

Pascoe has ‘no problem’ with critique of Dark Emu on history list

EXCLUSIVE

By ANGELICA SNOWDEN, JOURNALIST

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Bruce Pascoe says he has no problem with a critique of his acclaimed book, Dark Emu, being added to a Victorian history resource list for students.

Professor Pascoe told The Weekend Australian he was not concerned the latest challenge to his work – Farmers or hunter-gatherers? The Dark Emu debate by anthropologist Peter Sutton and archaeologist Keryn Walshe – had been included as an optional resource for Victorian students studying Australian History alongside his own work.

“It’s a book and I don’t burn books. I have no problem with it,” he said. “The curriculum should be designed so it is open ended, especially in history. There shouldn’t be an accepted view. We should be asking kids to make up their own minds. That’s why I’m not afraid of Sutton’s book.

“It’s just an opinion. It’s just a book. I’m too old to take offence.

“I’m working with and for my Aboriginal community.”

It was revealed on Friday that Prof Sutton and Dr Walshe’s work was endorsed by Victoria’s curriculum chiefs and included on a list of resources for the VCE subject area “from custodianship to the Anthropocene (60,000 BCE-1901)”.

Dark Emu argues that the economy and culture of Indigenous Australians before European conquest has been undervalued, and that journals and diaries of explorers revealed “a much more complicated Aboriginal economy than the primitive hunter-gatherer lifestyle we had

been told was the simple lot of Australia's First People”.

Prof Sutton and Dr Walshe argue Prof Pascoe is “broadly wrong”, that pre-European conquest Indigenous Australians were “hunter-gatherers-plus”.

Prof Pascoe said he never claimed Aboriginal people were “absolutely” farmers, rather that they engaged in food gathering practices which were in some cases more like farming than hunter-gathering.

“(In the book) I was acknowledging the fact that Aboriginal people were harvesting grain, processing it, storing it and cooking with it,” he said.

Responding to the critique he over relied on journals by explorers, Prof Pascoe said Australians had used those documents for years to understand their history, but were “unaware of much of the content”. In *Dark Emu*, he said that content included references to Aboriginal people building dams and wells, irrigating, harvesting seed and preserving the surplus. He argues this demonstrates the “complicated Aboriginal economy” and shows Aboriginal people were not nomadic hunter-gatherers.

“(Dark Emu) was an exposition of what is already on the public record, but not included in our educational or public life,” he said.

“(Prof Sutton) thinks I'm relying on old fashioned ethnography but until Australia is aware of the true history of this country, the true nature of the Aboriginal economy, we have to make ... broad brush comparisons.

“This is not a black or a white argument. This is an Australian argument.”

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