

# Dark Emu ‘hoax’: takedown reveals the emperor has no clothes

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*There is much terrible irony in Dark Emu’s struggle to shoehorn classical Aboriginal Australia into the supposedly advanced world of agriculture.” - Peter Sutton*

Can the **Dark Emu** scandal be explained by the fact that Australians seem inordinately susceptible to a good old-fashioned literary hoax? From the infamous Ern Malley affair through to Norma Khouri and Helen Demidenko, we seem to have an appetite for being misled. There are examples in the Aboriginal world, too. Ian Carmen, a white taxidriver from Adelaide, posed as a Pitjantjatjara survivor of the Stolen Generation, Wanda Koolmatrie, to write an “autobiography” called *My Own Sweet Time*. This book was used as a text for the NSW Higher Schools certificate curriculum.

In 2014, Bruce Pascoe, exhibiting zeal and showmanship, produced a book that has now sold more than 260,000 copies. Surprise, it says that we Indigenous Australians are more like white people, and therefore, somehow, more sophisticated than “mere” hunter-gatherers.

Well thanks, but no thanks.

Pascoe’s thesis went entirely against my lived experience, learning as a child to the “summer” and “winter” camps of my mother’s people. They moved to the Barrington Mountains, even in snow, for fatter game and thicker furs, and returned to the coast for the mullet runs in spring, feasting and meeting with other groups. The bunya bunya from the giant cones in the bunya tree, and the huge mulloway my grandfather caught, kept the family alive during the Depression. As a family, they moved out over country whenever they could for berries, fish, oysters and pippis.

These stories were a joyful reaffirming of proud hunting and gathering tradition.

Then came Dark Emu, and suddenly Aboriginal experience and pride in our culture was being subsumed by a tsunami of misguided appreciation for Aboriginal people as farmers. My

grandfather had a thinly disguised, humorous contempt for farmers. No proud hunter has animals following him around.

Now, seven years on, at last, we have the scrupulous, muscular take-down of Dark Emu. Professor Peter Sutton and Dr Keryn Walshe have written a very accessible book about Aboriginal cultural life, with Sutton taking responsibility for the first 11 chapters on anthropology, and Walshe the last two, on archaeology.

Their important book, **Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers: The Dark Emu Debate**, is organised to directly address issues raised by Pascoe. It is also a meticulously referenced defence of the disciplines of anthropology and archaeology that have come to hold the knowledge of Aboriginal people. Sutton alone acknowledges 59 major Aboriginal cultural mentors, language and bushcraft teachers from 19 different locations in the Northern Territory, Queensland and South Australia, and there are many more from his fieldwork since 1970.

The anthropology of Australian Aboriginal people is his life's work.

By contrast, Pascoe relied on white explorers' journals. These sources are extremely out of touch with living Aboriginal worlds.

Sutton is recognised as the most knowledgeable of all native title anthropologists. He argues convincingly for Aboriginal agency in the discipline, saying the deep and enduring respect between Aboriginal people and European anthropologists has shaped Australian anthropology.

His book also represents a defence of the academy, and its community of scholars. The acknowledgments include the names of more than 40 colleagues who looked at and advised on parts of the manuscript; three anonymous reviewers, engaged by Melbourne University Press, also examined the text.

The result is a masterful book paying deep respect to the academy, the discipline, and the agency of Aboriginal people in archaeology and anthropology.

This book too is a defence of Aboriginal people as hunters and gatherers; as nomads; as a dignified and highly intelligent, spiritual people, who don't need to be and have no wish to be farmers or horticulturalists. What is more advanced – living in such a way that the environment always provides what you need in terms of food and water, or interfering with that system of food production in order to plant and propagate? Pascoe has assumed that the second is more advanced. Some might say they are just different. I would choose the former, not just for the

lightness of its ecological tread but also because of the strength of the more equitable social relations this system fosters.

And the beauty of this way of life.

Aboriginal culture is different from modernist (western) materialist lives in every possible way. Consider these examples, from Australian anthropologist John Bradley, who spent years working alongside Indigenous Australians, and who is quoted in Sutton and Walshe's new book: "In many respects the Yanyuwa and Garrwa peoples do not see themselves as managers of the environment, but rather as peoples who are in constant apprehension and negotiation with it, following the Law established during the formative activities of the Dreaming." Sutton further says: "Centres of what some would call 'natural abundance' are often given a special term in Australian languages, although the category 'natural' is foreign to Aboriginal tradition, given that everything is designed by the Dreaming ... While one might metaphorically call these places 'gardens', they are not sown plots, and they are not human creations".

Reading this book you find much more of this information, leading the reader into a deeper understanding of this other world.

Sutton and Walshe argue that *Dark Emu* includes unsourced material, is poorly researched, exaggerates many points, selectively emphasises evidence to suit those opinions, and ignores information that does not support the author's opinions.

Can it be called a work of scholarship? Did Magabala Press put *Dark Emu* through a peer review process before publication?

Several academics including Sutton have said they thought the book would "blow over" but in the seventh year of its release it suddenly started to grip the public's imagination, and it is now, to the dismay of many Indigenous and other academics, being taught in schools, and in 2016, it won the Book of the Year Award and the NSW Premier's Indigenous History Award.

This beggars belief.

Anthropology has been described as the "handmaiden" of colonial powers. Now Professor Sutton is the "midwife" as he puts it, to "the rebirthing of tradition in conjunction with Aboriginal people". There is no doubt that anthropology has developed into an irreplaceable tool for Aboriginal rights and interests. All the state and commonwealth acts that provide Aboriginal people with contact with their lands, enacted in all states and territories except Western Australia

in the last four decades – and the Commonwealth Native Title Act (1993) – rely heavily on the expertise of anthropologists. They provide evidence for expert reports, litigation, dispute management, mediation of conflicting claims and compensation. Sutton takes seriously the contemporary responsibility of the profession – to record and preserve the testimony of Aboriginal “rules for belonging” to country.

Pascoe’s polemical style indicates that he wrote his book *against* something. Was he trying to overturn more than a century of scholarship? Or does his book serve a different, even more dangerous purpose? Dark Emu writes Aboriginal people into the white Australian racist monoculture, making “them” comfortably just like “other Australians” (ie: white people). This removes the danger posed by true difference, true belonging and thus the sovereignty of Aboriginal people. And it segues perfectly with the current penchant among white Australians for adopting an Aboriginal identity, which they can then distort to fit their own agendas.

Sutton has explained why he invited Keryn Walshe to write two chapters that cover the debate over stone utensils for farming – because he is “no archaeologist”.

I recently watched Pascoe on a YouTube video “anointing” the artist Jonathon Jones as an archaeologist as he found some implements in a museum storeroom he thinks could have been used by way of a plough. This is showmanship.

Since the publication of *Farmers or Hunter-gatherers: the Dark Emu Debate*, the Emperor has no clothes. There are many people scrambling for a semblance of cover, including high-level politicians, many journalists and sundry social media self-styled experts, many of whom, it is easy to suspect, have not read either book.

*Farmers or Hunter-gatherers? The Dark Emu Debate* by Peter Sutton and Keryn Walshe (University of Melbourne Press, Nonfiction, 264pp, \$34.99). Victoria Grieve-Williams is Warraimaay from the mid-north coast of NSW. She is an adjunct professor at RMIT University, and a widely published historian, whose works include *Aboriginal Spirituality: Aboriginal Philosophy and the Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal People*.