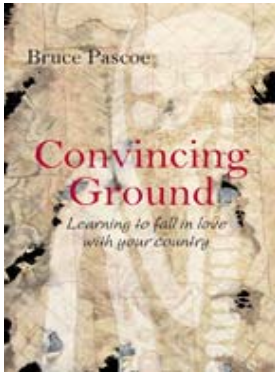


Convincing Ground: Learning to fall in Love with your Country by Bruce Pascoe. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007, pp. x + 302, AUD \$39.95 Paperback, ISBN: 9780855755492.



Bruce Pascoe's *Convincing Ground* is the epitome of the new multidisciplinary Aboriginal historiography. The author is a Wathaurong of the Kulin Nation from 'the clans surrounding Port Phillip and Western Port Bay' (p.ix) and writes from this Aboriginal perspective.

Pascoe is at pains to stress that what happened in the Port Phillip and Western Port country with the arrival of the Europeans was a very long running war between blacks and white men and women settlers, with all the horror and tragedy that this entails, partly in rebuttal of the ahistorical claims of recent right-wing culture warriors. Unfortunately, his rage at their travesty of history is so wide-ranging that he attacks several historians from across the political spectrum who are certainly not part of that circle. Names are pointless. Suffice to say one feels one is revisiting the *ad hominem* farce of the History Wars, albeit on a different battleground. Pascoe here reflects the widespread Aboriginal suspicion about some white interpretations of their history, both popular and academic. Nevertheless, his masterly interpretation of the real war is firmly buttressed by a close study of the public and private primary sources of the period, although not all the private material is available for perusal by other scholars.

His pen portraits of, among many others, a half-mad syphilitic John Batman, the well-intentioned but self-protecting and bureaucratic Governor La Trobe and the vainglorious, ultimately ineffectual Aboriginal Protector, George Augustus Robinson, with his silly hat, are triumphs of historical imagination. He errs, however, when he writes of Governor Bourke sending convicts 'who had deserted during the American War of Independence' (p. 157) to his country as part of a Mounted Police Regiment around 1838. They would have been far too old.

A persistent angry polemic against the Howard Government's policies on race and refugees echoes throughout the book. It is a stretch for Pascoe to claim in his search for connections between past and present that those policies had their origins in the racial prejudices and abuses of the early settlers. Rather, one needs to look at the adoption of an amoral political pragmatism that seized on unspoken racism as a point of differentiation from Labor in order to achieve a series of electoral victories. Pascoe, non-Aboriginal in appearance, himself experiences that racism when he reveals his Aboriginality to white people.

The greatest value of Pascoe's book, apart from his passionate cry for a fair go for his people, lies in its delineation of Aboriginal attitudes to the past, the land, and the relevance of those attitudes to the present. While archaeologists assert Aborigines have been in Australia for 40,000 years, Aborigines believe they have been there from time immemorial. Pascoe reveals to us the vast richness of Aboriginal mythology. Aboriginal people remember the formation of the Australian terrain because they were present when it happened. Why, he asks, do Australians not know those Aboriginal names, the 'Bram bram bult brothers' and 'the giant emu Tchingal' (p. 111), the creators and stars of the

Southern Cross? They are as Australian as Gallipoli, the Kokoda Track and the Eureka flag. This is a very different view of prehistory from the one I was taught at university.

Pascoe is at pains to dispel the myth 'that southern Aboriginal people were nomads who did not build' stone houses (p.41). Failure to recognise this and other archeological evidence of 'civilisation', he claims, is how the Europeans justify their theft of Aboriginal land. 'It is a crucial key in the search for the nation's soul and the reason for our steadfast refusal to acknowledge that we have one' (p.43). In essence, the whole point of Pascoe's book is to grope for, and find, the dark Australian soul, a soul that can be shared by black and white alike.

I have left much out, on the rebirth of Aboriginal language, on anthropology, on Aboriginality, on white/black relations, on Germaine Greer, on more politics, on our white mythologies, and on many other things. The work is far too complex to do justice to in a few words. This beautifully written book, with its fierce determination to recognise and right the wrongs of history, is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand where Aboriginal people are coming from. Some passages may unduly perturb university-trained historians like myself, or mightily disturb the general reader. That is partly the author's intention. But it is sometimes a good thing to have one's ideas so shaken up that one is forced to rethink them.

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