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### The Shark, Remora and Aboriginal History

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#### Abstract:

This paper has two clearly divided sections – the first will explore the concept of colonial history as a metaphor- likened to a cruising shark. The domain of this powerful shark is the oceans of history – its practice, understanding, delivery and ownership. The second part of the paper will examine two aspects of Keith Windschuttle's book *The Fabrication of Aboriginal history* with which I take issue namely the massacre at Risdon Cove in 1804 and secondly, Windschuttle's denigrating and uninformed appraisal of the relationship between Aboriginal men and women. I will state upfront that it is Windschuttle's blinding faith in the objectivity of the empirical record that is his Achilles heel. He does not recognise or consider that the archival record can be biased or recorded by those with a vested interest. This sort of naïve historical understanding is seriously flawed.

This article was delivered as a paper at the 'History Wars: Factitious Fiction or Fictious Facts?' symposium at QUT in Brisbane on the 27 September 2006. I believe that in holding this discussion we provide Keith Windschuttle with exactly what he craves – attention! He has been in his element from the outset of this largely white debate, serving as a manipulator of the media and has utilised it with stunning effect. From an Indigenous perspective we have a far more important agenda than enhancing the profile of Keith Windschuttle and that is to play a part in helping our people and communities put together the fragmented, erased and hidden jigsaw puzzle which reflects our historical experience since 1788. As Glissant articulates in referring to the restoration of history:

For history is not only absence for us. It is vertigo. The time that was never ours we must now possess. We do not see it stretch into our past and calmly take us into tomorrow, but it explodes in us as a compact mass, pushing through a dimension of emptiness where we must with difficulty and pain put it all back together (Glissant & Dash 1989, 161-162).

Nevertheless, engaging with some of Windshuttle's clearly unfounded claims is one way in which to begin this restoration by telling histories that counter or contradict his.

#### The Colonial Shark

The colonial historical shark was a feared predator during the 19<sup>th</sup> century but by the later stages of the 20<sup>th</sup> century many people began the process of re-entering what was formerly water too dangerous within which to swim. This process involved undertaking and exploring history from a different perspective, one result being Indigenous people's history from a grassroots perspective gained a rightful place. In recent times there has been a strong shift back from this revisionist work towards the glorified colonial history of the past. In this sense the shark did not go away and continues to cruise the history oceans devouring any other form of historical memory.

Allan Atkinson in his *The Europeans in Australia* has drawn comparison between the European arrival in Australia and stories of the Ancestral shark. He revealed that the traditional peoples of the Pacific, Torres Strait and Australia had stories about sharks 'who left the sea and came ashore.' Some Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land believed the shark was their ancestor, 'who had been washed inland and whose great spirit lived among those reedy islands of water, the brown lagoons' (Atkinson 1998, 38). Atkinson revealed that in Hawaii for instance the Polynesian Chiefs were 'called sharks that walk on the land' (ibid).

Atkinson was insistent that the arrival of Arthur Phillip in Australia was also 'to be distinctly shark like' (ibid). Phillip is thus described and matched with the Ancestral shark as the 'epitome (it seems) of unselfish authority, strangely blank and unknowable against an intimately known landscape, he stalks the horizon of the past' (ibid, 62). Atkinson reflects that it remains unknown 'whether the mythology of the Port Jackson area included any notion of the shark who came ashore. But the sharks fearful symmetry was a quality which might well have been mirrored, once again in the first Governor' (ibid, 151). The European arrival is thus tied to Aboriginal belief and knowing:

This was the shark's secret: it made its home ashore through an ancient, self-justifying certainty, a truth which echoed in the ear. If one cut along its shining sides they fell open like a book, full of gilded imagery and familiar stories, but edged also with terror (ibid, 340-341).

Atkinson's appraisal has been set upon by the Windschuttle disciple Michael Connor who scoffed:

Readers [will] find one of the funniest interpretations in all our history. Governor Arthur Phillip swims through Atkinson's text as the 'ancestral shark' of the European Australians. Other history books may come and go, but this erudite fish and chip history will last as long as histories of Australia are read. The finny journey of governor number one can be traced through ten index references to 'Shark, image' (Connor 2005, 109).

