



The Contested Frontiers exhibit at the National Museum of Australia
photograph by George Serras

Contesting frontiers

History, memory and narrative in a national museum

by Bain Attwood

Abstract

This article examines the ways in which historical conventions can determine the nature of the stories that museums seek to tell, and influence the manner in which many expect these to be narrated. Focusing on criticisms of a particular

exhibition in the National Museum of Australia, it argues that an unwillingness to recognise and respect differing conceptions of history can diminish the potential museums have to advance cross-cultural understanding.

Introduction

In recent decades, museums in settler societies such as Australia have been forced to confront their colonial legacy as Aboriginal peoples have challenged the nature of their collections and their collecting. The place of Aboriginality in museums has been transformed as Aboriginal people have become subjects rather than objects. This has provoked debate not only about who and what is represented in museums but also about how this should be done. This has raised matters of fundamental importance, particularly in national museums: by what historiographical conventions do we tell stories about the past and how does this affect how such narratives are presented and the truth claims they make?

Shortly after the National Museum of Australia opened in 2001, a display in its First Australians gallery was called into question by radical conservatives. They called the display 'the Bells Falls Gorge Massacre exhibit'.¹ In response, several critics, sympathetic to the new museum's approach to its work, suggested that the display in question should be removed or should never have been mounted.² They contended that it would have been better had the history of mass killings of Aboriginal people been represented by an exhibit telling the story of the 1838 Myall Creek massacre or the 1928 Coniston massacre, since this could have been defended more readily against those keen to downplay or deny settler violence. Such an exhibit, it was argued, would have relayed the incontrovertible historical truth, still unpalatable to many white or settler Australians, that killings of this nature *did* occur on the Australian frontier. This recommendation undoubtedly has considerable merit. However, it can be

argued that the abandonment of the original exhibit would be a retrograde step, since there were important principles at stake in the mounting of it.

In order to explore this, I will consider the arguments advanced in respect of 'the Bells Falls Gorge Massacre exhibit' by one of the Museum's radical conservative critics, the historical writer Keith Windschuttle. Many of his criticisms of this exhibit were both peculiar and poorly founded, as I will seek to demonstrate empirically. However, in order to conduct a consideration of the broader matters raised by the exhibit in question, I will assume, for the sake of argument, that much of Windschuttle's approach is informed by assumptions held by many professional historians, and I will adopt an approach which is largely speculative in nature.

Framing an exhibit

In a broadside fired at the National Museum of Australia in 2001, Keith Windschuttle damned the exhibit in question as 'objectionable'. 'The Bells Falls Gorge Massacre', he wrote, 'was supposed to have occurred near Bathurst in the 1820s during conflict with the Wiradjuri people ... The story claims that Red Coat soldiers surprised a party of Wiradjuri, mainly women and children. The Aborigines retreated to the edge of the Bells Falls, where the women halted, clutching their children. The troops opened fire, forcing the Aborigines to jump to their deaths over the cliffs of the gorge'. 'The National Museum', Windschuttle continued, 'has an exhibit on the massacre, including a large photographic reproduction of the waterfall and gorge ... "This is a place of great sadness", the Museum records. "Our people still hear the echoes of the women and children who died here"'.

Windschuttle asserted that the story that the Museum has told was 'spurious' and 'a complete fabrication'.³

On what grounds did Windschuttle make these claims? He asserted that reports of this event did not appear until the early 1960s, some 140 years after it apparently occurred. If we accepted Windschuttle's implication that the story of this frontier violence only emerged quite recently, many professional historians would probably be inclined to countenance his criticisms of the Museum's exhibit. I suggest, however, that Windschuttle's claims are *only* persuasive if we accept three things: his account of the story of Bells Falls Gorge, the way he frames the exhibit, and his premises.

