**Australia’s Agricultural Identity. An Aboriginal Yarn. A review.**

July 2025

This is why these yarns are so important – it’s why I’m desperate for our mob to be included. Because if we aren’t part of the stories being told, and if we aren’t helping to write them from our perspective, then the future of farming will continue on its lopsided and unfulfilled journey without Indigenous involvement.[[1]](#footnote-1)

One of the themes that ran through my book *True To The Land A history of food in Australia*[[2]](#footnote-2) was foodways of Indigenous Australians. I thought I had all the bases covered.[[3]](#footnote-3) Joshua Gilbert’s book shows me a glaring oversight. I did not cover Indigenous farmers.

Gilbert’s book champions the historic and contemporary place of Indigenous farmers in Australia’s agricultural industry.

Gilbert, a Worimi man, has been a lawyer, an Indigenous management consultant, a representative of the Young Farmers of New South Wales, and a Co-Chair of Reconciliation New South Wales. He is a fourth generation Indigenous farmer raising ‘cattle with humps – Bos indicus breed – on British-type cattle country.’[[4]](#footnote-4) The book is grounded in stories of his family as Indigenous cattle breeders and dairy farmers.

Like Bruce Pascoe[[5]](#footnote-5), Gilbert pushes the boundary of what farming is to be inclusive of Indigenous management of the continent and its resources over the 60,000 years of human habitation in Australia. This, Gilbert says, has given Indigenous farmers knowledge that is useful for agriculture today. For example, responding to climate change.

Indigenous people have a connection to the land that goes beyond words, and this contains knowledge of climate change. They’ve survived drought, extreme weather and floods for tens of thousands of years. The knowledge we have gathered can help both farmers and scientists understand how to adapt to climate. We should tap into this and embrace what Indigenous Australians have to offer.[[6]](#footnote-6)

However, that’s not happening, Gilbert writes:

‘We are rarely mentioned in conversations taking place in an industry that desperately need our people, and urgently needs to form connections to access our lands and learn deeply of this Country. There are very few blacks at the leadership tables, or at agricultural conferences, or in the media. You mostly see us in the ranger projects designed to keep mob on Country’.[[7]](#footnote-7)

He points to news coverage of the droughts and floods in the mid-2020s, where Indigenous voices were not sought and asks: ‘What if we recognised the 60,000 years of knowledge to understand Australia and its landscapes better’.[[8]](#footnote-8)

But to do that you have to acknowledge that there are Indigenous farmers. Gilbert writes of two

barriers that impinge on this. The first is the view that you can’t be both a farmer and Aboriginal. This is a view developed by anthropologists like W.E.H. Stanner in the 1930s, adopted by governments and still prevalent.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The second is the view that Indigenous farming stopped in the early years of the colony.

I worry that the concept of ‘Indigenous agriculture’ is an idea fixed in a time of two hundred years ago, which then assigns Indigenous people with a people who cannot farm, rather than acknowledging there have always been legitimate farmers, both prior to and after colonisation, who also happen to be Indigenous.[[10]](#footnote-10)

‘In spite of our history,’ he writes, ‘Indigenous farmers are still here and are working successfully in the modern food industry.’[[11]](#footnote-11)

Over laying all of this is endemic casual racism in the agriculture sector. Gilbert recounts what happened at a livestock sale.

When an acknowledgement of country is booed, when mob receive a lesser price per kilo for their beef from live-stock agents, and when Indigenous farmers are reluctant to publicly identify due to fear of endemic casual racism, it’s clear something needs to change.[[12]](#footnote-12)

What needs to be changed is to acknowledge ‘the role of Indigenous people in Western agricultural production since colonisation. Simply I contend that a truly Australian agricultural yarn must include First Nations voices, harnessing our 60,000 years of knowledge’.[[13]](#footnote-13)

How might this change happen? Through a ‘gastronomic reconciliation’, bringing Indigenous farmers and their stories ‘to the tables of our restaurants, cafes, and home kitchens.’[[14]](#footnote-14) ‘We should be telling the yarn of the resilience of our Indigenous farmers. Stories about our adaptability in climate change … We need to know about the careful attention being paid to breed cattle that emit less methane, and how renewables are providing alternative income streams to help ride throughs. …[[15]](#footnote-15)

The immediate future for Indigenous farming does not look good. ‘We do not have a complete picture of how many Indigenous farmers there are,’ writes Gilbert, ‘where they are located, what they are farming or how much they are producing’.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The longer term future also does not look promising. Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga found that fewer than five indigenous students studying agriculture were graduating each year.[[17]](#footnote-17) ‘In New South Wales, the number of High School Indigenous students getting the marks to study agriculture at the university was declining.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Many organisations and businesses in the bush food sector rely on government funding and many end up spending as much time fighting misconceptions regarding their reliance on funds as they do on harvesting, marketing, and selling their products.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Gilbert makes four suggestions to redress what he has identified.

* First that farmers work with local Indigenous groups to build new, sustainable practices based on Indigenous concepts and knowledge.
* Then that Governments can meet with Aboriginal farmers to hear what they think will make for successful and sustainable change …over time, the ability of our mob to help all Australians will only deepen.[[20]](#footnote-20)
* There should be an agricultural research and development corporation think we need to create two new agricultural groups to help unlock this potential and place Indigenous agriculture at the forefront. ‘Such an organisation would ensure more Indigenous farmers get involved and make for a more profitable Indigenous agricultural industry.’[[21]](#footnote-21)
* There also should be an organisation to address the lack of young people in the sector an establishment that attracts mob, providing education where needed and supporting them through scholarships and other opportunities to showcase Indigenous success.[[22]](#footnote-22)

‘I live in hope,’ writes Gilbert, ‘that Indigenous farming becomes an integral part of our Australian agricultural identity drawing upon the longstanding histories of mob, understanding the challenges of the constant frontier, before gently weaving the threads from the past into a shared future where everyone can enjoy incredible food in good company.’[[23]](#footnote-23)

1. Gilbert, Joshua, *Australia’s Agricultural Identity* Penguin2025…p.45 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Van Reyk, Paul, *True To The Land A history of food in Australia* Reaktion 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I covered food of the First Nation pre colonisation, the impact of colonisation , the Aboriginal Missions, Aboriginals girls in domestic service, stockmen and the Wave Hill walk off, the successful Mabo decision on land rights, Closing the Gap and its goal on Aboriginal health, and the bush food industry. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gilbert 2025…p.45 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Pascoe, Bruce, *Black Emu* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gilbert 2025 … p.48 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Gilbert 2025…p.246 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Gilbert 2025…p.48 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gilbert 2025…p.80 - 81 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Gilbert 2025…p.81 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Gilbert 2025…p.232 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Gilbert 2025…p.60 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Gilbert 2025…p.45 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Gilbert 2025…p.230. This should be more than one line describing a dish. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Gilbert 2025…p.233 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Gilbert 2025…p.250 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Gilbert 2025…p.250 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Gilbert 2025…p.250 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Gilbert 2025…p.252 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Gilbert Kevin … p.48 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Gilbert Kevin … p.255 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Gilbert Kevin … p.255 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Gilbert Kevin … p.256 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)