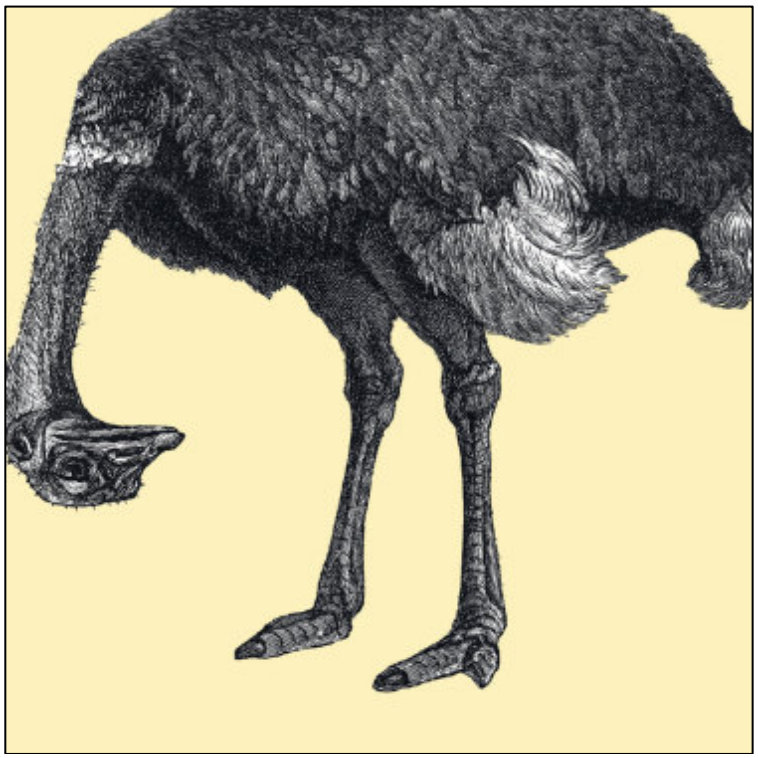
THE AGE

Debunking Dark Emu: did the publishing phenomenon get it wrong?

In 2014, Bruce Pascoe's Dark Emu revolutionised interpretations of Indigenous history, arguing that Aboriginal people engaged in agriculture, irrigation and construction prior to the arrival of Europeans. Now, in a new book, two highly respected academics say that there is little evidence for these claims.



Academics Peter Sutton and Keryn Walshe say of Dark Emu, "Its success as a narrative was achieved in spite of its failure as an account of fact."

By Stuart Rintoul
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The walls of Peter Sutton's home in country South Australia are hung with ghosts – black-and-white photographs he has collected from second-hand shops over the years, the long-gone people he calls "poignant strangers", staring out from the past, without families who want or remember them.

It's a rambling old house of stone and timber, everything you would expect an anthropologist's home to be: rooms filled with books, papers, a large volume of genealogies of Wik families from Cape York among whom he has spent much of his professional life, including some 2000 records of births and deaths. Sutton has spent many decades with the Wik people; danced with them, cried with them. There are other records, from western Arnhem Land, Daly River, the Murranji Track – ghost road of the drovers, Central Australia and the corner country of the Lake Eyre basin.

Sprawled across a dining room table is an almost-finished book about the early 20th century Queensland anthropologist Ursula Hope McConnel, who was brave and brilliant and solitary.

Sutton is one of Australia's leading anthropologists. A gifted linguist, rigorous, sometimes controversial, a debunker of myths who stood, grief-stricken, in the little cemetery at Aurukun, on the west coast of Cape York, in September 2000 and began to think the thoughts that gradually formed themselves into his heretical essay and then book, *The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Australia and the End of the Liberal Consensus*, which exposed the gulf between progressive ambition and dysfunctional reality in Aboriginal communities.

Quietly spoken, with a restless curiosity, independent-minded Sutton is now almost 75 years old but doesn't seem it. An outsider in many ways throughout his life, he was born in working-class Port Melbourne at a time when men in hats and shabby suits played two-up on the other side of his grandmother's back fence.