For his account of the story's history, Windschuttle drew heavily upon historian David Roberts's research. However, he omitted vital information provided by Roberts. Windschuttle's formulation — 'The first reports of the event's existence did not appear in print until 1962, that is, 140 years later, when ... a local amateur historian reported it as one of the oral legends of the district' — failed to note the existence of an earlier, *written* nineteenth-century tradition regarding a mass killing in the area of Bells Falls Gorge. And so he exaggerated the degree to which the story of the Bells Fall Gorge massacre merely comprises an *oral* tradition.⁴ Roberts had argued that the Bells Falls Gorge massacre tradition could be dated to 1887. At that time a settler, WH Suttor jnr, wrote down a story his father and grandfather, who were prominent landowners in the district, had apparently told him about a mass killing that had occurred a few years after his forebears had settled in the district: 'Suttor related an incident in which Aborigines were enticed to approach a group of soldiers and "were shot down by a brutal volley, without regard to

age or sex"'. Windschuttle, it can be argued, disconnects the mid twentieth-century history provided by the 'local amateur historian' from its grounding in a nineteenth-century settler tradition, thus creating a rupture between the past of the frontier and the settler tradition that sought to represent it, thereby diminishing the current story's potential authenticity and hence its claim to historical authority.⁵

Windschuttle's criticism of the exhibit is informed by a singular way of framing it. He asserts that an exhibit of the Bells Falls Gorge massacre is a 'section of the [Museum's] "frontier warfare" display'. In fact, the exhibit in question is a part of a section called 'Contested Frontiers'. Naming is, of course, one of the principal ways a storyteller presents a narrative to an audience. Windschuttle seems to be oblivious to the significance of the Museum calling this particular section 'Contested Frontiers'. Presumably the Museum's curators gave it this name because they wanted to draw attention to the fact that the frontier has long been contested — in both the past and the present. The main text panel for this exhibit concludes: 'Research suggests that over 2000 Europeans and some 20,000 Aborigines died on the frontier — these estimates have been contested'.

In the Museum, it should be noted, the frontier encounter between Aboriginal people and settlers is not only represented in terms of conflict. Contested Frontiers is merely one part of a much larger section of the Museum's First Australians gallery called 'Negotiating Coexistence', and its introductory text panel reads in part: 'Over a 200-year period marked by conflict as well as by efforts at cooperation and friendship, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to negotiate coexistence'. One of the other sections of

Negotiating Coexistence, called ‘To conciliate their affections’, illustrates the attempt of government officials and settlers to negotiate a friendly relationship with Aboriginal people. In other words, the Museum’s emphasis on settler violence is much less than Windschuttle would have his readers believe.⁶

Windschuttle’s account erred, moreover, in describing the display in question as a ‘massacre’ exhibit. In fact, it makes no specific reference to massacres, let alone to the Bells Falls Gorge massacre. Given this, why does Windschuttle characterise the exhibit in these terms? It can be argued that this reflects Windschuttle’s own, peculiar concerns. He was preoccupied with attacking ‘massacres’ at the time he wrote — witness his series of articles in 2000 in the radical conservative magazine *Quadrant* entitled ‘The myths of frontier massacres in Australian history’.⁷ Alternatively, it could be argued that Windschuttle *wanted* the display in question to be a massacre exhibit since this allowed him to conscript it for his aggressive campaign against the history and the historiography of frontier killings. In fact, the Museum seldom uses the word ‘massacre’ in *Contested Frontiers*. In its display ‘Rolling frontiers’, for example, only two of the twenty sites of conflict are called ‘massacres’, both of which (Myall Creek and Coniston) Windschuttle accepts as ‘genuine massacres’.⁸

Conceiving a history

In order to consider the broader matters at stake in this exhibit, it is useful to speculate why Windschuttle approached this display in the manner he did. It can be argued that he adopted a philosophical framework which was informed by his intellectual training as a historian in the 1960s and 1970s. In his reading of David Roberts’s work (from which, readers will recall, he derives his attack on the exhibit), he failed to realise

that Roberts’s approach was informed by a framework that we might call ‘local knowledge’ in order to distinguish it from Windschuttle’s normative assumption that the nature of knowledge is universal, or else he refused to accept that this approach was legitimate.

The nature of historical work done in universities has changed in many respects since Windschuttle was a student. Historians have become more interested in ‘local knowledge’ or what was once called ‘minority histories’ — the pasts of women, the working class, migrants, Aboriginal peoples and so forth. Academic historians were studying the history of these peoples in Windschuttle’s student days but they tended to treat these as subordinate to a ‘mainstream past’ and ‘mainstream history’. By contrast, more recent generations of scholars have interpreted ‘minority histories’ in such a way as to draw into question the universalist claims that ‘mainstream history’ has made for its knowledge of the past. In particular, they have challenged the claim of so-called mainstream history that it alone is history and that all other histories (such as traditions, myths and legends) are merely stories whose accounts of the past can seldom be countenanced.

