

A FRESH INSIGHT INTO ABORIGINAL LANDUSE IN AUSTRALIA

Editors comment

Bruce Pascoe spoke at the 2017 GTANSW Annual Conference about the findings revealed about Aboriginal agriculture and aquaculture in his book *Dark Emu: Agriculture or accident?*

In *Dark Emu*, Bruce examines evidence from the journals of explorers to expose the practices of sustainable aquaculture and agriculture by Aboriginal people on land much of which is considered unsuited to agriculture today. The revelation that the world's first bakers were Aboriginal was an interesting starting point for Bruce's presentation.

It is important that, as Geographers, we keep abreast of new findings and changing perspectives about Australia's past landuse as we seek to promote more sustainable forms of landuse. For this reason, I have included abstracts from an essay written by Bruce Pascoe that was incorporated into his presentation at the GTA conference, along with some images from his presentation and farm in northern Victoria, where native grain grasses are being grown to produce flour and bread.

Syllabus links:

1. **Sustainable Biomes**
2. **Landscapes and landforms – values, change, management and protection.**

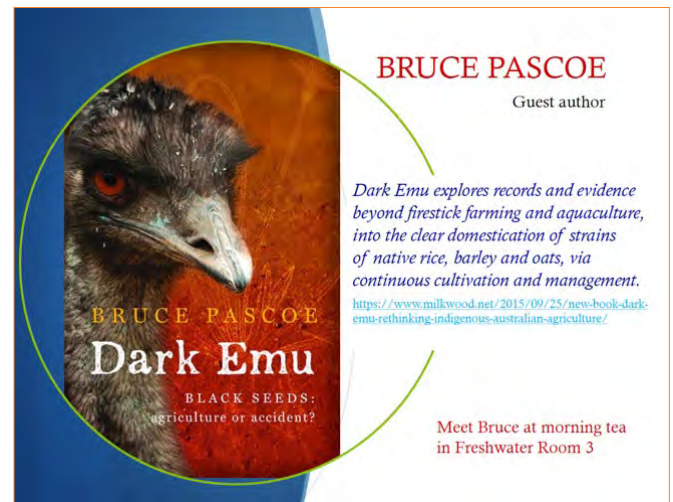
Abstracts from Bruce Pascoe essay

"When I was at school on King Island I was told that Aboriginal people had been in Australia for 7,000 years. By the time I got to Mornington I was told it was 12,000 years. At Fawkner High School, the assessment had risen to 30,000 years. At Melbourne University, we were told 40,000 years was the absolutely correct answer based on carbon dating. No-one told us carbon dating could only measure to 40,000 years after which the carbon trace disappeared.

Analysis of cave deposits in the Kimberley and Tasmania and cave art in the Territory bumped the figure to 50,000 years and then the analysis of an ossified midden at ¹Warrnambool in 2016 came in at 80,000 years using a new technique. The archaeologist ²Singh suggests Lake George pollen tests hint at an age of 120,000 years.

¹ Warrnambool Standard, 15 June 2015

² Howell-Edwards, W, *An Introduction to Aboriginal Societies*, p13



The last two dates turn the Out of Africa theory on its head. Even the proponents of that theory are having second thoughts after new research comes in from other continents. Our politicians of course are still saying 40,000 years because that is what they learnt at University.

We were taught each of these dates with absolute certainty by our history teachers. They also taught us that Aborigines were hapless wanderers of the soil who roamed from one witchetty grub to the next bush tomato with no plan or care for tomorrow.

After I wrote the contact history, *Convincing Ground*, in 2009 I began to review some aberrant passages in the explorers' diaries. They suggested Aboriginal people were seen planting, irrigating and harvesting crops. When I pointed these out to some archaeologists and historians I was howled down. In a very kind and genteel way of course.

The instantaneous scorn for the suggestion that Aboriginal people had agency in the land concerned me. But I'd seen these reports in writing and the resistance to these ideas convinced me that if I was to investigate this matter in any greater depth I would have no hope of convincing Australian academics unless I used an unimpeachable source. I would have to turn exclusively to the first-hand reports of the Australian explorers and pioneers.

