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Paper Trail by Bruce Pascoe



My great grandmother adopted a new identity. My father's family called one of the tent boxers cousin. Both families have inconsistent and doubtful histories. They seem to have gone to ground, merged with the general population of their neighbourhoods. Why did they think it was necessary?

It was quite common between 1840 and 1920 for young Victorian women to change their identities. To unravel all the changed surnames, muddy histories of marriages, births, deaths and so called adoptions is a confusing paper chase. While that chase lead me to the birthplace of my great grandmother and scattered details of her life, it also lead me through a history I'd never been taught.

I'm a university graduate and a school teacher. I learnt history through sixteen years of education and taught it, off and on, for another thirteen.

When I decided to teach myself my great grandmother's language I found a list of thirteen words. I turned to the language of the neighbouring Wathaurong and began to learn it and use it with my family.

Later the Wathaurong co-op asked me to pick up the pieces of the language in conjunction with the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages. That gave me the keys to every library and museum in the country and for a bookish sort of bloke it was a treasure. And the start of a nightmare.

I found references to my great grandmother couched in disgracefully condescending language. I was overwhelmed by the tone of racial superiority and the wilful misrepresentation of Victorian Aboriginal culture.

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No-one reading this magazine will be surprised that most of the local histories I read dispensed with Aboriginal culture and history in one cursory, inaccurate paragraph. Some librarians were actively antagonistic to my search.

The nun interviewed on TV the night before the Prime Minister's Sorry speech refused to think she'd done anything wrong. She'd trained and cared for the Aboriginal children taken from their mothers. She'd done her best and I'm certain she thought she was doing the right thing. But she didn't say Love. What she couldn't give those children was love. She believed her country's accepted history. In her view those children were better off without love. Better off in a home with a roof and a tap than by the river with people who loved them and could tell them who they were.

As a person who thought himself intelligent I went through a period of profound shock. And grief. My mother and grandmother, two wonderful women, had been brought up believing in this transparent lie. When I read of the massive aquaculture operations at Lake Condah and Colac, the possum skin cloaks, the tending of the yam pastures, the planting, irrigation, harvest and storage of grain right around the country I was ashamed. Here I am a real educated smart Alec and I'd fallen for the thimble and pea of Australian history.

I believed the false theories that we were nothing but hunters and gatherers and moved quietly off the land to make way for superior beings.

I'm a university graduate but didn't read until 2007 that Major Mitchell rode through nine miles of harvested grain. I knew a lot about Mitchell. I knew he named the grasslands of Victoria Australia Felix but had never been taught that he knew Aboriginal people harvested them. I knew a lot about the explorations of Sturt, Giles, Leichhardt, Ashwin and Gregory because we'd done 'Australian exploration' along with gold, wheat and wool in every year of our schooling.

Who decided not to tell us that those men saw Aboriginal people diverting rivers and making irrigation dams and channels to cultivate miles of grain pastures; that they found many stores of the grain weighing over one tonne. Who decided it wasn't important to tell us that there were thousands of kilometres of aquaculture water races only miles from our school?

What were those university graduates thinking when they decided that information was unimportant for young Australian minds?

What burned me most was that many of my own people had been lead to believe the same stuff. They were told we were just migrants like everyone else, we'd only been here 20,000 years. Well 20,000 years is still longer than any other culture on earth but what about 60,000 years, the probability of 80,000 years, the possibility of 120,000 years? I felt we were being coerced into believing a story of our culture which sought to underestimate the strength of our resistance and the utility we made of the continent, and that the purpose of that myth was to justify

stealing the land and the children.

I thought of all the books I'd read and felt that none adequately challenged the accepted Australian myth. With cheeks burning with shame and pain I sat down to write *Convincing Ground* and I wrote it to challenge Australians to reform their ideas of nationhood but mostly I wrote it for our own young people, to encourage them not to accept the blindfold of the white hanky, not to believe a diminished opinion of their ancestors. I wrote it to encourage those young people to be proud and defiant.

Not aggressive. There's no need to be aggressive, that's a trait we are told creates great civilisations, no, it's more important to show respect to our culture and search behind the history book to find what our ancestors knew.

To know the fact that we lived here for so long and yet remained true to our traditional lands where we were born. We had the weapons to wipe each other out, to take away the lands of our neighbours but we didn't. Why didn't we? We had decent old blues where we charged in and avenged crimes against the law but then we went home again. Why did we do that? The answer to that question is vital to the world. A people perpetuating a culture over more than 60,000 years without resort to imperial war: that's unique in the history of humankind. How did we do it? With an enormous amount of diplomacy and a political system which more closely resembles Plato's democracy than today's turbulent, selfish and violent capitalism and Communisms and any other kind of ism you can think of.

I wrote *Convincing Ground* to encourage young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to ponder the lives and philosophy of their ancestors and find the key to their success in negotiating a stable confederacy of 350 or more sovereign nations. The world needs that answer very badly.

Because my heritage is so fractured and so distant I never had the benefit of those old voices, I never even had the wisdom of the voices of those great people who formed the state and national Indigenous bodies of the 1930's and 1940's. In fact, the information I used to write *Convincing Ground* was available to any Australian. Many other Australians on the back of that great day, February 13, 2008, will want to ask themselves serious questions about their country, but it's important that our bright young minds beat them to it.

We need to be custodians of our languages and our history and the only way to do that is to be the expert. We will need to work with non-Indigenous people but we don't want to rely on their perspective of who we are because the past has taught us that they can get it wrong and often for reasons of selfishness and pride. Obviously most are not like that but there are periods in history when people like, A.O. Neville, John Howard, Keith Windshuttle, John Herron and Wilson Tuckey hold the reins of power. We must not let them believe they hold the truth about our history and culture as well.

Most importantly we need to work with those millions of Australians of

good hearts and good will to ensure they know the story we know, the story Sir Thomas Mitchell knew, not the story Geoff Blainey and John Howard want us to believe.

You young blackfellas, there's money in law, there's money in medicine and education, and our communities need them desperately. There's not anywhere near the same money in history and words but there is pride and knowledge and we are not free without them.

(Previous Page) Jillong Gathering artwork by Gavin Couzens.
Convincing Ground by Bruce Pascoe is available at
www.aiatsis.gov.au/aboriginal_studies_press

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