

Dear Editor,

THE WHITEWASHING OF ABORIGINAL MANHOOD

The increasing crisis in Indigenous communities is no excuse for airing the views of a person so inexperienced in Aboriginal affairs and in historical and anthropological scholarship as Keith Windschuttle (The Australian Tues May 23, 2006). As with his critique of Aboriginal history scholarship, he is so obviously unaware of the "root causes" of Aboriginal disadvantage that he goes back to the old truisms constructed in times of colonial takeover (for further discussion of this predilection of his see <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/lab/85/grieves.html>). The notion that Aboriginal men have always been hard on their women has been a rationale for the wholesale appropriation of Aboriginal women by a horrifically gender imbalanced colonial society since 1788. Waltzing Matilda, indeed. Reports of violence toward Aboriginal women since that date, that Windschuttle refers to, need to be rigorously investigated for the "root causes". And what does history, even contemporary social and economic research, tell us of the position of women in western societies? Further, I object to this assertion of innate domestic violence in Aboriginal men since it is disrespectful to the many Aboriginal men that I have known who are loving husbands and fathers and whose relationships with their wives has been one of deep and abiding regard and friendship.

And, how often is this idea that "customary law permitted old men to marry girls at puberty" trotted out to heap scorn on our traditional culture? (This was the catch cry of missionary groups in the top-end during the post war years; the same mob as Windschuttle has accused of making up stories of Aboriginal massacres in order to improve their market share of Aboriginal welfare!) It can also be said that under customary law men had to prove themselves worthy before sexual access to a woman and experienced a prolonged bachelorhood before marriage. The women they married were of the next generation, daughters of the women with whom they had developed childhood relationships and so, as mothers-in-law or potential mothers-in-law, were recipients of gifts and respectful avoidance. When the gaze is turned back onto British society at the same time we find that it was far from unusual for older men to marry much younger women and the age of consent in Britain was only raised to 12 years in 1875. It was much later in Australia and the post-federation parliamentary debates are notable for the idea that it would be wrong to raise the age of consent lest some poor unfortunate man be trapped by some wily young woman/child.

White Australia has indeed operated in many ways to deprive Indigenous men of their manhood and now worse than this, the current media frenzy seems to suggest that Aboriginal men "invented" sexual abuse and all Aboriginal men are threatened with this stigma. How then can Australia explain the plethora of mixed-race children with absent white fathers over many generations?

When an Aboriginal man from the north coast of NSW was to disclose the truth of being sexually abused as a child (ABC Lateline, 22 May 2006), I wondered if it would be one

of the six men from that area who have personally disclosed to me this trauma in their lives; four of them, like Jack Beetson, by white men who had "befriended" the family, two of these through the church.

A first step to disclose the "root causes" would be to give Aboriginal men the dignity of identifying the factors that contribute to their wellbeing rather than speak for them. Research that I am involved in with urban Aboriginal people, shows that while employment figures as important, factors such as cultural knowledge, spirituality and the opportunity to "give" in the customary way, rank higher.

In 1970 Charles Rowley made the observation that "(Aboriginal) traditions embody a unique and profound view of reality that may even now be developed by Aboriginal scholars to enrich the mainstream of human thought. The skills are precisely what the nation needs to appreciate and to conserve a unique environment in real danger". If you empty central and northern Australian communities and create more urban ghettos you are only doing a geographical and losing the potential for true custodianship of country. This could be seen as worthy paid employment, for example. Why not just turn around and listen and try to understand and value the cultural roots of the first people of this country?

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