

**HD** Reviving debate of history wars**BY** By The Canberra Times**WC** 992 words**PD** 11 August 2007**SN** Canberra Times**SC** CANBTZ**LA** English**CY** (c) 2007 The Canberra Times**LP**

"THIS IS not a history," warns the Victorian novelist and historian **Bruce Pascoe**, "it's an incitement." For that reason, and for its raconteur style, his reading of Victoria's mid-19th-century settlement years may not illuminate all the dark corners he would like to reach. "Refusal to grapple with history is the source of the national migraine," he declares, but we must "come to some basic agreement of how the past unfolded". Prime Minister Paul Keating said much the same in his 1992 Redfern speech. A former Australian of the Year, Dr Fiona Stanley, has returned to the headache just this month. The cure she prescribes is "recognition of history and past dispossession through processes that provide restorative justice". In his brief "psychology of the frontier", Pascoe quotes The Age of the late 19th century. It opined that Victorian Aborigines had only ever been attacked for "purposes of defence" and were compelled by "natural law" to "wither and disappear".

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Such "colonial attitudes" would be shunned in today's press releases. Pascoe believes that under the line their influence "continues to forge modern cultural imperatives". He points to a 1998 settlement history of Victoria's western plains which glosses over the original occupants in this way: "A few Aborigines were already settled in the area." That regional history, in Pascoe's view, is evidence of a "corrupted" education on Aboriginal history. But he is much more critical of Keith Windschuttle, whose reformulations of frontier history have attacked Keating's apologetics and (incidentally) won him fine rewards from Keating's successor.

"The History Wars of the past decade," rues Pascoe, "have poisoned opinion and impoverished debate. Windschuttle's insistence on reducing all scrutiny of the colonial frontier to the official reports of the colonial administration eliminates any possibility of analysing Aboriginal or even dissenting European perspectives." In paraphrase, this is Pascoe's challenge. How often do you think the Victorian squatters would have sent Melbourne impartial and accurate accounts of their dealings with the occupants they were displacing? How often would Governor La Trobe have collated these kinds of "unacceptable" reports and sent them back to London? No, says Pascoe, "spin" was not invented during the Children Overboard affair. His 1840s La Trobe, admittedly a brilliant and liberal-minded man, was not above doing what he must when he must. Rather than impotent efforts to restrain the squatters, he might do better to wear the further removals of an Aboriginal people with "no representation in London or Sydney, whose evidence is not acceptable in any court of law". Pascoe believes the early occupation of Victoria was a "land war" pure and simple. He perceives an "orchestrated campaign" prosecuted by enterprising souls who'd seen the movie before in India, Africa, or Van Diemen's Land and knew how to sidestep indigenes and colonial authorities alike to maximise their territorial gains while the going was good: "The nature of the planned dispossession precluded any partnership or cultural acknowledgement of the Indigenes because the occupation of their lands was predicated on their unworthiness to hold it." This kind of revisionism, you might say, is not news. Pascoe adds the grace note that Asian visitors and traders into pre-1788 Australia

appeared not to challenge local "sovereignty", whereas "the Europeans favoured invasion of any new land". And he returns to the distinctive records of the Victorian Aboriginal occupation that possibly stretch the European terra nullius concept in slightly unaccustomed directions. The original Victorians were known to build solid and substantial houses or villages. Along with traditionally managed forms of animal

and vegetable sustenance, they practised fish- or eel- farming technologies that supported thousands of people. Those congenial Victorian "parklands" observed by English equestrians were non- accidental. It is as if Aboriginal land possession "doesn't count". After all, their tribes and families did not

follow approved religions and kinship rules, hold the required Torrens titles, use respectable implements, or farm the designated Eurasian species of grains and beasts. That satire is not a new angle either. It's just a tweaking of the Guns, Germs and Steel thesis. Within the Victorian settlement context, insists Pascoe, the "germs" hurt less than the "steel". In the years from 1788 up until Melbourne's 1835 commencement, Victorian Aborigines were already suffering and rebounding from European

contacts and European diseases. The incident of the title refers to early 1830s whalers "convincing" Aborigines of their pre-eminent claim to a Western Victoria whaling location. Post 1835, Pascoe infers widespread Aboriginal "dispersals", using the occupation records and the population data of the Victorian plains. He makes a special case study of La Trobe's swift 1840s campaign against the tribe at Cape Otway. The rationale as cited here was to protect the lighthouse families and reduce the commercial devastations of shipwrecks. Leaving aside any genteel scrutiny of his historical credentials, Pascoe (incidentally, of Koori and Cornish antecedents) would know that he might face a more aggressive rebuttal. Along the lines of, so what mate, Aboriginal societies were no picnic, their dispersal happened long ago, "we" didn't do it, get over it. "We", counters Pascoe at one point, also includes "them". Or, their genes have infiltrated the Australian bloodline and character more than is thought. "We're stuck with each other and we're stuck with our land. What a magnificent prospect." Except that "the [European] Australian ignorance of the land is screaming" and any true "meeting of minds and morals" should embrace Aboriginal cultures and land use philosophies. "There is nothing like being Australian," the author concludes. "If this country had to be colonised, and that was inevitable, you could do worse than the British. Apart from the inheritance of British colonial government, however, everything else we count as our fortune comes from the [Aboriginal] land itself, including a democratic and egalitarian inclination." Stephen Saunders is a Canberra reviewer.

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