Reviews

Dark Emu. Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?
Bruce Pascoe
Magbala Books, 2014

Dark Emu, which gives its title to the book, is the creator Spirit Emu Baiame, the dark shape in the Milky Way that we cannot perceive, for culturally we have not been taught to do so. This sums up the whole thrust of this book, which exposes the nature of traditional Aboriginal society that we have not been educated to see.

The book is marketed in its media release as challenging ‘the hunter-gather tag as a convenient lie promulgated by colonisers who ignored the possibility of prior Indigenous possession of the land.’ This summary sells the book short. The book rarely discusses dispossession and certainly does not argue there is a ‘convenient lie.’ Pascoe is too nuanced and careful for that. What he does say is more profound. Pascoe argues that European colonisers possessed a mindset unable to imagine that a people deemed ‘savage’ and ‘primitive,’ and leading a so-called ‘miserable’ life, as William Dampier alleged in the late seventeenth century, could in fact be masters of their environment. Nor could they conceive that Aboriginal people cultivated and harvested seeds, tubers and yams, constructed semipermanent settlements, and preserved and stored their food production. There was no lie, simply no understanding.

However, the original observers, the often maligned explorers, did often understand, and Pascoe knows it. Indeed, he has many compliments to extend to explorers – especially Sir Thomas Mitchell – because of the careful observations they made of Aboriginal people at first contact. Pascoe researches this book extensively and in part from a careful reading of many explorers’ journals – Mitchell, Eyre, Sturt, Stuart, Giles and others. He also has researched key early colonial observers like Peter Beveridge and the Aboriginal protectors, William Thomas and George August Robinson. He has also drawn on the work of archaeologists, anthropologists, botanists and other scientists over the last few decades.

Pascoe explores agriculture and provides examples from many parts of Australia of Aboriginal people harvesting, grinding and cooking seeds such as nardoo and panicum. He reveals the bounteous ways fish, eels, abalone and other marine and riverine foods were harvested and the ways food was prepared and stored. Pascoe has a section on the more familiar ‘fire-stick farming,’ drawing well on the fine work by Jones, Gammage and others. Rupert Gerritsen’s work is an inspiration for Pascoe. He also discusses observations of Aboriginal housing, pointing to many semipermanent settlements close to abundant seasonal food sources. All acts on the land have stories, Pascoe argues, so Aboriginal religion is inextricably bound with food production – and discussed. Pascoe rarely overstates the case, drawing back several times from arguing all Aboriginal groups practised agricultural production or lived in houses as seen by explorers. He often calls for more research.

His arguments about the reality of Aboriginal agriculture, aquaculture, food storage and preservation are not new, but hitherto they have been buried in scientific papers, less accessible writings, or not pursued in such a sustained manner. He has done a great service by bringing this material to students and general readers, and in such a lively and engaging fashion. The one drawback is that Pascoe tends to pile example upon example throughout the book, which can become a little tedious. However, he reflects on this, commenting: ‘the reason I have provided so many examples, however, is to emphasise the depth of the available material and the desperate need of a revision of our history.’

Interesting but more speculative sections exist on the spread of Aboriginal languages, arguing trade and cultural exchanges, not conquest, spread languages. He believes this reveals social stability and a common response to food procurement. He wonders about what has been called (technological) intensification and whether it occurred earlier than 4-5000 years before present, given the unfolding longevity of Aboriginal society. Usually the realist, Pascoe does tend to see traditional society as peaceful, being marked by acceptance and no wars over land or resources. However, inter se violence stemming from clan feuding, ritual transgression and gender relations was a reality.

Aboriginal people are presented in this story as active agents, who shaped and managed the land, and were not shaped by it. In reality, the influence was both ways, as it generally is with culture and nature. Pascoe concludes by acknowledging this two-way relationship, discussing the need for Australia of the future to learn from Aboriginal use of nature, and adopt seeds adapted to the
Reviews

Writing a Non Boring Family History

Hazel Edwards

Hale & Iremonger, 2011

Do you want to write a book or a ‘non-boring’ family history? Then consider reading Hazel Edwards’ book. Edwards’ frank style and many ideas can be discussion starters. She also presents some strategies to make the family history ‘non-boring,’ including many ‘mini-stories’ highlighted in text boxes. Is the information relevant? Absolutely! Secondary teacher-librarians, English and history teachers and students, as well as family historians, will be impressed by Edwards’ straightforward tone and advice.

Edwards insists that the potential family-historian-cum-writer put distractions aside and write at least one thousand words or for four hours each week. Following this plan, writing a ‘non-boring’ family history requires a year, with leeway of two months to allow delays. The book follows a ‘how to’ format. Short thinking exercises help writers or interested students put down their thoughts; text boxes highlight important matters and dot points are used everywhere.

Before tapping a single keyboard key, consider asking the family whether they want to feature in a ‘non-boring’ family history. Edwards’ emphatic advice about legal concerns will help any potential author. What if a family member is offended by your interpretation of a family challenge, such as a drought or a family member’s response to a significant historic worldwide situation, such as the 1930s Depression? Edwards shares much information about how to write, publish and market a book. Woven into this framework are some valid considerations surrounding copyright. If you want to exercise your brain, then this topic will start your marbles rolling. Younger family historians who discover a famous relative, well, they will be able to flex their synapses. Edwards points out some straightforward truths: relatives’ photographs and letters require personal permission to be published and research that includes maps, diagrams and relevant background text requires a formal request be sent to the owner, author, publisher, organisation, group or authority before publishing. She ends on a clear note: ‘The laws of copyright are very complicated and keep many lawyers employed.’

Visual design is important. Shaded text boxes within a book can draw attention to crucial content. Edwards stresses that book cover images must not be boring. Book cover photographs and designs must be sensational because they are the first visual that a potential reader sees and thinks about before opening the book to read. Strong links to local families and region by the title, cover and blurb can also help. Edwards then recommends catching the reader’s attention straight away in the first pages of the book.

Teachers can elaborate some suggestions in the book. Edwards talks about technology in various places but, for the teacher, GIFs and Tumblr might appeal to students as an unusual book review compilation technique. Photographs are a natural conversation starter and perhaps get around the need for a structured, formal interview. Primary age children who want to chat with their grandparents would find this a great way to inform their writing or, as Edwards suggests, using PowerPoint or photography software instead.

If you are thinking of co-authoring, reading the many dot points in Edwards’ book may make you think again. I was reconsidering some plans until I thought that some concerns could transform into strategies to make co-authoring work. Edwards’ advice may strike a chord with the hesitating co-writer. An initial planning meeting may be wise.

Edwards suggests that writers consider the historical setting when writing their history. She also reminds us that photographs need great captions – they do not speak for themselves. Your published book may be considered for a course of study and the result may increase the amount of books printed – a real plus, of course, but it will increase costs too. For interest, writers should include a family member that may have a claim to fame. All writing should be grounded in the idea that readers enjoy an insight into life situations experienced by real people going through historical events.