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‘Black armbands or white picket fences’: debating the Dark Emu divide



By [Konrad Marshall](#)

Updated June 12, 2021 – 2.03pm, first published at 4.59am

The publishing sensation *Dark Emu* rewrote our understanding of Indigenous history when it was published in 2014, but accordingly to a pair of veteran academics in the field, there is little real evidence for many of author Bruce Pascoe's grander claims.

Indeed, a new book by veteran anthropologist Peter Sutton and archaeologist Keryn Walsche — *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers: The Dark Emu Debate* (released by Melbourne University Press next week) — argues that Pascoe's book in fact *devalues* pre-colonial Aboriginal society. In claiming, for instance, that our First Nations people lived in villages of thousands, or built stone houses, or sowed fields of crops, or might have been the world's first bakers, it fails as a work of scholarship and dangerously emphasises the values of “ingenuity, sophistication and creativity”.

Explains Sutton: “That's the culture of cleverness, invention, change — constant change — a boredom with constancy. Aboriginal societies were the opposite of that. They highly valued the continuing reproduction of what had gone before.”

The highly respected Sutton — who has spent half a century working with “the Old People” and studying Indigenous culture — was speaking on the latest episode of *Good Weekend Talks*, along with freelance writer Stuart Rintoul, who wrote this week's cover story: “Debunking Dark Emu: Taking aim at a publishing phenomenon”.

Rintoul, who last year wrote *Lowitja*, an authorised biography of Indigenous leader Lowitja O'Donoghue, believes *Dark Emu* took off in part because reading and accepting the book became an act of “moral recovery” for white Australians of goodwill.

With moderation from *Good Weekend* deputy editor Greg Callaghan, the discussion also turned to how the book became — perhaps inevitably — another line in the culture wars. One that's divided people into different camps, the “black armbands or white picket fences”, according to Rintoul.

“It's become a touchstone for the left, and a lightning rod for the right,” he explains. “I think this is why people have been so reluctant to question *Dark Emu*, and so quick to embrace it as well.”

Both men are quick to point out that *Dark Emu* has done a great service in reviving interest in Indigenous culture and lore. “The trouble is, it's awakened a lot of interest on the basis of something that's fairly riddled with factual errors,” says Sutton, “and repairing that is going to be a major job.”

For the full feature story, see *Good Weekend*, or visit [The Sydney Morning Herald](#), [The Age](#) and [Brisbane Times](#).



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