In this case, David Roberts does not treat the tradition of Bells Falls Gorge as merely local knowledge but uses it instead to challenge the claim of national history to be universal — to truly represent the past of Australia. More importantly, Roberts does not conceive of the Bells Falls Gorge tradition as subordinate to Windschuttle’s notion of history which privileges a particular kind of historical knowledge we can call empiricist (rather than empirical) history. Rather, he considers it to be a legitimate form of knowledge about the past, one which has its own conventions for establishing historical truth and which

enjoys an authority of its own among those who know and acknowledge this form of historical narrative.⁹

Arguably, Windschuttle proceeds to the National Museum assuming that his historiographical tradition remains dominant and so will be shared by the institution. In other words, he does not expect it to treat the tradition of Bells Falls Gorge as history.¹⁰ However, national museums no longer necessarily regard such stories as an inferior form of historical knowledge. At various points in the First Australians gallery, the National Museum tells history by using the narrative forms or conventions that are often adopted by Aboriginal people. Doing this is, of course, part and parcel of the very reason why this part of the Museum was created in the first place. This approach obviously informs the exhibit in question: a Wiradjuri man tells a history, about settler violence against his people, in the form of a myth. This means that the Museum is, for the most part, not seeking to tell the story of Bells Falls Gorge in the manner empiricist history treats an event, that is, as a particular, verifiable historical occurrence. Instead, it tells a story in which it treats an event as symbolic of a general phenomenon that really happened, which is how myth commonly relates the past.

The Bells Falls Gorge exhibit or the Wiradjuri war exhibit?

Let us imagine someone making a visit to the section of Contested Frontiers where the exhibit in question is housed.¹¹ We could now call this display ‘the Wiradjuri war exhibit’. This will help to reveal how naming can influence how visitors might receive the knowledge an exhibit presents.

To begin, our visitor does not go to the Wiradjuri war exhibit but through the parts of the display preceding it. When she

comes to Contested Frontiers she stops and reads its introductory panel, which makes it clear that the exhibit principally focuses on *Aboriginal* responses and *Aboriginal* perspectives:

It soon became apparent to Aboriginal people around Sydney Harbour that the British intended to stay. As the frontiers of colonisation expanded, Aboriginal groups resisted. Guerilla wars were fought along a rolling frontier for a century and a half. Today the names of resistance leaders such as Windradyne and Jandamurra are virtually unknown outside their communities.

This Aboriginal focus is reflected in the objects chosen to tell this story. Ten of the military weapons in the Wiradjuri war exhibit are Aboriginal; only two are British.

Our visitor moves on to look at an illuminated map of Australia showing contested frontiers before going to displays on one or the other side of this. Each case contains regional exhibits, one regarding the Bunuba people (led by Jandamarra), the other regarding the Wiradjuri people (led by Windradyne). In the Wiradjuri war exhibit, our visitor is provided with further context in order to make sense of the display: a text panel labeled ‘1823–1825 Wiradjuri war’. This — ‘1823–1825 *Wiradjuri war*’ — is actually the name of this exhibit. (There is in fact no exhibit called ‘the Bells Falls Gorge exhibit’. If we were to use Windschuttle’s language, we would have to describe that exhibit as a fabrication on his part.¹²) The text panel for the exhibit points to a war between settlers and Aborigines in the region. It *does* include the passage Windschuttle quoted in his attack — ‘This is a place of great sadness. Our people still hear the echoes of the women and children who died here’ — but these are not the Museum’s words, as Windschuttle claimed. Rather, they



The Rolling Frontiers interactive map of Australia in the Contested Frontiers exhibit, National Museum of Australia
 photograph by George Serras

are the words of a senior Wiradjuri man, Bill Allen, and they are clearly attributed to him in the exhibit. Moreover, as Graeme Davison has pointed out, ‘nowhere in the display does the Museum actually affirm the popular story of women and children being forced over the edge of the falls’.¹³

One might be tempted to say that only someone with a blinkered vision could miss the various signs the Museum has provided in order to help its visitors understand the nature of exhibits such as this one. Perhaps this would be unfair, as many visitors might have missed the various signs in Contested Frontiers. All around the text panels in the

