

# TIMELINE: HOW BRUCE PASCOE BECAME ABORIGINAL. OR NOT

Andrew Bolt



**(NOTE: this timeline has been extensively updated with extraordinary new information about Bruce Pascoe's search in 1993 and 1996 for his elusive "Aboriginal great-grandmother".)**

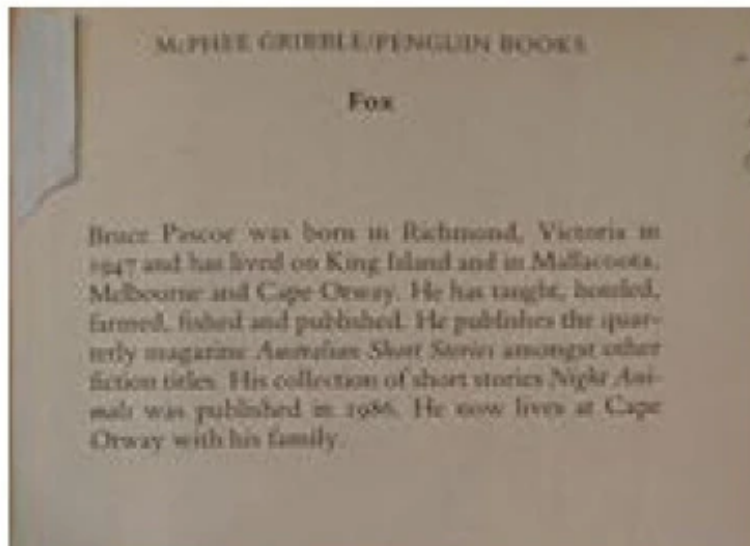
Bruce Pascoe, author of the best-seller *Dark Emu*, has publicly claimed to be Aboriginal since a critic marked him down for being white.

He has since won a NSW Premier's literary award for best Indigenous writer, and is a professor in the Aboriginal studies department of the University of Technology, Sydney. The ABC is now about to run a two-part documentary featuring Pascoe and his claims that Aborigines were settled farmers living in "towns" of "1000 people".

Here is a chronology of Pascoe's astonishing transformation into an Aboriginal - against all the evidence and despite objections from Aboriginal groups.

**1988**

Pascoe publishes his first novel, *Fox*, about a fugitive who thought he was white, now searching for his Aboriginal roots. Pascoe in his biography in the book does not say he is Aboriginal himself:



**1988**

A Canberra Times reviewer of Pascoe's first novel says [it would have been better had Pascoe been Aboriginal](#):

*Pascoe is, after all, imagining the psyche of an Aboriginal person; and it is not possible for him to convey all that the concept of 'my people' would mean to, say, Colin Johnson [sic. Johnson was later exposed as non-Aboriginal]...*

*He writes as a humane, informed liberal, but as a white man as well.*

**Circa late 1980s**

From a profile [this year](#) of Pascoe, this claim:

*By the time he was 40, he had fully identified as Koori.*

Which suggests 1987. Note: this is a claim made this year.

## 1993

But Pascoe in 1993 is still searching for an allegedly Aboriginal great-grandmother, and writes a letter to the Koori Mail (July 14, 1993):

### *Calling Sarah Matthews*

*I have been looking for my Koori family for a number of years without much success. My great grandmother Sarah Matthews was born at Dudley, South Gippsland on or around 1848 and she gave birth to my grandmother, Gertrude Cowland. at Pleasant Creek Victoria in 1875. Sarah Matthews may have come to South Gippsland on a sealing vessel. If anyone has any knowledge of this family, I would be very grateful. I am trying to let my children know about their people and we would all like to be able to join our family group again. Bruce Pascoe  
Apollo Bay, Victoria*



Pascoe's letter to the Koori Mail, 1993

But genealogist Jan Holland, through some great digging for [Dark Emu Exposed](#), has found that Matthews was born not in Dudley, South Gippsland, but Dudley, England. Here is the entry from the marriage

register in Pleasant Creek, 1874:

No. in Register	When and where married.	Name and Surname of the Parties.	Condition of the Parties.		Birthplace.	Rank or Profession.	Age.	Present.	
			Single or Married, if a Widow or Widower, Date of Death of former Wife or Husband.	Single or Married.				Present.	Present.
114	Oct-5 <sup>th</sup> 1874 Pleasant Creek Sturtell	Robert-Clarke and Sarah Jane Murray Sturtell	Bachelor Spinster		Southern England Germany Victoria	Labourer	29 19	Sturtell Sturtell	
<p>I, <u>James Stone</u>, being in full Orders do hereby certify, that I have this day, at <u>Pleasant Creek, Sturtell</u>, duly celebrated Marriage between <u>Robert-Clarke, Sturtell</u> and <u>Sarah Jane Murray, Sturtell</u> and Declaration duly made and published, as by law required (and with the written consent of <u>James Murray, the Minister of the Parishes</u>)</p> <p>Dated this <u>5<sup>th</sup></u> day of <u>October</u> 1874</p> <p>Signature of Minister, Registrar-General, or other Officer <u>James Stone</u></p>						<p>Marriage by Licence according to the Act, &amp; Assurances of Payment</p> <p>Witnesses <u>William</u> <u>Thomas</u></p>			
115	Oct-6 <sup>th</sup> 1874 The Passmore Sturtell	William Wynne and Sarah Matthews Sturtell	Widower Spinster		Southern England England	Builder	48 26	Sturtell Sturtell	
<p>I, <u>James Stone</u>, being in full Orders do hereby certify, that I have this day, at <u>The Passmore, Sturtell</u>, duly celebrated Marriage between <u>William Wynne, Southern England</u> and <u>Sarah Matthews, England</u> and Declaration duly made and published, as by law required (and with the written consent of <u>James Stone, Minister</u>)</p> <p>Dated this <u>6<sup>th</sup></u> day of <u>October</u> 1874</p> <p>Signature of Minister, Registrar-General, or other Officer <u>James Stone</u></p>						<p>Marriage by Licence according to the Act, &amp; Assurances of Payment</p> <p>Witnesses <u>James</u> <u>Thomas</u></p>			

Sarah Matthews - entry in marriage register

Nor did Matthews arrive in South Gippsland on a sealing vessel. She came with her family on the ship Burlington, landing in Fremantle on April 8, 1863. Here is the entry in the ship's records:

Lord	James	Lead	28
	Pratt		29
Lupton	Lilyan	Ayher	26
	Ed		22
Hobbs	Edward	gardener	29
	Mary		21
Pratt	John	Lab	31
	Pratt		29
	John		24
Matthews	Geo	Lab	40
	Ed		29
	John C		19
	Harriet		15
	John		12
	Ann	Lead	12
	Ed		10
	Lewis		10
	John		10
Montgomery	Mary		20
Johnson	Philip	Ayher	24
	Hobbs		27

Burlington passenger records

1996

Pascoe still can't find his Aboriginal great-grandmother, and sends another letter to the Koori Mail (November 6, 1996), misspelling her name, suggesting she lived on Aboriginal missions and had a baby who became one of the so-called Stolen Generations:

*The librarian in charge of family archives at the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (IATSIS) has received a request for information about Sarah Mathews from an Aboriginal person in New South Wales. I do not know all the details of the application, but Sarah Mathews was my great grandmother and was born in South Gippsland, Victoria (Bunurong country) about 1845-47. She married in Ballarat in 1875 and may have spent time at Cummererugunja and Ebenezer Mission. Her daughter was taken from her as an infant and she then moved to the Horsham area, possibly Ebenezer. We are trying to find more members of our family and it seems likely that we are related to the person who made the inquiry to IATSIS. We would love to hear from that person. Please write to me at P O Box 42, Apollo Bay, 3233 or ring (reverse charges) xxxxxxxx My family is very anxious to meet all branches of our family. BRUCE PASCOE Apollo Bay, Victoria*

## In search of their family

I am trying to trace any member of my family after learning recently that my father had Aboriginal blood. His name was George Steelberg and I was born after he had an affair with my mother.

My father, who had three or four other children, died in the Manly area of Sydney about 1945-46.

My mother gave me to her parents when I was one and I have seen her only a few times since.

I'm 51, so my half-siblings would be older than me. I would truly love to locate any relative of George. Please contact me as soon as possible.

**ELIZABETH KING**  
79 Woodrow Place, Figtree, 2525 or call (042)  
263 727

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My family is very anxious to meet all branches of our family.

**BRUCE PASCOE**  
Apollo Bay, Victoria

**2007**

But Pascoe still implies that his Aboriginality comes [from a great grandmother](#):

*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.*

**2007**

Pascoe says his Aboriginal ancestor was [a great-grandmother on his mother's side - like Sarah Matthews](#):

*Mine is only a remote Aboriginal heritage, going back to my mother's grandmother.*

[Genealogical records recently found by a genealogist on [dark-emu-exposed.org](#) suggest his mother's grandmothers were a Mrs Smith, who never left England, and Sarah Matthew, who was born in England. I have asked Pascoe to tell me if and where they are wrong, but he won't.]