However, in strong support of Atkinson's understanding Aboriginal people in many parts of this country do hold stories that strongly identify with the invading shark metaphor. As an example a story of contact from the Narungga community on the Yorke Peninsula, which I retell with the permission of my brother Lester Irabinna Rigney from the Yunggoorendi First Nations Centre. It is a story about a huge white shark, Gooreta (Goor-etah). The custom of the Narungga when arranging a meeting of the clans at the Yorke Peninsula was to capture a small fish and wrap bark around its midriff and release it, then at a later point they recapture the fish and know by its size that it's time for the meeting. There came a time when the fish was caught again by the Narungga and released in expectation that the meeting would take place the next full moon. However, this time the full moon came and no-one came to the meeting. So they caught the fish again and found that it had got bigger and had started to go grey. They released the fish again, and again, but the next full moon came and still no-one arrived. Yet again they recaptured the fish, found that it had grown remarkably again and become greyer still, and released it, and again come the full moon nobody turned up. One day the Narungga people found that the bay was full of fish, all the children went running down and the rest of the people including the elders went down to welcome the fish in. But behind the smaller fish was Gooreta, the original fish grown to enormous size and coloured white - a monstrous SHARK that came in and killed and dismembered the Aboriginal people.

This story was a warning to Aboriginal people to beware of large white predators that come from the sea even though at first they may appear friendly (driving in schools of fish). It was constructed as a way of warning Aboriginal people and announcing the arrival of the voracious and deadly white intruders, and also provides an explanation of some cosmic readjustment to explain why people are not turning up to the customary meetings and ceremonies. Despite including an account of the destruction of Aboriginal people, there is no suggestion that the overarching system of Aboriginal law and cultural responsibilities has been destroyed. Indeed the fact that this story is still current today is in itself a testimony to the resilience of the Aboriginal world-view.

This brings me to the 'Remora' or sucker fish which rides with the shark, a freeloader who dines on the droppings of his host. I think it is a fair appraisal to liken Keith Windschuttle with the 'Remora'. He has attached himself to the glorified colonial historical understanding and cruises the shoals of others' footnotes looking for any discrepancy or possibility to stamp his own interpretation in a savage feeding

frenzy. Windschuttle's work, particularly through his articles in *Quadrant* and the book *Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, reflects the practice of the remora: His work is not original and he relies on attaching himself to a host to feed off. It is the ingrained vilification and racism that resides within Windschuttle's work that is the most disturbing. He has used vicious attacks upon Aboriginal people, culture and history to enhance his own profile and agenda.

## **The Remora Exposed**

As stated there are two points of Windschuttle's work I wish to explore, the first being the 'massacre at Risdon Cove' in Tasmania. In the past consensus decreed that on 3 May 1804 a detachment of military personnel of the New South Wales Corp fired with musket and cannon upon a large gathering of Aboriginal people who had been induced to come down the valley. After reading Windschuttle's attempt to discount this account of Risdon Cove I had immediate concerns over his portrayal of the relationship of the cannon that was based in the European community at the time. Windschuttle's analysis clearly gives the impression that working replicas of these cannon could be sold at Toys R Us with little fear! Having always had an interest in Napoleonic history I set out to ascertain as clearly as I could the capabilities of this weapon which Windschuttle describes as a small:

ship's cannon often used for ceremonial purposes to fire a salute to welcome or farewell important visitors and naval vessels, or on public celebrations such as the Queen's birthday or victory over the French. This purpose was the most likely reason the carronade was still kept at Risdon Cove, since it was not a weapon normally used by English field artillery. Despite William Wentworth's assertion in 1819 that it fired grape and canister shot, none of the original documents tell exactly what it discharged (Windschuttle 2002, 18).

In contrast I felt that the cannon was more likely to have been loaded with grape and canister and if discharged at close range upon a large gathering of people the impact would have been devastating. A description I uncovered in a book supported my initial reaction, describing the carronade as a 'short, large bore design first made at Carron in Scotland in 1789. It was economic in weight, space, crew, and very destructive at short range' (The Diagram Group 1980). Going further I contacted the Australian War Memorial and was given admirable assistance from Brad Manera who I justly acknowledge for the following information.