Wiradjuri war exhibit are ones in which the texts are anonymous, and this probably encourages visitors to assume that the other panels follow the same pattern. They might not grasp the fact that every exhibit is informed by the particular perspective of the curatorial staff who conceived them. Yet, there are actually several text panels that include Allen’s words and make it clear that he is the speaker, while one explicitly says that this exhibit is his people’s ‘point of view’. Furthermore, the overall framing of this exhibit makes it clear that this is a *Wiradjuri* story. For example, part of the central panel for this display is accompanied

by a map of Australia with a label ‘The Wiradjuri people’, and its text concludes: ‘When martial law was declared, Windradyne and his people launched a guerilla campaign. They frustrated the poorly organised British forces, who began to attack any Aboriginal people they could find. Windradyne and the Wiradjuri remained unvanquished’. Perhaps Windschuttle missed the significance of these signs simply because he did not expect an *Aboriginal* person to be telling a story about this part of the country in Australia’s national museum. If so, there is a racial blindness at work here — an assumption that white or settler Australians are normative and that their dominance should prevail so that the National Museum is *their* place to tell stories, or the place to tell stories in *their* way — and this is very telling.

Let us consider further the implications of the name the Museum has given our exhibit to see how visitors might sensibly approach it. If you had an exhibit called ‘the Myall Creek massacre’, a visitor might reasonably expect the Museum to tell a story that provided the facts about that particular event in its particular place on its particular day and provide the particular names of those whites who did the killing, and the particular number of those killed and even perhaps their names, because this story has often been told by professional historians and is well known among settler Australians. (This massacre is one of the rare examples in Australian frontier history where detail of this kind is available.)

With a display called ‘Wiradjuri war exhibit’, though, it is reasonable to expect that another kind of story will be told. The Museum announces through the exhibit’s title that it is telling a big regional history about a general phenomenon (a contested frontier it calls a war), not a small local history (about one incident in that conflict). And it says it is doing this in reference to a

particular area (Wiradjuri territory) rather than a specific locality (Bells Falls Gorge), over a period of time (1823–1825) rather than a particular day or week (say 18 March 1824), and a group of aggressors (‘British forces’) rather than particular settlers (who have names), and a group of the slain (the Wiradjuri) rather than named individuals. And it gives a rough indication of those killed (‘hundreds’) rather than a specific number (such as 28, the number killed at Myall Creek). By naming it the ‘*Wiradjuri* war exhibit’, the Museum signposts that this history is being told within the conventions of Aboriginal history, and thus alerts its visitors to the fact that they should not expect an account of the nature privileged by history told in the empiricist tradition. It might be objected that the Museum could have done more to alert the visitor to the fact that this story was being told in a particular idiom common to Aboriginal storytellers. However, it can also be argued that this is, after all, the First Australians gallery and that the Museum does not declare elsewhere that most of its stories are told in another idiom, and so why should it do so here?

Culture, location and nation

There might be a further reason why the Wiradjuri war exhibit has proven controversial: it seems that settler Australian audiences are reluctant to accept the truthfulness of Aboriginal histories when they are narrated by people who are *located* in the way the Wiradjuri are. Arguably, this is the result of this audience’s lack of familiarity with such storytellers, which in turn is a consequence of those narrators’ lack of power in what we might call the realm of culture.

Instead of the Wiradjuri war exhibit, let us imagine that the Museum mounted an exhibit of the Coniston massacre in

Central Australia in 1928; that this narrative is told by the Aboriginal people in that area; that they narrate this history on their own country; that they tell it in their own languages; that they tell this story in the form of myth; and that it is recorded by a film crew. I suggest that the critics of the Wiradjuri war exhibit would have found this more acceptable than the other exhibit, not just because they accept the truthfulness of this particular massacre story on empirical grounds but because they regard Aboriginal people located in 'remote Australia' as 'real Aborigines' and accept that these people have different ways of relating the past. There is a reality effect at work here, which depends on two factors. First, these Aboriginal people seem authentic because they are familiar to a settler Australian audience as a result of the wide circulation of accounts of 'traditional Aboriginal culture' originally derived from classical anthropology; second, their authenticity is guaranteed by a well-known fiction that these Aboriginal people are radically different from settler Australians, their 'ancient' life-ways fundamentally unchanged by 'modernity'.

