

What is Indigenous knowledge and who has it? Tim Rowse reviews Peter Sutton and Keryn Walshe's critique of Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu*

The teller and the tale

There's no mystery about the strong sales of Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu* and its sequel for younger readers, *Young Dark Emu: A Truer History*. They have helped articulate a desire among non-Indigenous Australians who love their country to credit Indigenous Australians with its foundation.

At least, this seems to be Pascoe's appeal. The back cover of the second edition of *Dark Emu* carries Pascoe's invitation to buy, read and admire. "If we look at the evidence presented to us by the explorers," he writes, "and explain to our children that Aboriginal people *did* build houses, *did* build dams, *did* sow, irrigate and till the land, *did* alter the course of rivers, *did* sew their clothes, and *did* construct a system of pan-continental government and generated peace and prosperity, then it is likely we will admire and love our land all the more."

The repeated, emphatic "did" hints at Pascoe's belief that in allowing the reader to look at evidence of Aboriginal people's constructive behaviour he is undoing a

history of suppression or neglect that has stopped Australians from knowing that Aboriginal people practised agriculture. To position oneself as revealing obscured or suppressed truth is powerfully to befriend the reader; that appeal is intensified if the stated aim is to deepen the reader's bond with "our land."

Irresistible? In 2016 *Dark Emu* won both the Indigenous Writer's Prize and Book of the Year in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards; in two other competitions it made the short list. *Young Dark Emu* won the Australian Booksellers Association's Children's Book of the Year and the Children's Book Council of Australia's Eve Pownall Award for Information Books, and was short-listed in four other competitions. A teaching resource book, *Dark Emu in the Classroom*, has also been published.

Now two academics, anthropologist Peter Sutton and archaeologist Keryn Walshe, have called *Dark Emu* into question. In their new book *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers? The Dark Emu Debate* — of which Sutton wrote eleven chapters

and Walshe two — they argue that Pascoe's reading of the evidence has been determined by his firm belief that Aboriginal people gave birth to agriculture. They draw attention to many instances of Pascoe's minimising or ignoring evidence that "the Old People" (as Sutton respectfully calls them) were hunters and gatherers, and emphasising evidence of what he sees as "agricultural" elements of their economy and society: grouped and durable dwellings, food storage, grain harvesting. Pascoe has graciously welcomed Sutton and Walshe's critique.

In some respects, Pascoe and his two critics converge. To smash the orthodoxy (as he presents it) that Aboriginal people were nomadic, Pascoe describes them as "more or less sedentary" and as "sedentary or semi-sedentary." Sutton embraces "semi-sedentary" (erroneously remarking that "semi-sedentary is not mentioned in *Dark Emu*") and goes on to cite many instances of academic and popular works published since 1938 that characterise pre-colonial mobility in that way: people foraged within a range of inti-

mately known country, sometimes stayed for long periods in one camp, and even built structures that they could leave and return to find intact.

What Sutton and Walshe question is whether this was an agricultural society. They chip away at so many parts of Pascoe's thesis that it is, in my opinion, demolished. To give but one example, in his chapter "The Explorers' Records" Sutton cites evidence that Pascoe could have mentioned but chose not to. He compares Pascoe's quotations from the explorers' records with his own, longer quotations — exposing Pascoe's tendency to omit words that cast doubt on his view that explorers were reporting what they observed as agricultural practices.

The intellectual combat is not as straightforward as this in every chapter. Sometimes the reader must work harder and make choices. For example, Walshe, an archaeologist, devotes eleven pages to considering a small number of stone implements housed in Australian museums. They demand her consideration on the basis that, according to Pascoe, they are "crucial to our understanding of Aboriginal agricultural history."

Inviting the reader to look "with an open mind" at these tools that he believes could have been hoes for tilling soil, Pascoe laments that they have been little studied. Walshe's approach is not to say they have not been used as hoes but to ask why anyone should believe that they were. She begins by pointing out that these objects *have* been studied — as "picks" and "cylcons." Documented Aboriginal testimony points to cylcons being

Bruce Pascoe on his property near Mallacoota in November last year.

Justin McManus/
The Age

Tim Rowse is an Emeritus Professorial Fellow in the Institute for Culture and Society at the University of Western Sydney. His books include *Indigenous and Other Australians* (1991) and *New South* (2017).

used in ceremonies to maintain the land's fecundity. Picks (strided since the 1940s) are likely to have been used when haffed — that is, as an axe-head — for breaking open timber. If such items are “crucial” evidence of agriculture, as Pascoe declares in *Dark Emu*, then Walshe has effectively questioned this particular “crux.”

