

Preface

Peek-a Boo Australia

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About the Preface

Bruce Pascoe's latest book, Dark Emu. Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident? (Magabala, 2014) was shortlisted for the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards in 2014. In an authoritative discussion of the history of Aboriginal land use, Pascoe uses archaeological and documentary evidence to refute the notion that pre-colonial Aboriginal people were hunter-gatherers, arguing instead that Aboriginal land use has always been agricultural in nature. In doing so, he sheds light on colonial mythology, the history of dispossession, and the devastating impact of unsuitable farming practices on country.

'Peek-a Boo Australia' prefaces our collection in a spirited invitation to re-imagine our collective social, intellectual and creative responsibilities.

Australia is like the baby that has pulled a bag over its head and thinks no-one can see him. An innocent baby, gurgling with good humour and wonder but a baby nonetheless.

We refuse to look at the reality of our history and hope the rest of the world sees what we see; a blameless past.

We live in a country with an incredible history but pretend it began in 1788. Not Gallipoli, not Eureka, not federation and not when Cook landed at Sydney.

We declare that as the ancient past was not written it does not exist. The Aborigines are primitive hunter gatherers who are migrants to the country just like us, so really they had no more right to the land than we did!

Oh, baby, pull off the bag, examine your land.

It is on the public record that Aboriginal people were not feckless and innocent nomads but constructed complex housing, harvested grain, yams, eels, fish and other produce with sophisticated feats of engineering and created the first and most enduring art, music and language in the world.

The social organisation looks amazingly like the first democracy, the first modern state where art and dance were devoted more time than the procurement of food.

The eel aquaculture of the Western District of Victoria covers thousands of hectares and involves hundreds of kilometres of stone walls, weirs and tunnels burrowed through solid rock. The houses for these fishermen were set out in large villages and some of them could accommodate 40 or more people. They are small town halls.

In the lakes area north of Mildura an ancient village has been uncovered where ordered rows of houses are divided by canals. The town was built on an earthen platform created by the enormous labour of many hands shifting earth to create a haven from the waters of the Murray lowlands. It's like a Venice of the south.

Explorers saw this village, archaeologists relocated it in 2012 after the artificial flooding of the area was reversed. Why did it take so long? And why did the archaeologists face so many financial restraints in undertaking the work? Don't we want to know the real story of Aboriginal occupation?

Grain was harvested in Queensland and on other grasslands, the fields of over 1000 acres carefully managed to maintain productivity. *Settlers* found this grain stored in stone and clay silos and intricately sewn, vermin proof skin bags. Often the store weighed over one tonne.

This is all on the public record in the firsthand reports of Europeans. So why do we maintain the myth of a crude civilisation meandering hopelessly across the continent? Because we have to? Because to admit anything else defies our perception of ownership and legitimacy, our explanation of how we took the land?

It's not enough to express regret and plant a hand in a garden. Until the knowledge is assimilated that there was a land war on this country we are corrupting the education and intellectual development of our children.

Blood was shed on Australian soil; it wasn't the benign occupation we tell ourselves. The *Indigenes* lost that war but not before conducting battles which forced back the Europeans from many fronts in the campaign. Aboriginal people did not just go away, disappear, die out from exotic diseases, they were defeated in war. That war is on the public record. The word war was used by our first governors and magistrates, it is there for any Australian to read.

Of course it was unlike any other war we are familiar with because Aboriginal people had lived within nation boundaries which remained the same over thousands, probably tens of thousands of years. The languages tell us this because of the reference to climatic and geological events. This country is unique but we can't bring ourselves to admit it because we *have* to believe the *Indigenes* walked away from it, left the field in awe of the marvelous European.

I implore young Australians to undertake a scrutiny of the available material and begin a negotiation with Aboriginal Australia, not about money but about our shared history, our shared future and in celebration of this land we love, the land we toast with cups of tea and indigenous wine and beer.

Australians please read your history, don't believe your elders' version of events, most have got their head in a bag. You are young, intelligent, hopeful, you have the rest of your lives ahead of you. Enjoy it, learn that you live in a fabulous place where a civilisation developed that may yet teach us crucial lessons about sustainability and civilised behavior. Be sceptical when people try to paint the Aboriginal nations as barbarous wanderers.

To understand our history is not an act of grand generosity but bloody minded necessity. The alternative is to live with a bag over your head . . . and baby, it's dark in there.