

Anthropologist and archaeologist say *Dark Emu* littered with weak evidence & unsourced claims



*One of Australia's leading anthropologists, Peter Sutton, disputes many claims made in *Dark Emu*.*

By Rob Harris
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Two leading Australian academics have savaged the best-selling Indigenous history book *Dark Emu* for being riddled with mistakes, accusing its author Bruce Pascoe of lacking “true scholarship” and ignoring Aboriginal voices.

In a new book, *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers? The Dark Emu Debate*, anthropologist Peter Sutton and archaeologist Keryn Walshe claim Professor Pascoe’s work was “littered with unsourced material”, used selective quotations and exaggerated “weak evidence”, including the suggestion Aboriginal people had occupied Australia for 120,000 years.

Published in 2014, *Dark Emu* argued for a reconsideration of the “hunter-gatherer” description for pre-colonial Aboriginal Australians and depicted more complex Indigenous societies, which employed sophisticated agriculture and governance. It has sold more than 260,000 copies and has inspired a children’s book, a teaching resource and a stage play and won some of the nation’s richest and most prestigious literary awards, including the Victorian Premier’s Literary Award for Indigenous Writing and both the Book of the Year and the Indigenous Writers’ Prize in the NSW Premier’s Literary Awards.

But Professor Sutton, from the University of Adelaide, who has lived and worked with Aboriginal people in remote areas and rural centres for 40 years tells *Good Weekend* he was “outraged” that school curricula were being changed to conform with the *Dark Emu* narrative and embracing Professor Pascoe’s descriptions of an early agricultural society.

Professor Pascoe defended his work and welcomed the latest critique, saying it should further an important examination of Australia’s history prior to European settlement.

“*Dark Emu* has helped to shine a light on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ingenuity, the stewardship of Aboriginal lands and First Nations’ agricultural practices in Australia.”

The new book is published by Melbourne University Publishing – the publishing arm of the university that last year appointed Pascoe as Enterprise Professor in Indigenous Agriculture. However, Professor Pascoe defended MUP’s decision to publish the book.

“I would be alarmed if a university press began suppressing academic commentary,” he told *Good Weekend*. “Certain academics may feel a particular book has flaws, but it would be an indictment on all our futures, if we suppressed dissent.”

Professor Pascoe’s work has previously attracted criticism by conservative commentators and in 2019 his own Aboriginal heritage was the subject of a bitter public dispute. Then Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton referred to the Australian Federal Police fraud allegations against Mr Pascoe raised by a prominent Aboriginal businesswoman, Josephine Cashman. The AFP found Mr Pascoe had no case to answer.

Professor Sutton told *Good Weekend* he believed reading and accepting *Dark Emu* had become a search for “moral recovery” for some white Australians of good will. Professor Sutton and Dr Walshe, a long-time archaeologist at the South Australia Museum, also question why no one asked Aboriginal people still connected to traditional practices, or anthropologists, whether Mr Pascoe was right.

“As far as we can tell, no journalist or book reviewer covering the Dark Emu story has interviewed senior Aboriginal people from remote communities where knowledge of the old economy is retained at least by some, and practised in an adapted way by many,” they write.

In a foreword to the new book, Wiradjuri archaeologist Kellie Pollard, from Charles Darwin University, writes that the authors “show that Pascoe tried, and failed, to overturn over a century of anthropological and archaeological study, analysis and documentation, in addition to Aboriginal oral testimony, of the ways of life, governance, socioeconomic behaviour, material, technological and spiritual accomplishments and preferences of Aboriginal people in classical society and on the cusp of colonisation.”

Mr Pascoe said *Dark Emu* had encouraged many Australians to recognise the ingenuity and sophistication of the many Aboriginal cultures, societies and land-management practices, which had not previously been brought to mainstream attention.

“The extent of Aboriginal social and economic organisation has been surprising to many Australians and a nuanced debate needs to be ongoing,” he said.