For Pascoe and those devoted to his thesis, though, this might not be enough. His mind open to a new interpretation of the picks, Pascoe (teamed with historian Bill Gammage and Indigenous artist Jonathan Jones) hosted a museum exhibition, *Bunha-bunhangga: Aboriginal Agriculture in the South-East*, whose catalogue declares that the picks were “used to cultivate the murrnong [yam] fields” — speculation presented as fact.

Walshe's eleven pages on cylcons and picks confront readers with a choice. Do we continue to warm to Pascoe's speculation (ignoring the extant scientific literature as an artefact of benighted scholarship), or do we accept that we just don't know how Aboriginal people used these objects? Can the available research show that they were *never* used as hoes, we might ask.

Pascoe, inviting us to believe in a might-have-been that no one can disprove, is answered by Sutton and Walshe, asking why anyone should believe a proposition that lacks supporting evidence. Walshe's cool presentation of what is known about the use of these objects will leave some readers... well, cold. The idea that picks and cylcons were hoes solicits readers who feel that Aboriginal people would be more admirable if they could be shown to be not so very different from us. Many readers will want to make that commitment.

Pascoe and his two critics differ not only in their marshalling of evidence but also in their



Framing the argument:

anthropologist Peter Sutton with one of the doors painted by a

group of artists for the Yuendumu School, on the

Pascoe's invitation to revise and renew our view of Aboriginal civilisation, and Sutton and Walshe's challenge

that Aboriginal people were more admirable for being agricultural suggests that cultural relativism has not yet undermined social evolution in popular thinking about human history.

The second of Sutton's fundamental objections to Pascoe is that in his materialist conception of “economy” he can't conceive that the Old People's persistence in hunting and gathering entailed their intellectual and spiritual rejection of agriculture. Here we should note that in this book, as in his previous book, *The Politics of Suffering*, it is clear that Sutton's field work on Cape York formed him ethically and intellectually.

In the 1970s Sutton lived on Cape York with groups collectively known as the Wilk. There his teachers explained how vital to human existence it was to talk to “country” in quotidian action and in ceremony. Recounting that learning, Sutton then combines his own observations of Wilk on country with reports made by other researchers to argue that what we call an “economy” has been, for the Old People, a spiritualised practice; they understand “country” as imbued with spirits consubstantial with the humans who live off it.

The getting of food enacts an ontology that we have learned to call “the Dreaming.” In what Sutton calls “spiritual propagation” and “spiritual gardening,” the fertility of the biota is understood to be inherent, maintained by living off and with it. Pascoe's preoccupation with “maternal methods of species cultivation” briefly acknowledges this spiritual dimension but fails to understand its significance: it was a way of seeing nature to which agricultural improvement was irrelevant. To issue this corrective to Pascoe's “modern Eurocentric attitude” is what Sutton believes he owes his teachers.

So, what is at stake? Melbourne University Press chose the title *Emu* on a

another bestselling author, Benjamin Kidd. In 1894 Kidd achieved high sales and several translations by arguing in *Social Evolution* that it was natural for simple societies to die out when they came in contact with the more complex society that now occupied their country. Pascoe's pertinent message would have been that Aboriginal society was more

Pascoe and his two critics differ not only in their marshalling of evidence but also in their imagined readerships. Much of the Sutton and Walshe book assumes a reader who thinks that a proposition lacking supporting evidence is probably not true. Pascoe's work is often an explicit appeal to readers willing to reconsider orthodoxy, positioning them as victims of colonists' self-justifying hunter-gatherer myth, ready now to see that Aboriginal people were really agriculturalists. In his own words, Pascoe aims "to give rise to the possibility of an alternative view of pre-colonial Aboriginal society," a flattering invitation to Australians' desire for self-renewal.

Sutton is aware that Pascoe's readers have feelings, that they may be searching "for forgiveness, or reconciliation, or the undoing of the colonial crimes of their forebears," and that this may dispose them to welcome Pascoe's explicit invitation to a new way of seeing. One of Sutton's responses is to argue that Pascoe's self-proclaimed iconoclasm is spurious, as much in *Dark Emu* has been said before. That Aboriginal people were "ecological agents" – changing the landforms and biota as they lived from them – has been accepted by researchers for many years. By setting fire to the country and by digging edible flora out of the ground (thus overturning soil) and planting the inedible portion back in the hole, hunter-gatherers had a "profound effect on the distribution of forest and grassland," wrote Norman Tindale in 1959. Tindale even used the term "proto-agriculture" in a 1974 publication to refer to evidence that Aboriginal people sometimes stored food in excess of immediate requirements. (Sutton is critical of that term's implied view that agriculture would have been a forward step from hunting and gathering.) A book called *Resource Managers: North American and Australian Hunter-Gatherers* came out in 1982, with Sutton as co-author of one chapter. Such examples (and Sutton gives more) tell us of academic, not popular,

view of Aboriginal civilisation, and Sutton and Walshe's challenge, make clear that Indigenous knowledge takes many forms.

acceptance of the idea that Aboriginal people were canny and intentional manipulators of nature. Pascoe's position as revealer of neglected or suppressed truth could still be justified by saying that he is the first to disseminate esoteric research on Aboriginal people's ecological agency. Sutton challenges that as well, pointing to several popularising books and audiovisual projects since the 1970s that have celebrated the ecological agency of pre-colonial Aboriginal society. What Pascoe learned as a child in the 1950s, he says, is not what the Australian public has been learning in recent years.

