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AACo's Colonial Legacy Tied to Violent Aboriginal Dispossession

August 6, 2025

– Categories: General News



Australia's largest beef-producing firm, the Australian Agricultural Company (AACo), is facing renewed scrutiny over its colonial history. A recent investigation by Guardian Australia reveals deep links between the company and acts of violence, displacement and poisoning targeting Aboriginal people during the 19th century.

Founded in 1824 with one million acres awarded by the British Parliament, AACo operated in regions of New South Wales and Queensland where early executions, massacres, and land seizure occurred. Key figures in this history include Jesse Gregson, a pastoralist and

longtime superintendent of AACo, whose earlier work as a station manager in central Queensland was marked by the killing of members of the Gayiri community. Records show that Gregson and native police reportedly shot dozens of Aboriginal people, sparking reprisals that caused hundreds more deaths.

The investigation describes incidents including a poisoning event near Newcastle, in which damper laced with arsenic was administered to Aboriginal people, causing multiple fatalities. Other episodes included native police attacks that drove fleeing Indigenous people off a cliff edge. Today's suburbs and landmarks such as Gregson Park carry hidden histories tied to these events.

Currently valued at approximately AU\$830 million, AACo remains a major cattle producer across Northern Territory and Queensland. Its shareholders include UK billionaire Joe Lewis, and mining magnate Andrew Forrest and his former wife Nicola Forrest.

AACo has declined to comment directly on the historical details, noting that relevant records are publicly archived at the Australian National University. The company has stated it now works with traditional custodians, recognising cultural heritage and aiming for respectful engagement. However, scholars and Indigenous community leaders say acknowledgment and reparation remain imperative steps.

Legal expert James Fitzgerald, representing Australasian Centre for Corporate Responsibility, argues AACo and corporations like it have a “moral obligation” to address wrongs of the past. He cites precedents in sectors such as mining, where companies have issued formal apologies, negotiated compensation, or created Indigenous employment and heritage programs in response to colonial-era harm. Impacted Indigenous groups and historians stress the public is owed the full story of how wealth was built through dispossession.

This coverage is significant both for Australia's ongoing national reckoning with colonial violence, and for the future role of heritage institutions in addressing historical injustices. The Guardian's reporting underscores a critical moment for corporations founded on colonial land to engage in meaningful truth-telling.