In contrast, the Wiradjuri are probably located very differently in the settler imagination. Being positioned in 'settled Australia' rather than 'remote Australia', Bill Allen and his people confound the historical expectations of most settler Australians. They are not deemed to be truly Aboriginal since they are not regarded as being 'other' in any of the ways classical anthropology or its popular offshoots have made known to settler audiences.¹⁴ To make matters worse, while they might be seen to be telling a story in a form which is recognisably one used by 'traditional' Aboriginal people, they are deemed to have borrowed the story of the Bells Fall Gorge massacre from a written settler Australian tradition. In rejecting the Wiradjuri story on these grounds, critics

apply a double standard. Settler Australian audiences have become accustomed to their own history-makers changing from one form to another, shifting from one place to the next and borrowing things — for example, telling stories of Gallipoli by using the themes of Biblical stories or ancient Greek myths — without ever being accused of inauthenticity. However, they tend to be unfamiliar with Aboriginal history-makers changing genre or/and locality and borrowing (even though they have been doing this since the beginning of British colonisation), and so they reject the truthfulness of the stories told by these narrators.

Critics of the Wiradjuri war exhibit are probably not alone in holding the assumptions about Aboriginality I have just sketched. Museum curators seem to prefer that their Aboriginal storytellers remain bounded by a purely Aboriginal tradition rather than accept that they cross cultural boundaries and so are hybrid just like everyone else; they apparently fear that exhibits such as the Wiradjuri will lose their authenticity if it is admitted that they rest on stories which are told by both settlers and Aborigines. In the course of responding to the radical conservative attack on this exhibit Brad Manera, the curator responsible for Contested Frontiers, has insisted that there is a separate, autochthonous tradition of the Bells Falls Gorge massacre. This, of course, is possible, though the only evidence Manera has adduced for this is contemporary Wiradjuri testimony. (Roberts, in his original work on the subject, implied that an Aboriginal account of Bells Falls Gorge was derived from the settler tradition.)¹⁵

In seeking to defend the Wiradjuri war exhibit, some have also been inclined to argue that this particular narrative has a sound empirical basis. (The exhibit itself also implies

this.¹⁶) This amounts to an attempt to justify the exhibit on much the same intellectual grounds advanced by empiricist history.

Shared and sharing histories

Accepting these ways of justifying the Wiradjuri war exhibit — or adopting the recommendation to abandon it and install a more conventional historical exhibit of the Myall Creek massacre instead — constitutes an approach which spurns the opportunity, provided by the current exhibit, to advance historical understanding in a multicultural context.¹⁷

The weakness of the approach critics have recommended is arguably part and parcel of the broader one which has long characterised modern professional history. As Michel de Certeau has argued:

Historiography ... is based on a clean break between the past and the present ... Historiography conceives the relation [between past and present] as one of succession (one after the other), correlation (greater or less proximities), cause and effect (one follows the other), and disjunction (either one or the other, but not both at the same time).¹⁸

In other words, the discipline of history in the modern world has long rested on an arbitrary temporal rupture which historiography itself has constructed. Gabrielle Spiegel has described this rupture as the discipline's 'founding gesture': 'to keep the past in the past, to draw the line, as it were, that', she remarks, 'is constitutive of the modern enterprise of history'. In many critical respects this 'clean break' between past and present has been fundamental to the way professional historians have done their work and to the truth claims we have made for the historical knowledge we

produce. If this is to overstate matters, there can be little disagreement that a marked sense of distance (rather than proximity) between past and present has long been the hallmark of historical work; so much so, Mark Salber Phillips has argued, that it is difficult for historians 'to distinguish between the concept of distance and the idea of history itself'.¹⁹

The consequences of this for both historical practice and historical consciousness are threefold. It tends to deny the fact that the past often continues to be present; it tends to deny the presence of the history-maker, and hence the present, in contemporary representations of the past; and it tends to deny the relationship a history-maker has with the subjects we treat and our implication in the ways we present these. Most importantly, historians do not acknowledge openly the fact that our work is inherently dialogical — that it is inevitably the result of a dialogue between past and present, present and past, and thus the product of a fusion of two horizons, past and present.