In *Dark Emu*, I sifted the evidence of organised Aboriginal agriculture, building and continental governance. I relied almost exclusively on the journals of the first European visitors to Aboriginal land.

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There were a few shots fired back on social media and I had to scurry to check my sources. One history sleuth accused me of manufacturing and distorting evidence and he cited as the most glaring example my placing of ³Charles Sturt in the desert when he was saved by Aboriginal people, people who had never seen either a white man or a horse. They gave him water and a house and fed him on roast duck and cake.

And my inquisitor was quite right. I'd made a mistake of about 70 kilometres and you'll agree that in the context of the Simpson and Sturt's Stony deserts that is a hanging offense. Sturt was in the desert, the Aboriginal people were cropping the ephemeral river bed, Sturt did extoll the wonders of cakes, duck, houses and social harmony and cohesion, but I had made an error of 70 kilometres. All of it sandhills.

My critic also accused me of 'making things up'..... but unless the explorers were lying, the proof is in their journals. The explorers were not really interested in Aboriginal people as they were employed to find, grass, water and inland seas, so the fact that they reported Aboriginal activities at all is a brief diversion from their duties as servants of the colony and empire.

We are entering a period of re-reading the accepted history. I try to avoid words like revision and revisit because they don't do justice to the enormity of our task and that task is to read every document with a critical eye, not with the eye of someone convinced of Aboriginal incompetence but someone who reads as critically as possible, someone who has read that Lt Grey saw yam fields stretching to the horizon in Western Australia and so deeply tilled he couldn't walk across them and that ⁴Sir Thomas Mitchell rode through nine miles of stooked grain which his fellow explorers referred to as an English field of harvest.

Having read those passages and others by Stapylton, Giles (both of them), Gregory, Warburton and hundreds of others it is wise to keep an eye out for the repeated references to the Aboriginal agricultural economy. It is too late to wonder why these references were never considered important enough to read to our school children or the nation because the ignorance created by that omission has already fettered every interaction between the two races".

Bruce Pascoe

NOTE: Bruce's PPT and full essay are available to GTANSW members and conference delegates on the GTANSW website along with other conference presentations.

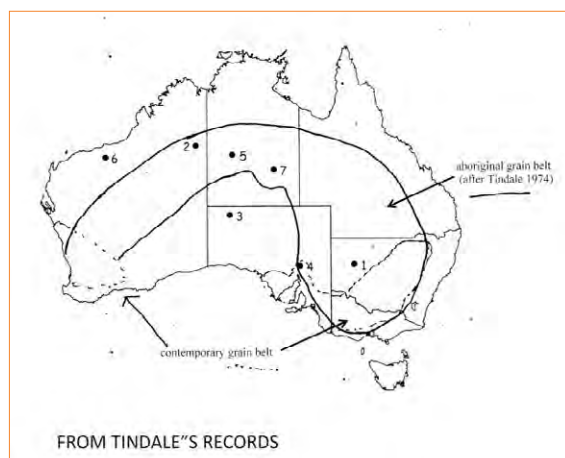


Image 1: A much larger grain belt than exists today

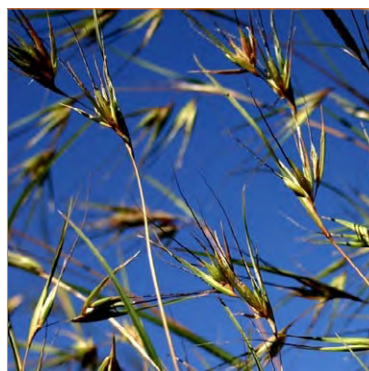


Image 3: Kangaroo grass on Bruce's farm



Image 4: Bread produced by grinding grain into flour bread.



Image 2: A drawing from an historical diary showing a grain storage facility in an Aboriginal village



Image 5: Grain harvest time on Bruce's farm

4. Mitchell, T, Journal of an Expedition into the Interior of Tropical Australia, Vol1 p237-238

3. Pascoe, B, Dark Emu, p74-75