He was raised a Christian Scientist, steeped in its doctrines and uplifted by its faith in "life's unlimited possibilities", but ultimately found his emotional home in the lives and memories of the Aboriginal families with whom he has long been entwined. Such is his standing among his academic colleagues that in 2016, to mark his 70th birthday, a two-volume Festschrift was arranged, a collection of essays to honour his life's work. Such is his standing among the Wik people that they contributed to its publishing costs.

We sit talking at his kitchen table. A visiting dog, owned by a friend and named after the irascible Daisy Bates – who lived on the edge of the Nullarbor Plain with Aboriginal people and tried to understand them when many did not – lies at my feet and keeps company with Sutton's old dog, Hochi, who is blind and loving and finds his way by smell and memory.

It is a new book, just completed, that we meet to discuss – a rebuttal of one of the most popular Aboriginal histories of recent times, a publishing phenomenon, Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu,* in which Pascoe argues that Aboriginal people in pre-colonial Australia were not "hapless wanderers across the soil, mere hunter-gatherers" – his expression – but were "in the early stages of an agricultural society", were not "simply wandering from plant to plant, kangaroo to kangaroo in a hapless opportunism", but were early farmers who tilled the soil, sowed crops that they irrigated, harvested and stored, altered the course of rivers, built dams, sewed clothes, and lived for long periods in substantial dwellings, sometimes made of stone. First published in 2014, *Dark Emu* has 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, where the judges declared that Pascoe was "without peer in his field".

A host of reviewers have spoken glowingly of it. Indigenous academic Marcia Langton called it "a profound challenge to conventional thinking

about Aboriginal life on this continent" and "the most important book on Australia". In 2018, Australia's premier Aboriginal dance company Bangarra adapted the book into dance. Last year, Labor senator Penny Wong declared that Pascoe had helped free Australians from an "underlying supremacism". A children's version has been published and a documentary film is being made.

At the same time, Pascoe, who, like Sutton, also grew up in a working-class family (becoming a teacher and then a writer of literary fiction, non-fiction, poetry, essays and children's literature before finding unexpected fame), has been targeted by conservative commentators and media who have questioned both his version of history and his Aboriginality.

Pascoe claims to have discovered Aboriginal ancestors on both sides of his family, including the Palawa people from Tasmania, Bunurong from Victoria and Yuin from the south coast of NSW. Some Aboriginal people have embraced him, others have not. The conservative magazine *Quadrant*, whose editor Keith Windschuttle has accused historians of fabricating the extent of colonial violence, called him a "fauxborigine". A vitriolic website, "Dark Emu Exposed", was created by "a collective of Quiet Australians from many walks of life who question, and want to hold to account, authors who appear to be rewriting our Australian history to progress their own particular, political narrative".

It is into this fraught arena that Sutton and his co-author, archaeologist Keryn Walshe, now step with *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers? The Dark Emu Debate*. And their rebuttal of *Dark Emu*, published next week by Melbourne University Press, is damning. In page after page, Sutton and Walshe accuse Pascoe of a "lack of true scholarship", ignoring Aboriginal voices, dragging respect for traditional Aboriginal culture back into the Eurocentric world of the colonial era, and "trimming" colonial observations to fit his argument. They write that while *Dark Emu* "purports to be factual" it is "littered with unsourced material, is poorly researched, distorts and exaggerates many points, selectively emphasises evidence to suit those opinions, and ignores large bodies of information that do not support the author's opinions".
"It is actually not, properly considered, a work of scholarship," they write. "Its success as a narrative has been achieved in spite of its failure as an account of fact."

The Sutton/Walshe book is not the first criticism of *Dark Emu*. Australian National University anthropologist Ian Keen has said that Pascoe's evidence for Aboriginal farming is "deeply problematic", although he also believes that some of the criticism has been used to support a racist agenda. Christophe Darmangeat, a lecturer in social anthropology at the Sorbonne in France, wrote that in *Dark Emu* Pascoe mixes "perfectly proven elements, others possible but more doubtful, others very improbable, and finally frank fabrications, firing on all cylinders by handling concepts and facts with a disarming casualness". *Quadrant* published a polemical book, *Bitter Harvest*, against Pascoe's claims. But Sutton and Walshe's *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?* is the most forensic and best credentialled examination and repudiation of *Dark Emu*.
Over his long career, Sutton has been credited with explaining Aboriginal art to the world in the sophisticated catalogue that accompanied the landmark *Dreamings* exhibition to America in 1988. He has written or contributed to 20 books, and about 200 anthropology and linguistics papers. He has been an

expert anthropological researcher in 87 Aboriginal land claims since 1979. When barrister Ron Castan presented the landmark Wik case to the High Court in June 1996, he brandished a 1000-page anthropological report entitled *Aak*, the Wik word for homeland, written by Sutton and others, which he said would be the foundation for the argument.