Manera is adamant that Windschuttle clearly does not understand the military and armed civilian context around the mouth of the Derwent at the time. Windschuttle quotes extensively about Lieutenant William Moore and demands of the reader that this is an authoritative source as he is an officer of the "102nd regiment of the New South Wales Corps" (Windschuttle 2002, 16-18). Manera reveals that the 102nd Regiment of Foot did not exist in 1804. Moore was in fact an officer of the NSW Corps at that time and the NSW Corps only lost its title when it deposed Governor Bligh in 1808 and so was renamed the 102 Regiment for the year or so it waited in disgrace to be replaced by Governor Macquarie's old regiment, the 73rd, in 1810. Windschuttle repeats the mistake when he talks about 'the hard drinking' '102nd Regiment' in 1804 (ibid, 20). Manera checked on Lt William Moore and found that he joined the New South Wales Corps in 1795 as an Ensign (the lowest of the officer ranks) so by the time of Risdon Cove he had been with the unit for almost a decade and risen a rank. Certainly not a glowing endorsement of this officer's ability.

Manera is scathing of Windschuttle's authoritative reference on artillery, revealing Donald Featherstone's work as a thirty year old picture book of just over 100 pages (designed for people who build model soldiers) that deals with the British Army of the 1850s to 1890s. Artillery of 1804, Manera concludes, is completely outside the scope of this book. Windschuttle's analysis of artillery capability and use within the colony are wildly erroneous and are clearly based on inappropriate and inadequate research. Windschuttle should be aware, but clearly isn't, that settlements at Port Jackson and the Derwent were rich in a range of light ordnance at the time. Manera directs that if the gun used in the famous incident at Risdon in 1804 was, as Moore describes, a carronade, it is a short barreled artillery piece that could vary in size from 1.65 inch calibre to well over a 12 pounder. HMS Victory for instance had carronades that exceeded 60 pounders at Trafalgar in 1805!

Manera insightfully recognizes that artillery has rarely been of much use against Indigenous people as they do not move or fight in packed stationary formations of the type that artillery was designed to destroy. However, if the locals could have been lured into a very tight packed group within 200 metres of the arc of fire of even a very light carronade (like a 3 pounder or 6 pounder) a large percentage of fatal wounds would have been inflicted by grape or cannister and even at double that range serious injury would still be inflicted on a large number of people within the target area. Windschuttle's argument that the most likely and only use of a carronade was to fire blank ammunition for saluting or signaling purposes is clearly in error. A carronade had a wide range of purposes, the most lethal of which is its use as a very large shotgun.

Manera does concur with Windschuttle on some points, stating that Moore was an army man and the carronade was usually a navy weapon but that is not relevant as Windschuttle records that the man responsible for ordering the firing of the carronade was Jacob Mountgarrett. If Windschuttle had read the reference he uses as a footnote he would know that Mountgarrett was a former Royal Navy surgeon, and veteran of the Napoleonic wars at sea, who would have seen many carronades fired at close range and been well aware of the destructive power of such a weapon on human flesh.

Naval cannon were often put ashore because their ammunition was effective against foes both on land as well as sea. During the age of wooden sailing ships, the aim of naval warfare was not to sink the opposing ship but rather to kill or maim enough of the opposing crew so they were unable to main the sails or oppose a boarding party (Connor, 2004, 93-94).

As a naval weapon that came ashore the carronade is the perfect weapon to represent the destructive shark that comes on land to unleash horrific destruction upon unsuspecting Indigenous peoples.

Manera disclosed that he had actually fired an early 19th century carronade and a replica of a light field gun c1805 and had seen both (in a shark like manner) tear holes in a steel 44 gallon drum at ranges of over 100m with very economical charges of black powder. Carronades do not have the range of cannons but (from his personal experience) they are faster to load. Manera concluded that with a full load and properly made canister they could be dreadful weapons.

