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He Wants to Save the Present With the Indigenous Past

Bruce Pascoe's book "Dark Emu" sparked a reconsideration of Australian history. Now he hopes to use his writing to revive Aboriginal community.

Bruce Pascoe in a field of mandadyan nalluk, also known as "dancing grass."Credit...AnnaMaria Antoinette D'Addario for The New York Times

By Damien Cave
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WALLAGARAUGH, Australia — Bruce Pascoe stood near the ancient crops he has written about for years and discussed the day's plans with a handful of workers. Someone needed to check on the yam daisy seedlings. A few others would fix up a barn or visitor housing.

Most of them were Yuin men, from the Indigenous group that called the area home for thousands of years, and Pascoe, who describes himself as "solidly Cornish" and "solidly Aboriginal," said inclusion was the point. The farm he owns on a remote hillside a day's drive from Sydney and Melbourne aims to correct for colonization — to ensure that a boom in native foods, caused in part by his book, "Dark Emu," does not become yet another example of dispossession.

"I became concerned that while the ideas were being accepted, the inclusion of Aboriginal people in the industry was not," he said. "Because that's what Australia has found hard, including Aboriginal people in anything."

The lessons Pascoe, 72, seeks to impart by bringing his own essays to life — and to dinner tables — go beyond appropriation. He has argued that the Indigenous past

should be a guidebook for the future, and the popularity of his work in recent years points to a hunger for the alternative he describes: a civilization where the land and sea are kept healthy through cooperation, where resources are shared with neighbors, where kindness even extends to those who seek to conquer.
"What happened in Australia was a real high point in human development," he said. "We need to go back there." Writing, he added, can only do so much.

Terry Hayes, a Yuin man and one of Bruce Pascoe's team members, works in the orchard and garden.Credit...AnnaMaria Antoinette D'Addario for The New York Times

"Dark Emu" is where he laid out his case. Published in 2014 and reissued four years later, the book sparked a national reconsideration of Australian history by arguing that the continent's first peoples were sophisticated farmers, not roaming nomads.

Australia's education system tended to emphasize the struggle and pluck of settlers. "Dark Emu" shifted the gaze, pointing to peaceful towns and well-tended land devastated by European aggression and cattle grazing. In a nation of 25 million people, the book has sold more than 260,000 copies.

Pascoe admits he relied on the work of formal historians, especially Rupert Gerritsen, who wrote about the origins of agriculture, and Bill Gammage, whose well-regarded tome, "The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia" (2012), tracked similar territory. Both books cited early settlers' journals for evidence of Aboriginal achievement. Both argued that Aboriginal people managed nature in a more systematic and scientific fashion than most people realized, from fish traps to grains.

What made Pascoe's version a best seller remains a contentious mystery.

Critics, including Andrew Bolt, a conservative commentator for News Corp Australia, have accused Pascoe of seeking attention and wealth by falsely claiming to be Aboriginal while peddling what they call an "anti-Western fantasy."

Asked by email why he's focused on Pascoe in around a dozen newspaper columns since November, Bolt replied: "Have fun talking to white man and congratulating yourself on being so broad-minded as to believe him black."

Pascoe said "Bolty" is obsessed with him and struggles with nuance. He's offered to buy him a beer, discuss it at the pub and thank him: "Dark Emu" sales have doubled since Bolt's campaign against Pascoe intensified.

His fans argue that kind of banter exemplifies why he and his book have succeeded. His voice, honed over decades of teaching, writing fiction and poetry — and telling stories over beers — is neither that of an academic nor a radical. He's a lyrical essayist, informative and sly.

The Wallagaraugh River from Bruce Pascoe's farm.Credit...AnnaMaria Antoinette D'Addario for The New York Times

To some Aboriginal readers, he's too Eurocentric, with his emphasis on sedentary agriculture. "It is insulting that Pascoe attempts to liken our culture to European culture, disregarding our own unique and complex way of life," wrote Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, a politician in the Northern Territory who identifies as Warlpiri/Celtic, last year on Facebook.

