

Until quite recently, Australia's history was written as if Indigenous people barely mattered. In the past 50 years, however, as Indigenous people have demanded political rights and compensation for what was taken from them, history has played a crucial role in deepening our understanding.

The writing of Henry Reynolds and others looked again at the accounts of early contact with Indigenous people left by white explorers and pioneers. They compared these with Indigenous oral histories handed down over generations. They supplemented this evidence with modern archaeological, linguistic and environmental techniques.

The picture that has emerged is that white settlers had to conquer the continent from Indigenous owners in bitter frontier wars that lasted decades and that, even under British common law of the time, Indigenous people had rights to the land. This led, in the 1990s, to the Mabo and Wik High Court decisions, which overturned the fiction of *terra nullius* used to deny those rights. Along with the Bringing them Home report into the stolen generations in 1997, the High Court's decisions were watershed moments in re-evaluating Australia's history and confronting the past.

These historical discoveries triggered a fierce backlash from some right-wing commentators and politicians.

This history war smouldered for decades but it took a new turn in 2014 when **Bruce Pascoe** published *Dark Emu*. In it, Professor Pascoe, drawing on his own research and the work of other scholars, took aim at those who dismissed pre-colonial Indigenous society as primitive nomads. He assembled evidence from around the country showing that Indigenous people harvested native grasses, conducted controlled burns of grassland, built permanent housing and constructed elaborate stone fish traps. He said Indigenous people practised sophisticated, settled agriculture.

The book's popularity and critical success antagonised the right, which saw it as a challenge to the technological superiority that justified white settlement. Some in the academic world also queried his use of sources, accusing him of exaggerating and embellishing his work.

These questions have now been given prominence in a new book, *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?* The Dark Emu Debate, in which respected anthropologist Peter Sutton and archaeologist Keryn Walshe claim Professor Pascoe's work is "littered with unsourced material", uses selective quotations and exaggerates "weak evidence". This is not a right-wing criticism that devalues Indigenous stewardship of country. In fact, one of the problems they have with Professor Pascoe's work is his implied acceptance of the old-fashioned hierarchy that puts agriculture higher up the chain of human development than hunter-gathering.

Professor Pascoe responded to their criticisms by putting them down to "differences of opinion" about the facts and welcomed the debate. The precise balance in the pre-contact Indigenous economy between settled agriculture and more nomadic hunter-gathering is indeed a fascinating

subject for academic debate and the pendulum may have swung too far.

But the difference of opinion should not obscure the fundamental truth that Indigenous people occupied this land for millennia before white settlement and used their ingenuity to exploit its resources sustainably. Nothing in this debate should encourage those who want to hold back Indigenous empowerment or denigrate their unique, creative and central role in our history.

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