Adding weight to the evidence as provided by Manera is the analysis of John Connor in his article *The Tasmanian Frontier and Military History* (2004). Connor reveals that there were two carronades at Risdon Cove and they were in fact 12 pounders taken from Mathew Flinders' HMS Investigator (ibid, 93). Manera again provides a comparison – stating that 12 pounder-sized field artillery was the standard field artillery of the Napoleonic wars and that 12 pounder carronades were lighter and more maneuverable than 12 pounder cannons. Reference to the Napoleonic war at the time as referenced by both Connor and Manera is of great importance and apparently missed by Keith Windschuttle. As Connor points out:

Van Diemens Land was initially occupied to prevent the French using it as a base to disrupt British shipping in the Pacific. The cannon fired at the Aborigines was one of two deployed along with ammunition, gunpowder and other supplies to defend Risdon from French attack (93-94).

I have ascertained from archival sources that at the time there was widespread paranoia throughout the colonies regarding imminent French attack. Coverage in the *Sydney Gazette* 20 November 1803 informs the populace that 'hostilities had commenced between GREAT BRITAIN and the FRENCH' (The Sydney Gazette, 20 Nov 1803). Two weeks later a further report highlighted the increased state of alarm:

His Excellency the Commander in Chief deeming it necessary to cause proper persons to be trained to the exercise of the Cannon, Field Pieces etc. the free inhabitants of Sydney (on any case of eventual emergency from the enemy attack), willing to contribute their aid to the defence of this colony will give their names in to his honor the Lieutenant Governor during the present week (The Sydney Gazette, 4 December 1803).

The reference to the readiness of cannons and the training of personnel in their use is a damning rebuttal of Windschuttle's shallow analysis. In light of this evidence it would have been ridiculous at this time to have had these weapons loaded with blanks.

There is no argument that a cannon was fired at Aboriginal people at Risdon Cove in 1804, it is the result of that unleashing that has been questioned. Windschuttle's attempt to devalue the capabilities of the weapon is either in complete error or dare I say it fabricated. It is quite evident that the toy, ceremonial popgun invention of Keith Windschuttle's mind is well removed from the lethal 12 pounder destructive reality of Risdon Cove. In sticking with our maritime connection I conclude this section by stating that the naval carronade completely blows the shark and his ravenous remora out of the water.

## **Savagery and Barbarism**

The second piece of Windschuttle's work I wish to examine is his malicious attacks against the relationships between Aboriginal men and women, which clearly demonstrate the depths to which the remora is prepared to sink. He states that Aboriginal women 'endured frequent violence' and quotes French explorer Peron stating that Aboriginal women 'were nearly all covered with scars, the miserable results of the bad treatment of their brutal husbands' (Windschuttle 2002, 379). Windschuttle himself without strong conviction acknowledges the uninformed nature of this observation by disclosing that they 'might merely have been the ritual scarring, with which they adorned themselves'. Of course this is the case, but it is quite apparent that Windschuttle would be far happier with the badly represented early portrayal of brutal relationships between Aboriginal men and women - namely that the women were clubbed and dragged away as submissive and battered captives. Early writers in Sydney were also adamant that the 'women bore the marks of male brutality on their scalps, and elsewhere on their bodies' (Hiatt 1996, 60). The remora is adamant that the 'aspect of their society that left them most vulnerable in the face of the European arrival was the treatment of their women'. As a means of completely dispelling these assumptions we need only examine observers like Spencer and Gillen who insisted that:

statements are frequently made to the effect that the women are brutally treated by their men. A wife – so it is reported time after time – is commonly obtained by a man lying in wait near to a waterhole and clubbing the unfortunate lubra, who is then dragged away by the hair of her head... As to the capture of women – we have never in any of these Central tribes met with any such thing, and the clubbing part of the story may be dismissed...(Gillen 2007, 32).