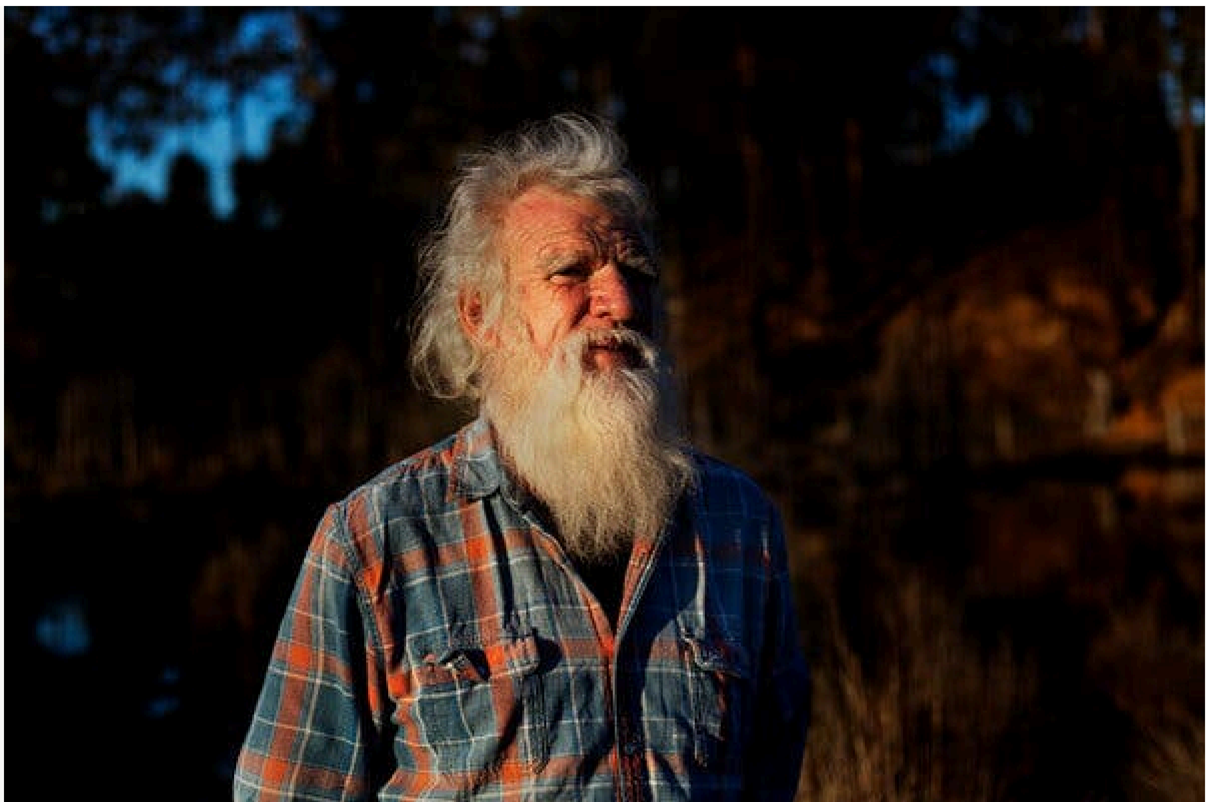
To others, Pascoe opens a door to mutual respect.

"He writes with such beautiful descriptions that let you almost see it," said Penny Smallacombe, the head of Indigenous content for Screen Australia, which is

producing a documentary version of "Dark Emu." "It follows Bruce going on this journey."

A telling example: Pascoe's take on early explorers like Thomas Mitchell. He introduced Mitchell in "Dark Emu" as "an educated and sensitive man, and great company." Later, he darkened the portrait: "His prejudice hides from him the fact that he is a crucial agent in the complete destruction of Aboriginal society."