Keryn Walshe's work in archaeology over 35 years has included a decade at Koonalda Cave, a rich heritage site that has offered a glimpse of Aboriginal life on the Nullarbor Plain during the Pleistocene. In 2017, her work took her to Sturt Creek in the Kimberley, where she was asked to examine burned bone fragments at a place called "the goat yards", where more than a dozen Aboriginal people were alleged to have been massacred in 1922. The examination found nothing to dispute Aboriginal accounts of the massacre and a "very high likelihood" that the remains were human, based on the intensity of the fire in which they were burned.

Sutton and Walshe's book comes, uncomfortably, from the publishing house of the university that last year appointed Pascoe as Enterprise Professor in Indigenous Agriculture. At Melbourne University Press, which suffered an organisational seizure two years ago when chief executive Louise Adler and board members quit after the university ordered a focus on more academic works, Adler's successor, Nathan Hollier, describes *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?* as an important book for MUP, "in the sense that it might well build awareness of what we are doing, namely publishing works of scholarship, for a broad readership, which build respect for us as an especially trusted source of knowledge and commentary and respect for scholarship more generally".

He says that he did not know Pascoe was to be appointed to a professorship at the university until it was publicly announced, but even if he had known of it, it would not have affected MUP's decision to publish *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?*.

At his home at Gipsy Point, Victoria, Pascoe waits for the storm to break. He seems sanguine. In a written response to extracts shown to him, he tells *Good Weekend*, "*Dark Emu* has 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 says it would be "disappointing" if Australia's understanding of Aboriginal history and culture "digressed to a limiting debate about semantics and nomenclature".

"Hunter-gatherer and farmer are both settler/colonial labels, and the long prevailing negative interpretation of hunter-gatherer has been used as a weapon against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (as a justification for terra nullius)," he writes.

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Asked about MUP's decision to publish *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers*?, he says: "I would be alarmed if a university press began suppressing academic commentary. Certain academics may feel a particular book has flaws, but it would be an indictment on all our futures if we suppressed dissent. I have no problem with Sutton's book being published by MUP. In fact, I welcome the discussion and difference of opinion as it should further this important examination of our history. *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."

Peter Sutton did not see *Dark Emu* until 2016, when he was given a copy during a native title hearing in Broome, where he was giving expert evidence. Preoccupied by research, he put it to one side, regarding it as "optional reading, being the work of an amateur student of the subject who had no apparent direct knowledge or experience of how the Old People made a living in times gone by".

It was not until 2019, when *Dark Emu* had taken on a celebrated status, that Sutton gave it his full attention. He was deeply unimpressed, as he was when he read Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines*, the 1987 bestseller combining fiction and non-fiction which popularised the notion of Aboriginal people singing the stories of the land, without much understanding of Aboriginal culture. Nothing in Sutton's 50 years of research with senior Aboriginal people suggested to him that Pascoe was right. He was "disturbed" that Pascoe's descriptions of Aboriginal life were based on – and to his mind, took liberties with – "the journals of blow-through European explorers, men who were ignorant of the languages and cultures of those they met", rather than Aboriginal people, whose knowledge has been recorded for the past hundred years at least.

He was "disappointed" that in attempting to describe Aboriginal land use, Pascoe ignored the importance of spiritual tradition and ritual. He was "stunned" that the book was "riddled with errors of fact, selective quotations, selective use of evidence, and exaggeration of weak evidence", including the suggestion Aboriginal people have occupied Australia for 120,000 years. And he was "outraged" that school curricula were being changed to conform with the *Dark Emu* narrative, embracing Pascoe's descriptions of an early agricultural society.