But Sutton's strongest disagreements with Pascoe are less about evidence than about what he sees as two major flaws in how he frames his argument in *Dark Emu*. First, Pascoe implicitly endorses an outmoded theory of human history known as "social evolution." And second, he has not understood Aboriginal people's comprehensively spiritual understanding of their world.

"Social evolution" was the gift of Scottish Enlightenment thinkers who argued that the manifold variety in human societies arose from the fact that some societies had progressed faster than others through a series of civilisational stages that all human societies could and would traverse. The orthodox British colonial view that Pascoe seeks to overturn was that Aboriginal society was a real-life example of humanity still functioning at the most primitive stage – living by hunting and gathering.

Had Pascoe published *Dark Emu* 120 years earlier his foil would have been

Painted by a group of artists for the Yuendumu School, on the edge of the Tanami Desert. David Martiniel/The Age

came in contact with the more complex society that now occupied their country. Pascoe's pertinent message would have been that Aboriginal society was more complex than merely "hunter-gatherer." It was in "marked movement towards agricultural reliance"; it was "burgeoning agriculture" – an economy worthy of more respect.

"In denying the existence of the economy," Pascoe writes in *Dark Emu*, "[the British] were denying the right of the people to their land, and fabricating the excuse that is at the heart of Australia's claim to legitimacy today." By emphasising how agricultural the Aboriginal people really were, *Dark Emu* seeks to reimagine Indigenous Australians as dispossessed sovereigns and to undermine non-Indigenous Australians' assurance that, by colonising Aboriginal people, Britain was enacting humanity's natural progression.

Sutton needs no convincing that Australia's history is a story of colonial conquest and usurpation, but he objects strongly to Pascoe's way of questioning Australia's "legitimacy." The "most fundamental flaw" of *Dark Emu*, he writes, is that it implicitly endorses the social evolutionists' scale of human value: by seeking to redescribe the Old People as agriculturalists it has conceded too much to the idea that agriculture is a higher stage than hunting and gathering. Sutton urges us to admire the Old People for what they were rather than for what, in Pascoe's view, they were becoming.

Sutton's plea for the inherent worth of the hunter-gatherer way of life (and implicitly, for the right of the Old People and their descendants to assert their unceded sovereignty) is a product of "cultural relativism." In the "human sciences," cultural relativism began to replace social evolution in the second decade of the twentieth century. It has been axiomatic for the research community on whose works Sutton and Walshe rely, and it has been buttressed, since the 1940s, by emerging international law concepts such as the right of "peoples" to "self-determination." Popular assent to Pascoe's assumption

"modern Eurocentric attitude" is what Sutton believes he owes his teachers.

So, what is at stake? Melbourne University Press chose the title *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?* In *Dark Emu* Pascoe hints at discomfort with that stark binary: "Arguing over whether the Aboriginal economy was a hunter-gatherer system or one of burgeoning agriculture is not the central issue." Rather unhelpfully, he explains: "The crucial point is that we have never discussed it as a nation." The two sentences work against each other: why would the nation discuss "it" if "it" is not "the central issue"?

In my view, beyond the (undoubtedly important) issue of how to describe pre-colonial Aboriginal society is an issue of contemporary civics: how to respect "Indigenous knowledge" in a way that meets the Uluru Statement's demand for "truth-telling." To respect and include Indigenous knowledge we need some way to identify what it is. Pascoe's invitation to revise and renew our view of Aboriginal civilisation, and Sutton and Walshe's challenge make clear that Indigenous knowledge takes many forms.

Pascoe is probably Australia's most widely read and influential Aboriginal intellectual (with Stan Grant a possible rival) and he is likely to remain so because of schools' take-up of *Dark Emu*. Yet his Indigenous knowledge is enriched, or burdened, with borrowings from the colonists' intellectual traditions: from the Enlightenment the notion that some societies are "ahead" of others (see page 70 of *Young Dark Emu*), and from secular social science his materialist framing of "economy." Sutton and Walshe are not Indigenous, but they have spent years training to re-present Indigenous knowledge in terms that are scientifically credible because (unlike "the Dreaming") their accounts are open to refutation. Truth-telling's best hope is to keep in mind the distinction between teller and tale. •

Peter Sutton and Keryn Walshe's *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?* The *Dark Emu Debate* is published by Melbourne University Press.

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