At the farm, tugging at his long white beard, Mr. Pascoe said he wanted to guide more than scold, letting people learn along with him. It's apparently an old habit. He grew up working-class around Melbourne — his father was a carpenter — and after university taught at a school in rural Mallacoota, just down the winding river from where he now lives. He spent years guiding farm kids through "The Grapes of Wrath" while writing at night and editing a fiction quarterly, "Australian Short Stories," with his wife Lyn Harwood.



"While the ideas were being accepted, the inclusion of Aboriginal people in the industry was not," Pascoe said of the response to his book, "Dark Emu." "That's what Australia has found hard, including Aboriginal people in anything."Credit...AnnaMaria Antoinette D'Addario for The New York Times

In his 30s, he said he started to explore his heritage after recalling a childhood experience when an Aboriginal neighbor yelled that she knew who his real family was so it was no use trying to hide. Talking to relatives and scouring records, he found Indigenous connections on his mother and father's side. His publisher, Magabala, now describes him as "a writer of Tasmanian, Bunurong and Yuin descent."

"Dark Emu" followed more than two dozen other books — fiction, poetry, children's tales and essay collections. Pascoe said he had a hunch it would be his breakthrough, less because of his own talent than because Australia was, as he was, grappling with the legacy of the past.

In 2008, a year after his book about Australia's colonial massacres, "Convincing Ground," Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologized to Indigenous people on behalf of the government. In the months before "Dark Emu" was published, all of Australia seemed to be debating whether Adam Goodes, an Aboriginal star who played Australian football for the Sydney Swans, was right to condemn a 13-year-old girl who had called him an ape.

"There was just this feeling in the country that there's this unfinished business," Pascoe said. Pointing to the protests in the United States and elsewhere over racism and policing, he said that much of the world is still trying to dismantle a colonial ideology that insisted white Christian men have dominion over everything.

The deep past can help by highlighting that "the way Europeans think is not the only way to think," he said.

Yam daisy sprouts grow in the back of Pascoe's farmhouse.Credit...AnnaMaria Antoinette D'Addario for The New York Times

Pascoe now plans to make room for a dozen people working or visiting his 140-acre farm. Teaming up with academics, Aboriginal elders and his wife and his son, Jack, who has a Ph.D. in ecology, he's set up Black Duck Foods to sell what they grow.

The bush fires of last summer slowed them all down — Pascoe spent two weeks sleeping in his volunteer firefighter gear and battling blazes — but the small team recently completed a harvest. Over lunch, Pascoe showed me a container of the milled grain from the dancing grass, shaking out the scent of a deep tangy rye.

Out back, just behind his house, yams were sprouting, their delicate stems making them look like a weed — easy for the untrained eye to overlook, in the 18th century or the 21st.

Terry Hayes, a Yuin employee, explained that they grow underground in bunches. “If there are five, you’ll take four and leave the biggest one,” he said. “So they keep growing.”

A tree on Pascoe’s farm that burned and fell down during last season’s fires.Credit...AnnaMaria Antoinette D'Addario for The New York Times

That collective mind-set is what Pascoe longs to cultivate. He likes to imagine the first Australians who became neighbors, sitting around a fire, discussing where to set up their homes and how to work together.

That night, we sat on his porch and watched the sun set. On a white plastic table, in black marker, Pascoe had written Yuin words for what was all around us: jeerung, blue wren; marru, mountain; googoonyella, kookaburra. It was messy linguistics, with dirt and ashtrays on top of the translations — an improvised bridge between times and peoples.

Just like the Pascoe farm.

“I’d love people to come here and find peace,” he said, shaking off the evening chill after a long day of work that did not involve writing. “It would give me a lot of deep satisfaction for other people to enjoy the land.”

Damien Cave is the bureau chief in Sydney, Australia. He previously reported from Mexico City, Havana, Beirut and Baghdad. Since joining The Times in 2004, he has also been a deputy National editor, Miami bureau chief and a Metro reporter.