

National

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Time to meet the Aborigines you weren't taught about

By **Bruce Pascoe**

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The hapless blackfella, once a handy myth, lives on through poor teaching.

I'M NOT very black. I'm sure that in years to come the Aboriginal community will be under pressure from bureaucracies to exclude people whose heritage is from a great-grandmother who did everything she could to become white, to merge with the master class.

Plenty of blackfellas think that a separation of two generations and failure to be present at formation of the Aboriginal Advancement League, the 1967 referendum or Charlie Perkins' bus trips invalidates us; we weren't around when it mattered most. Fair enough too. We had squibbed it along with a million other cross-cultural Aboriginal refugees.

But I never felt blacker than when I looked out of the ABC studio window this week and saw that perfect autumn sky. I had to look out the window because I couldn't look Jon Faine or Jill Singer in the face.

We were discussing my new book, *Convincing Ground*, on Radio 774's Conversation Hour and Singer had just chastised me for giving the wrong date for the waterside workers' dispute.

Faine and I had discussed the contact history of the Western District before and he thought I was still gilding the black lily, that my claim of Aboriginal people at war with white settlers was a romanticisation of contact history, that my reference to stone houses, grain harvests and fish aquaculture was somehow a fabrication or at best a distortion of history. Here are two of Australia's best journalists who cannot believe the story I have lifted from the same pages that ABC board member Keith Windschuttle must have read.

Theirs wasn't a case of ill will or mischief-making as displayed by others in the debate — they'd just never read this stuff before.

It's a failure of education. We persist in teaching the young that Aboriginal history is no older than 40,000 years, that the people were nomads and had no "real" houses or agriculture and did not fight to protect their land.

It's a failure of education that English visitors to the Port Phillip District in 1835 reported Aboriginal towns where houses were built with basalt blocks, timber and turf, some capable of accommodating 30 people, and yet we don't advise our 12-year-olds of this fact.

It's a failure of education that we read of the aquaculture systems covering more than 100 square kilometres at Lake Condah and elsewhere and assume that a society capable of the engineering to tunnel into rock and build sophisticated structures must have been advised by an Englishman.

It's a failure of education to read that the search party for Ludwig Leichhardt observed Aboriginal people in central Australia harvesting, irrigating and sowing grain, and allow that information to disappear from our history. Grain was stored in stone silos, wooden dishes and sewn kangaroo skins, some collections weighing over a tonne. Doesn't this prick your interest? Don't you think your children would find it fascinating that this was going on in their country?

It's a failure of education to read that parties of 200 to 300 Aboriginal warriors attack white settlements and not to conceive that a war might be under way.

A cynic would say we hide behind a myth of the hapless Aborigine wandering aimlessly over the continent and failing to resist European invasion so that we might validate our occupation of the continent. But I think that, while the myth may have grown from that source, we persist in believing it because our education has failed us.

Normally intelligent people have been told they need not search the public record because it bears no evidence other than proof of the haplessness and brutishness of indigenous Australians. We advise our best minds to ignore Australian history because nothing happened. We resort to reconciliation as an expression of our compassion and understanding for a benighted race.

Young Australians, I beg you to thank your parents for their earnest response to indigenous disadvantage, but then go back to the early documents — you're in for a surprise.

None of us are going anywhere until we believe our history. Argue about it by all means, speculate on what it represents, but when you read of the warfare, the houses, the agriculture, don't fail to mention this to your own children. It's their country, and they deserve to know.

Bruce Pascoe's latest book, Convincing Ground, is published by Aboriginal Studies Press.