**2008**

Pascoe says [his great-grandmother was Aboriginal from a tribe bordering the Wathaurong of Geelong and Colac](#) (presumably the Boonwurrung, or Bunurong):

*My great-grandmother adopted a new identity. .... It was quite common between 1840 and 1920 for young Victorian women to change their identities.... 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.*

**2010:**

[Pascoe publishes a book about his mother, Gloria](#), who'd died six years earlier and co-wrote it. His mother does not describe herself as Aboriginal and says her son only discovered an Aboriginal connection after his father died in 1989, but Pascoe adds that this connection was on his father's side:

*My cousin Barbara and I continue to search the records. Some of the information has turned out to be incorrect but new material has also been found. Mum was convinced of a Tasmanian connection on Dad's side to and we are searching that line at the moment.*

## 2012

Pascoe admits [his "Aboriginal ancestor" - his great-grandmother? - was actually English](#):

*My cousin had discovered the woman we thought was our Aboriginal ancestor was, in fact, born in England.*

## Date unclear

In [an interview](#) with Pascoe still published by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority as a resource for students, Pascoe says his great-grandmother actually herself spoke the language of [Wathaurong](#):

*I began reclaiming the Wathaurong Language... . It does my soul good to go back and talk words that my great-grandmother would have spoken.*

## 2014

[Pascoe finds more Aboriginal relatives "all over the country"](#):

*It's just really telling that so many of the family friends were Aboriginal families and were always in association, living in the streets with Aboriginal people and, which you could account for from living in poverty, but there must have been an element of choice there as well. We're still searching for family, you know, we're finding them all over*

| the country.

## 2016

Pascoe says [the white side of his family comes from Lockhart River in Queensland](#):

| *And part of my family, the white side of my Pascoe family, come from Lockhart River.*

## 2016

Pascoe turns his white ancestors at Lockhart River into Aborigines, and claims to belong to Aborigines from South Australia to Queensland:

| *I'm proud of my heritage. All my heritage... We have Aboriginal family from both sides from Moonta in South Australia to Lockhart River in Queensland.*

## 2016

[In an interview in The Guardian,](#) Pascoe claims membership of three more tribes from three more states:



*(Bruce says that he) has a "complex" racial background, which includes Bunurong (south-central Victoria), Yuin (NSW south coast) and Tasmanian Aboriginal, as well as ancestry from Cornwall in the UK.*

[In fact, [genealogical records suggest all his ancestors came from England](#), and only a few specifically from Cornwall.]

**2019**

[Pascoe again claims membership of three tribes:](#)

*I'm a Yuin, Bunurong [Boonwurrung] and Tasmanian man.*

[Aborigines from all three tribes or areas [deny Pascoe's claims.](#)]

**2019**

Pascoe again suggest his Aboriginal descent is [from his mother's side](#):

*His mother's brother sometimes alluded to their Aboriginal ancestry but Pascoe didn't begin investigating it in earnest until he was in his early 30s...*

[That means before he published Fox, in which he does not describe himself as of Aboriginal descent.]

**2019**

Pascoe claims to have gone through some sort of [initiation or acculturation ceremony with the Yuin of NSW](#):

*...he was summoned to a meeting with.. a Yuin elder, arriving to find himself at a cultural ceremony...the beginning of his complete acculturation into indigenous lore, although Pascoe again declines to elaborate. "This is an honour but not something we talk about, nor do we point to the marks," he says, adding that he prefers not to use the term "initiated" because of its capacity to be overdramatised.*

**2019**

["I am in fact Aboriginal."](#)

**2019**

Pascoe seems to suggest [he's Aboriginal because of where he's born and chooses to live](#). He also asserts claims to four tribes:

*Yeah. I was born on Bunurong country. Lived on Yuin land. But we've also got that Tasmanian connection, also a South Australian connection as well. You start following the family line and it spreads out around you.*

**November 29, 2019**

After I questioned his Aboriginality, Pascoe claimed [he had birth certificates to prove it](#), but will not release them:

*I've always said that my Aboriginal heritage is a distant one. I've got birth certificates to confirm it. I'm not going to engage at such a petty level. There are more important things to do.*

**November 30, 2019**

But the Saturday Paper says Pascoe's relatives are now [in a "mournful" search of "libraries around the country to find the name of their Aboriginal ancestor."](#)

*Looking for family has taken on a mournful quality this week, as Pascoe's kin went to libraries around the country to find the name of their Aboriginal ancestor. But how to proceed, one must ask, when so much of their story and the story of a people has been destroyed to protect the last excuse for colonisation?*

So let's sum up.

Pascoe did not publicly claim he was Aboriginal until after a critic said his

novel would be better if he did.

Since then he has claimed his great-grandmother on his mother's side was Aboriginal, only to later say she was English (presuming he was referring to the same person).

Despite that, he has gone on to claim links with at least six Aboriginal tribes from five states - the Bunurong or Boonwurrung of south-central Victoria, the Yuin of the NSW south coast, Tasmanian Aborigines, the Wathaurong of Colac, Aborigines from Moonta in South Australia and Aborigines from Lockhart River in Queensland. Aborigines dispute his claims and genealogical records suggest his ancestors are all originally English. When challenged, Pascoe refused to respond to me or to produce birth certificates he claims support his Aboriginality.

Why on earth are so many journalists on the ABC still defending Pascoe and not asking the most basic questions about his wildly improbable claims?

This is absolutely extraordinary. The most startling proof that facts no longer count. The myth is all, on the ABC.