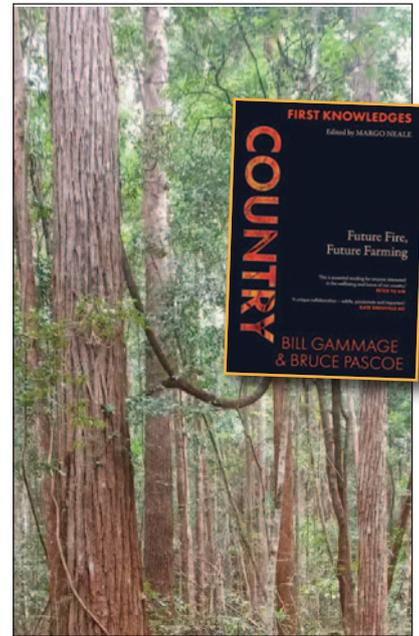




Spreading tallowwood in open paddock at Old Marengo.
RIGHT: Broad trunk of same tallowwood.
FAR RIGHT: Tallowwood in closed forest habitat.



Wilderness an unknown concept

PROLIFIC author Bruce Pascoe has weathered recent academic criticisms of his popular *Dark Emu*, which highlighted Aboriginal farming, by publishing yet another book—this time a collaborative effort with historian Bill Gammage, of *The Biggest Estate on Earth* fame.

Country: Future Fire, Future Farming focuses on managing fire in grasslands in this era of climate change by utilising Indigenous management techniques.

They explain that Indigenous cultures rendered the whole distinction between “hunter-gatherer” and “agricultural” societies spurious. For thousands of years Aboriginal people were both.

They moved about, farming the continent. “Every corner of this continent was cared for,” says Gammage. Australia was a vast, managed landscape, a mosaic of “paddocks without fences”.

The interesting claim in the new book is that, in Pascoe’s words, “wilderness was a concept unknown to Aboriginal people prior to 1788”.

It’s a fallacy to assume that wilderness is the land’s “natural” condition. The “rewilding” concept, our desire to return national parks to wilderness, underpins anti-interventionism in general, including

opposition to selective logging, to stock removal and hazard reduction.

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But it’s an error. As Pascoe and Gammage argue, wilderness in Australia is something the invaders have created, especially in the “crowded and tangled commercial forests and national parks”.

In fact, in Indigenous times, the typical landscape was open, lightly wooded grassland with as few as “10 to 12 massive trees to the acre”. Cool fire was the key.

Cool fire is usually lit at dawn or dusk, at the right season for sap content and the right moment; barefooted fire-makers walk behind and if the ground is too hot for feet, the fire is put out.

Cool fire preserves the canopy and soil creatures. It creates less carbon, doesn’t throw sparks or embers, moves slowly, lets animals escape, allows refuge and is easily customised to different plants and seasons. It clears saplings and litter but preserves ground cover.

This alters our demand for preservation of “wilderness”. What point is there in excluding human activity when without an Indigenous presence what we are left with in no way resembles a pre-European landscape.

It’s also false to believe that removing human activity allows an ecosystem to return to some sort of pristine steady state. In some cases the result will be a tangled, weed-infested landscape. It may be wilderness, but far from ideal.

This is not an invitation for development in protected areas or wholesale land clearing, but a call to manage more intensively and sensitively with an Indigenous perspective, providing appropriate funding and manpower is obtained, of course.

However, it may be impossible to revert to the previous Indigenous management exactly in areas like the Blue Mountains, where closer settlement in fire-prone areas has placed them at extreme risk.

Climate change requires a whole new re-writing of the script, including Indigenous, as evidenced by the exceptional 2019-2020 fires which devastated 80% of eastern bushland.

ROGER FRYER