Spencer and Gillen reveal that the 'majority of the scars which mark the bodies of the women are self-inflicted, and as a matter of fact, they are proud of them'. Adding further that 'when a husband dies the widow has to gash her scalp right down the middle line of the head, then sear the wound thus made with a fire-stick' (Gillen 2007). In relation to Aboriginal marriage practice, Malinowski in 1913 was able to reveal to his readers that 'it was now evident that throughout the continent the normal, legal and peaceful method was by bestowal' (Gillen 2007, 63). Over two decades later Phyllis Karberry, a product of Malinowski's department at the London School of Economics, forever changed the understandings of relationships between Aboriginal men and women:

Whereas the all-male cohort of observers in the nineteenth century had pitied Aboriginal women as victims of male oppression, Dr Karberry defended them against the misrepresentations and devaluations of male ethnographers. Far from being chattels and slaves, they had rights, privileges and complex social personalities on a par with men. The impression of drudgery and servility was superficial' (Gillen2007, 63).

Hiatt is adamant that 'Darwin's assumption that the acquisition of wives was largely a matter of strength and boldness among rival males is also untenable' (Gillen 2007, 76). The poor old remora, he is swimming against the tide and on this evidence is probably a century behind in his thinking!

Windschuttle goes to great pains in portraying Aboriginal society as immoral, and claims that the men placed 'no constraints on the women's sexual behavior with white men' adding that the men 'appeared to encourage their prostitution' (Windschuttle 2004, 384). Windschuttle concludes that only 'men who held

their women cheaply would allow such a thing to happen'. Windschuttle' should examine aspects of his own pristine and pure British history more closely before pointing the finger at others. The treatment of white women at Sydney Cove is no indictment of British respect and law: there is no greater example of savagery and barbarism than when these women disembarked. The event that followed witnessed 'an orgy among the rocks, carried on with the usual half-knowledge, half-collusion, half-condemnation of those in charge. The marines had requested – and been given by the officers – 'rum to make merry with the women' (Rees 2001, 208). There was little or no respect or protection for women whatsoever in the British understanding at the time:

The men in charge had a utilitarian view of camp women, if one often tinged with compassion: basically, they were an undifferentiated mass of mouths and wombs. The people attached to these fundamental body parts would be moved from place to place according to what the first required and the second offered; it was unnecessary to know them as individuals to determine their colonial future as a group. They had been brought over from England to sleep with the camp guards and bear children to male settlers... (ibid, 215).

Similarly and further down the track white stockmen for instance had no qualms whatsoever in trading their white wives or partners for as little as 'a pound of tobacco or a keg of rum' (Haskins 2005, 199). 'What sort of men' could hold their women so cheaply as this, as Windschuttle seems to ask? Apparently white men could and did!!

But let us take this tale of savagery a step further. The horrific cases of rape and assault against young children in the Colony was again barbaric and British law protected not the victims but the perpetrators. Eliza McCabe was four years old when she was sexually abused, Ann MacAdams was six as was Harriet Smith. None of the attackers of these children received the death penalty and most were given lenient sentences in light of their crimes – James Deegan for instance who assaulted McCabe was given two years. In another incident Jane Kennedy aged between eight and nine years was raped by one John Ingram. 'Ingram was found not guilty because the Kennedys did not appear to prosecute on the day ordained, but they later gave evidence that the 'mother's agitation and grief made her so ill that she was unable to attend until this day to give evidence against her child's attacker' (Robinson 1993, 204-205). In another incident a marine private Henry Wright 'violently and feloniously did make an assault... and then and there did ravish and carnally know a child of eight years'. Initially Wright was found guilty and sentenced to death however he received a pardon and sent to Norfolk Island for life, the Judge Advocate stating:

This was an offence that did not seem to require an immediate example; the chastity of the female part of the settlement had never been more rigid as to drive men to so desperate an act (ibid, 350).

It is truly amazing in reading this evidence that the remora has the audacity to claim that Aboriginal society was so 'internally dysfunctional' when in reality it is like comparing Jesus Christ with 'Vlad the Impaler'. If these whitemen were capable of committing such horrific violence against white women and children, it takes little imagination to realise what they could and did unleash upon Aboriginal women and children!

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion I will reinforce the statement I began with and wish to encourage the young Indigenous historians who are now emerging to get on with the job and get out there and assist our communities in putting our history back together. Nevertheless I hope this paper makes a contribution from an Indigenous perspective on the irrelevance of Keith Windschuttle and provides a warning that the colonial historical shark is far from extinct and continues to cruise our history beaches in search of prey. To our people and those people that support us stay strong the struggle continues!

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