


Dark Emu overshadows the truth

EDITORIAL

By **EDITORIAL**

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Dark Emu is the speculative book by the genial Bruce Pascoe, which has had extraordinary popular success. Dark Emu has been promoted as the secret history revealing the unguessed sophistication of Indigenous farmers long before James Cook fiddled with a sextant.

The book has been debunked by critics; they say the evidence doesn't support the story it tells. Readers may recall Nyunggai Warren Mundine's review last year of a new book, *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers? The Dark Emu Debate*, by anthropologist Peter Sutton and archaeologist Keryn Walshe. In Friday's newspaper we report that the Sutton-Walshe work has been added to an optional resource list for Victorian history teachers to use in the classroom as a counterweight to Dark Emu, also on the list. It would have been better for Dark Emu not to find its way into the classroom, where it could mislead both teachers and students. But at least a solid critique is also on offer. It is to be hoped that teachers encourage their students to read it.

There is nothing wrong with imaginative flights of fancy in book form. Critics can chase down footnotes, poke holes in reasoning and hold up inconvenient evidence that has been ignored. All this has been done with Dark Emu. For the reading public to refuse to give up the illusion of an Indigenous squattocracy is one thing; for institutions to give this narrative their imprimatur is quite another.

Pascoe has been given the title enterprise professor in Indigenous agriculture by the University of Melbourne. His book took out the 2016 Indigenous Writers' Prize in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards. Young Dark Emu (for the kids) was gonged by the Children's Book Council of Australia.

Careful scrutiny of Pascoe's thesis has had little effect because it reaches an audience galvanised by identity politics. For them, *Dark Emu* tells a story that empowers Indigenous people, that celebrates their mastery. Unfortunately, it's a backhanded compliment because it suggests Indigenous people weren't good enough as hunter-gatherers, that to be valued they had to be moved up the civilisational hierarchy to farmer status.

This kind of thinking sets Australian history back many decades. The clue is in the title of Geoffrey Blainey's 1976 book, *Triumph of the Nomads*. His contribution was to popularise a new wave of academic work seeking to understand, in its own terms, the achievement of hunter-gatherer Indigenous people in a harsh land. *Dark Emu* casts a shadow over that truth.