More than anything, he felt that Pascoe had done the Old People – as Sutton refers to them – a monumental disservice, resurrecting long-discredited ideas of social evolutionism that placed hunter-gatherers lower on the evolutionary scale than farmers. To Sutton, it was a rebirthing of the colonial philosophy used to justify Aboriginal dispossession in the first place: that people who lived lightly on the land had no claim to it, that farmers were more deserving of dignity and respect than hunter-gatherers.

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"Pascoe's approach appears to resemble the old Eurocentric view held by the British conquerors of Aboriginal society," Sutton writes in *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?*. "Those were the people who organised mass theft of Aboriginal country and many of whom justified the killing of Aborigines who resisted them, really out of greed and indifference, but often under an ideological flag of social evolutionism. They assumed they had a right to profit from the 'survival of the fittest' and were the 'superior race'. The 'less advanced' had to make way for the 'more advanced'. Pascoe risks taking us back to that fatal shore by resurrecting the interpretation of differing levels of complexity and differing extents of intervention in the environment as degrees of advancement and evolution and cleverness and sophistication."

Sutton and Walshe began working on a response to *Dark Emu* late in 2019, with Sutton writing the bulk of it, and Walshe contributing two chapters in her area of expertise – archaeology. The aim, Sutton says, was to "set things back to a balanced truthfulness" and "restore the dignity of complex (never 'mere') hunter-gathering, and thus First Nations cultural history, that has been eroded due to *Dark Emu*". For her part, Walshe says that when she first read *Dark Emu*, she was so frustrated by its lack of scholarship that she didn't finish it.

Like Sutton, Walshe was also appalled that in attempting to present Aboriginal people as more "advanced" than was known, Pascoe had used pejorative terms, such as "primitive", "simple" and "mere" to describe the brilliance and complexity of hunter-gatherer life. "I still struggle to believe that this has happened," she tells *Good Weekend*.

Early in their book, Sutton and Walshe acknowledge that *Dark Emu* has made some positive contribution, including engendering interest in traditional ways of life; building awareness that conquest, slaughter and land theft was underpinned by an assumption of racial superiority; and drawing attention to earlier works that showed how Aboriginal people managed the land and its resources with fire and conservation. They see no harm in Pascoe criticising false beliefs, "perhaps held by some", that all Aboriginal people were naked all of the time and that classical Aboriginal society consisted of a constantly nomadic people who simply lived off nature's bounty, were not ecological agents, did not stay in one place for more than a few days and did not store resources.

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But the world of 1788 that Pascoe created in *Dark Emu*, Sutton says, was "a reimagination, not a discovery" and "agriculture" was not the way of the Old People – who had their own complex philosophy and practice – but "the badge of their conquerors".

"Pascoe's message is built on a simple distinction between what he calls 'mere' hunter-gatherers, on the one hand, and farmers; or between 'mere' hunting and gathering on one hand and 'agriculture' on the other," Sutton and Walshe write. "We consider that the evidence, in fact, reveals a positioning of the Aboriginal people of 1788 somewhere between these two extremes and very far from both. The Old People in 1788 were neither, because they had developed ways of managing and benefiting from their landscape that went beyond just hunting and just gathering but did not

involve gardening or farming. They were ecological agents who worked with the environment, rather than, usually, against it. They frequently used slow-burning fires to make their landscapes more liveable. On the other hand, they did not cut down bush to clear the land, plough and hoe the soil in preparation for planting, or then sow stored seed or tubers or rootstock in gardens or in fields."

Admirers of *Dark Emu* invariably refer to Pascoe's persuasive use of the journals of explorers such as Thomas Mitchell and Charles Sturt. Sutton is less enamoured of them, questioning both the reliability of journals written by Europeans who encountered Aboriginal people only transiently and who were "the forward scouts for the army of land-hungry farmers who would come in their wake", and Pascoe's sharp editing of them. Where Pascoe quotes explorer Thomas Mitchell discovering grass that had been pulled and piled into "hay-ricks" that stretched for miles, for example, Pascoe suggests that Aboriginal people were practising an idyllic agriculture. But he leaves out Mitchell's puzzlement about the purpose of these "ricks" and Mitchell's later writing that all attempts to persuade Aboriginal people to till the ground had failed.