This has undoubtedly been the case in the work academic historians have done on the Australian frontier. The anthropologist Gillian Cowlishaw has remarked on the way in which academic histories of the settler violence have filled a gap in our understanding of the Australian frontier violence but have done so in such a way that this is not seen to be 'an organic and ongoing part' of Australian society:

These histories seem to present with ease a view of the past that fills us, as readers, with horror at the same time as it distances us from it. How is it that in reading these accounts we position ourselves on the side of the Aborigines and identify our forebears as the enemy? These violent and racist men could be our grandfathers and

they certainly left us something, if not the land they took or the wealth they made from it, then the culture they were developing.²⁰

The approach of historiography described by de Certeau has been contrasted to one that Spiegel, among others, has called ‘memory’. Unlike history, she argues, ‘memory “reincarnates”, resurrects”, “re-cycles”, and makes the past “reappear” and live again in the present ... History re-presents the dead; memory re-members the corpse in order to revivify it. To be sure’, she adds, ‘memory as a social phenomenon forms part of the vast apparatus that civilisations construct to preserve the fragments of the past, but unlike the backward-gazing history, it faces forward from the living present to an imagined future’.²¹

The Wiradjuri war exhibit was largely shaped by an alternative conception of history informed by ‘memory’ and, as such, it addresses the problem of historical distance. In large part it conceives of history as comprising a collection of narratives told by differently situated or located peoples and hence contingent on who the teller is, what their purpose is, the context in which they tell their story, and who their audience is. It is an approach, quite clearly, which reveals connections between past and present. In the context under consideration here, this conception of history offers museums — and nations more generally — the opportunity for deepening understanding among and between peoples by demonstrating both the similar and different ways in which they have related to each other and to the past.²²

In the light of this, the principal weakness of the Wiradjuri war exhibit is arguably its failure to provide enough space in order to demonstrate that white or settler Australians have told stories like the one presented in the Wiradjuri war exhibit. Adding more of their accounts of the frontier, told at the time and since, would have allowed settler visitors to grasp that stories of settler violence have not only been told by Aboriginal people but by their own, which could have provided a point of identification for them, and which could have enabled the exhibit to convey more effectively the relationships which have often existed between Aboriginal and settler stories, oral and written accounts, memory and history, past and present.

I trust readers can understand why I am reluctant to endorse the suggestion that the National Museum of Australia’s Wiradjuri war exhibit be removed and replaced by one of the Myall Creek massacre or the Coniston massacre. This would be tantamount to saying that the Museum should only tell stories according to the traditions which usually privilege white storytellers. In effect, it would concede ground to those who are really claiming, ‘This museum is my place for telling stories, not yours’. Is this what we want in a national museum in a democratic nation? Or do we want to continue to seek ways of exhibiting history which convey different perspectives of the past and different visions for the future?

This paper has been independently peer-reviewed.

