, in 1830. But it is too soon after the incident, for the denials still abound.

The second incident, in April 1828, also appears to have been a response to another killing, in this case the shepherd, William Beames.

Comparing the Models

In comparing the two models, it would appear that Semelin's approach encourages a deeper investigation of the sources and of the context in which they were made. Windschuttle's model on the other hand encourages a deeper interrogation of the immediate evidence, even though he fails to do so himself. Indeed the two models could be combined to develop a method to investigate incidents of alleges massacre elsewhere on the Australian colonial frontier.

Aftermath

After the evidence to the Aborigines Committee a great silence descended. The report of the inquest into the bodies of the two men killed by the Aborigines, Thomas Rawling and Edward Green, was not sent to the Colonial Secretary in Hobart until February 1831 and contained no information about a reprisal party, let alone the outcome (AOT CSO 1/316:812). In 1852 historian John West read the evidence by Gilbert Robertson and the two settlers in the report of the Aborigines Committee published in the British Parliamentary Papers for 1831. He wrote:

> An exploit, claimed by a corporal and party of the 40th regiment is disputed. They professed to have discovered a tribe lodged on a shelf of a rock, inclosed by wall-like heights. They poured in their fire, and dragged the women and children from their shelter: all perished. This was stated to be a mere tale of pretended success, and devised to satisfy the neighbourhood, that the men had done their duty. It proves, at least, that such achievements were in request. How fearful a condition for the government to tolerate, or for a colony to approve (West 1852:30).

In 1870 James Bonwick gained information about the incident from another source:

> A gentleman, many years a magistrate in these colonies, mentioned to me the death of a shepherd of his near the Macquarie River. Soon after a company of soldiers went in pursuit of the supposed murderers. Falling in with a tribe around

> their night fires, in a gully at the back of the river, they shot indiscriminately at the group. Many were slain, but no Government inquiry was made into the well-known circumstance (Bonwick 1870:62).

The magistrate was probably James Simpson who was officiating at Campbell Town when the incident occurred, but who, as I have already pointed out, did not send his report of the inquest into the deaths of the two men, until nearly four years later. But some details of his story do not match other accounts. Simpson says that it was his own shepherd who was killed when the press reports and the inquest indicate that two stock-keepers were killed and were employed by Walter Davidson. However, the description of the site and the indiscriminate shooting appear to match some of the newspaper reports and the information provided by Gilbert Robertson and Dr Turnbull.

Clive Turnbull, a descendant of Dr Adam Turnbull, briefly mentioned Gilbert Robertson's account in a footnote in his book *The Black War* first published in 1948 (Turnbull [1948] 1967:40) and British anthropologist David Davies also mentioned it in his book, *The Last of the Tasmanians* published in 1973 (Davies 1973:64). It was not until 1983 that Lloyd Robson provided the first extended account which Windschuttle queried in 2002 (Robson 1983:217, Windschuttle 2002: 146-9).

However, in the same year that Windschuttle took Robson to task, the *Chronicle of the Oatlands District Historical Society* published the memoir of settler James George who grew up in the Campbell Town District in the 1820s and 1830s. It contains an account of the incident at the Elizabeth River in April 1827.

> I remember an incident that occurred near Campbell town in the Eastern Tiers at Stock Station of a Mr Davidson, who on visiting it found one of his men Murdered and lying half in and half out of the hut door. As he was going up, he overheard loud screams of the other man who was also found Murdered, and placed up against a gum tree. He made haste to inform the Magistrate, who made up a party to go in pursuit of the Blacks. Having seen their fires in a gully near the River Macquarie, some score of armed men, Constables, Soldiers and Civilians, and

> Prisoners or assigned Servants, who fell in with the Natives when they was going to their Breakfast. They fired volley after volley in among the Blackfellows, they reported killing some two score (George 2002:13).

The memoir matches the press reports and the evidence of Gilbert Robertson. It also contains three important pieces of new information that appear to confirm the seriousness of the incident. First is that the reprisal party was much larger, 'some score of armed men' which matches the first report in the *Colonial Times* of 4 May 1827. Second, that the party 'fell in with the Natives when they was going to their Breakfast', suggesting not only that the Aborigines were ambushed and thus defenceless but that the attack was carefully planned. Third, that 'they reported killing some two score', which is in keeping with some press reports that twenty and thirty were killed if not Gilbert Robertson's claim that seventy were killed, suggesting that estimating numbers killed in massacre is a hazardous enterprise. Finally, it would appear that the memoir fits an important part of Semelin's typology: the need to tell long after the event, when prosecution is no longer applicable.

Conclusion

From this investigation, it would appear that there were not one but two massacres in the Campbell Town area, the first in April 1827 and the other in April 1828. The investigation reveals the fear and anxiety experienced by the settlers and stock-keepers in their insecure control of the land and the measures they were prepared to take against the Aborigines to assert their authority. It also reveals that settler William Robertson may have denied the massacre of April 1827, not once in public but twice. This raises a further question: why did the colonial government fail to investigate the incident, when it appears to have been widely known at the time?

Above all the investigation confirms Lloyd Robson's point that 'if ever there was a case of the victors writing history, this is it.' (Robson 1983:217) For contrary to Windschuttle's claim, it would appear than 'some colonists … were so shameless they would not only lie about a serious matter but would also attempt to trivialize the murder

of Aborigines as “ridiculous”’(Windschuttle 2002: 147). Finally, the publication of James George’s account of the massacre of April 1827, one hundred and seventy five years later, suggests that it is surely time for it to be acknowledged and placed on the public record.

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