Pascoe records Mitchell's astonishment on coming upon a large, deserted village during his Australia Felix expedition, which he estimated housed "over 1000" people. This, says Sutton, is "pure fiction". "All Mitchell says is that his party 'noticed some of their huts'; there is no mention of anyone counting anything." Pascoe then quotes a member of Mitchell's party, Granville Stapylton, as saying that the buildings "were of very large dimensions, one capable of containing at least 40 persons and of very superior construction". But he omits Stapylton's speculation that this was "the work of a white man", probably the runaway convict William Buckley, who lived with the Wathaurong people for three decades.

Elsewhere, Pascoe cites Charles Sturt's discovery of a large well and village somewhere north of Lake Torrens in South Australia, but neglects to say that Sturt saw no signs of recent occupation. When Sturt finds grass set out to dry and ripen, Pascoe guesses this was because of surplus grain, which suggested "sedentary agriculture". Sutton ridicules the idea. "The suggestion, if that is what Pascoe intends, that anyone could practise 'sedentary agriculture' in that blasted desert environment is simply ill-informed," he writes.

Similarly, when Pascoe quotes Alice Duncan-Kemp's memory of women on the Diamantina River in the early 20th century sprinkling seed over the ground from woven dilly-bags, he fails to mention that Duncan-Kemp wrote that this was done "as they danced and sang the rain song" as part of a rain increase ceremony.

Nor does he mention Duncan-Kemp's references to "the hard, nomadic life that they have had to lead since the beginning of time". To Sutton, such omissions suggest "an almost desperate search to find something to back up the belief that the Old People sowed seeds for crops and were thus agricultural people".

Over 300 pages, Sutton and Walshe pick apart *Dark Emu*. Where Pascoe writes that permanent housing was "a feature of the pre-contact Aboriginal economy and marked the movement towards agricultural reliance", Sutton dismisses this absolutely. "The recurring pattern, all over Australia, was one of seasonal and other variation in lengths of stays in one place," Sutton writes. "No group is ever described, at the moment of colonisation, as living year in, year out, in one single place." Where *Dark Emu* featured the use of stone for housing, Sutton answers that it was "the rarest in the Aboriginal record", a "last resort" in the stoniest of environments.

Pascoe writes that when early settlers found an Aboriginal tool that looked like a hoe, it was dismissed because they had convinced themselves that there was no agriculture in Australia. He refers to a hoe examined in 1894 by palaeontologist Robert Etheridge, who believed that Aboriginal people suffered from being regarded as "one of the most, if not the most degraded variety of the human race". But what Pascoe does not say, Walshe writes, is that Etheridge concluded that the hoe, which was collected in Cape York, was "not of Aboriginal manufacture", but was introduced from the Torres Strait islands.

In *Dark Emu*, Pascoe cites the World Heritage-listed Budj Bim eel traps, in western Victoria, and fish traps at Brewarrina, NSW, and the Glyde River, in Arnhem Land, as examples of unappreciated Aboriginal ingenuity. But he fails to mention how rare they were. The eel traps are "unique in the whole country", Sutton and Walshe write. The Brewarrina fish traps "have no equal on the inland river systems". The Glyde River fish trap is "even unique in Arnhem Land". At the same time, while Pascoe views the fish traps as wonders of creativity and invention, Sutton writes that the Old People did not claim them as the ingenious works of human beings, but always "as having been put there in the Dreaming, by Dreamings".

In *Dark Emu*, and the children's version of the book, *Young Dark Emu*, and a teaching resource, *Dark Emu in the Classroom*, a photograph shows a large "pointed dome house", inferred to be Aboriginal. It is not. It is from the Melanesian region of the eastern Torres Strait. *Dark Emu in the Classroom* also states that both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples had "an agricultural economy in which seeds were propagated, irrigated, harvested, stored and traded across regions", and that Aboriginal people "had systems of agriculture, aquaculture, housing, food storage and land management, inconsistent with hunter-gatherer societies". Sutton says it should be withdrawn from classrooms and rewritten.