Notes

- 1 I am indebted to Alan Atkinson, Stephen Foster, and the two referees for their comments on an earlier version of this article. My thanks, too, for comments made by participants in the Australian National University's Collections seminar series, where I gave an earlier version of this paper in April 2005. Bells Falls Gorge is near a small town, Sofala, about 245 kilometres north-west of Sydney, New South Wales.
- 2 See, for example, Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2003, p. 215. See also Graeme Davison, 'Conflict in the museum', in Bain Attwood and SG Foster (eds), *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2003, p. 213, though Davison recommended reorganisation and relabelling of the exhibit.
- 3 Keith Windschuttle, 'How not to run a museum', *Quadrant*, vol. 45, no. 9, 2001, p. 19.
- 4 In a submission to a review of the National Museum of Australia, Windschuttle asserted: 'All "evidence" about this incident is based on oral tales told in the twentieth century' (Windschuttle to Ruth Ashe, National Museum of Australia Review Secretariat, 3 March 2003, www.sydneyle.com, my emphasis).
- 5 WH Suttor, *Australian Stories Retold*, Glyndwr Whalan, Bathurst, 1887, p. 45, cited by David Roberts, 'Bells Falls massacre and Bathurst's history of violence: Local tradition and Australian historiography', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 26, no. 105, 1995, p. 623; Roberts, 'The Bells Falls massacre and oral tradition', in Attwood and Foster (eds), *Frontier Conflict*, p. 153.
- 6 Windschuttle's misrepresentation of the work he attacks is notorious. See my account of this in *Telling the Truth about Aboriginal History*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005, Part II.
- 7 For a further discussion of the role of massacres in particular and violence more generally in Windschuttle's work, see *ibid.*, pp. 111–12.
- 8 Windschuttle, 'The myths of frontier massacres in Australian history, Part I', *Quadrant*, vol. 44, no. 10, 2000, pp. 13, 19.
- 9 Roberts, 'The Bells Falls massacre and oral tradition', p. 155.
- 10 Windschuttle assumes that all will be lost if his tradition of history does not remain absolutely dominant, as this typically hyperbolic statement betrays: 'to take oral history, legends, mythologies as some kind of sacred, or sacrosanct statement, is really to give away history altogether and to engage in myth-making' (in Claire Lasko, dir., *The Museum of Conflicting Histories*, BBC/Open University, London, 2002).
- 11 I am borrowing here an approach adopted by Davison in 'Conflict in the museum', pp. 210–12.
- 12 In fact Windschuttle is aware that this display is called '1823–1825 Wiradjuri war': see Windschuttle to Ashe, 3 March 2003. It might be noted that he rejects this naming on the grounds that the term 'Wiradjuri' is ahistorical. In his submission to the review of the Museum in 2003, he wrote: 'I would like to add now that this exhibit is also misleading in asserting that there was such a thing as a "Wiradjuri War" or "Wiradjuri country" in 1823–1825. This is because there was no group of Aborigines known as the Wiradjuri in existence in the 1820s' (*ibid.*). This is as fallacious an argument as the one which claims that the ideas about Aboriginal land ownership we associate with the term 'terra nullius' did not exist in the early and mid-nineteenth century because the term was not used then (see Wilfrid Prest, 'History cries out for more charity', *Australian*, 18 January 2006). Arguably, Windschuttle adopts a double standard on such matters. He makes no reference to the ahistorical use of 'Australian' in the Museum. Apparently settler Australians can change their names and their sense of self (from English to Australian, for example) and still be regarded as authentic; Aboriginal people cannot.
- 13 Davison, 'Conflict in the museum', p. 210.
- 14 Witness the reaction to Aboriginal claims to land in settled Australia, such as the Yorta Yorta native title case in Victoria.
- 15 Roberts, 'Bells Falls massacre and Bathurst's history of violence', p. 630; Roberts, 'The Bells Falls massacre and oral tradition', p. 156; Brad

Manera, 'Fighting for the Land exhibition: Bunuba and Wiradjuri modules', unpublished paper, National Museum of Australia, 2001.

- 16 One of the text panels refers to the declaration of martial law in 1824.
- 17 Radical conservatives would probably welcome Myall Creek as an exhibit since it could provide an opportunity to advance an argument that the subsequent trials, in which several of the perpetrators were eventually found guilty and sentenced to death, demonstrate that the rule of law worked to check settler violence and protect Aboriginal people (see Keith Windschuttle, 'The fabrication of Aboriginal history', *New Criterion*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2001, www.newcriterion.com/archive/20/sept01/keith.htm, p. 7). In fact, there can be no doubt that these trials were exceptional. There are only four known cases in which whites were executed for the murder of Aborigines during the era of frontier conflict; and only ten whites are known to have been executed for killing Aborigines in the nineteenth century, and seven of these were those men hung for the same deed at Myall Creek. Consideration of the controversy the trials provoked reveals, moreover, that many colonists were unwilling to regard the murder of Aboriginal people as a crime. It can also be observed that the Myall Creek trials seem to have had the opposite of the effect intended by government, driving much settler violence underground (see Andrew Markus, *Australian Race Relations, 1788–1993*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1994, pp. 46–49).
- 18 Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. by Brian Massumi, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1986, p. 4.
- 19 Gabrielle M Spiegel, 'Memory and history: Liturgical time and historical time', *History and Theory*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2002, p. 161; Mark Salber Phillips, 'Distance and historical representation', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 57, 2004, p. 125.
- 20 Gillian Cowlshaw, 'Studying Aborigines: Changing canons in anthropology and history', in Bain Attwood and John Arnold (eds), *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, La Trobe University Press, Melbourne, 1992, pp. 26–27.
- 21 Spiegel, 'Memory and history', p. 162.
- 22 Heather Goodall, 'Too early or not soon enough?: Reflections on sharing histories as process', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 33, no. 118, 2002, p. 12.

Citation guide

Bain Attwood, 'Contesting frontiers: History, memory and narrative in a national museum', *reCollections: Journal of the National Museum of Australia*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2006), pp. 103–114.

Author

Bain Attwood is associate professor of history at Monash University and adjunct professor at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, The Australian National University. He has authored and edited many books in the field of Aboriginal history, including (with Stephen Foster) *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience* (National Museum of Australia, 2003).