Sutton is highly critical of Pascoe for the voices that are not heard in *Dark Emu*, both white and black. He wonders at the absence of anthropologist Norman Tindale, who recorded in 1932 the travels of a young Warlpiri man, Pariparu, who named 332 desert places he had walked to in the previous 11 months; or Athol Chase, who recorded that for the Umpila, Kuuku Ya'u and other peoples of north-east Cape York, agricultural practices were regarded as "a wasteful and illegitimate activity in the landscape".

He wonders why there is no mention of missionaries Francis Xavier Gsell and Wilbur Chaseling, who each recalled being told that planting food in the ground was a pity and ridiculous. Or the Warlpiri women who have recorded their stories of desert life and the trauma of early European contact, with no mention of agriculture. Or the

colonial “castaways” who lived inside traditional Aboriginal communities, including the convict William Buckley, who wrote of a people who “kept up the old fancy of wandering about”, and the castaway Narcisse Pelletier, who lived with Cape York people beyond the frontier for 17 years and was recorded as stating: “No one plants and no one sows”; “They seldom stay long in one place”; and “It would seem that these tribes spend their lives in hunting, fishing, and fighting, and never attempt any kind of cultivation.”

And if Aboriginal people were farmers as Pascoe contends, Sutton asks, where is the evidence for it in Aboriginal languages, as there is evidence in Torres Strait languages? “If, as he says, they traditionally hoed and tilled and ploughed the earth, made gardens, selected and sowed seed or planted tubers, irrigated their crops, reaped the results and stored them, and thus were farmers on farms doing farming, should he not have tried to demonstrate that these categories and terms were present in at least some of the approximately 260 distinct languages of Australia in 1788?”

Aboriginal people knew about farmers, Sutton and Walshe write, from their trading interactions with Torres Strait gardeners and Macassans and Baijini from the Indies, but chose not to emulate them, for reasons that were cultural as well as practical. Economics without religion was “inconceivable” to the Old People, they write. “Gathering and hunting and fishing were not just economics: they were the Law.”

“In contrast to the picture conveyed by *Dark Emu*, the greater part of Aboriginal traditional methods of reproducing plant and animal species was not through physical cultivation or conservation but through spiritual propagation,” Sutton writes. “This included speaking to the spirits of ancestors at resource sites, carrying out ‘increase rituals’ at special species-related sites, singing resource species songs in ceremonies, maintaining rich systems of totems for various species that were found in the countries of the totem-holders, and handling food resources with reverence ... A secularised notion of Aboriginal cultivation, devoid of spiritual dimensions, did not exist in Australia before conquest.”

The decision to not adopt horticulture and agriculture was not a failure of the imagination, Sutton writes, “but an active championing and protection of their own way of life and, when in contact with outsiders, a resistance to an alien economic pattern”.

Pondering why ***Dark Emu*** was so well received, Sutton and Walshe write that its success appears to indicate a profound lack of knowledge about Aboriginal people and history, “or an unconcern with facts and truth themselves, or a combination of these things”. Whichever, they say, “the situation is troubling”. Sutton tells *Good Weekend* he believes reading and accepting *Dark Emu* has become a search for “moral recovery” for some white Australians of goodwill. Walshe says it has become something like “a pilgrimage”. They also question why no one asked Aboriginal people still connected to traditional practices, or anthropologists, whether 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. "Nor do members of the media appear to have spoken to any of the anthropological specialists who have learned from Aboriginal authorities and from the vast literature on their traditional ways of life ... This journalistic abandonment of the academy, if that is what it is, seems to be symptomatic of a break from the past – a past in which professional knowledge and lay knowledge were more distinct, and the distinction more respected. The authority of the academy has slipped. Much worse than that, the authority of Aboriginal knowledge-holders has been ignored yet again."

In a foreword to *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?* Wiradjuri archaeologist Kellie Pollard from Charles Darwin University writes that Sutton and Walshe "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."

Sutton dedicates *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?* to Enkidu and Gilgamesh – the first, in ancient Mesopotamian legend, a free-roaming man of the hills and forests, the offspring of silence, and the other a cruel king, two-thirds divine – who came, after conflict, to love one another. When Enkidu died, the grief of Gilgamesh knew no bounds. Sutton has returned often to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which was written at a time when Neolithic farmers were displacing, absorbing, and probably in many cases killing, hunter-gatherers. He sees in it, he says, "the birth of reconcilement".