

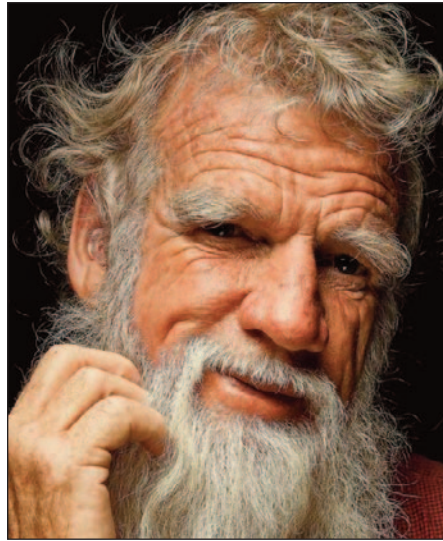
Darker side to Dark Emu

By ROGER FRYER

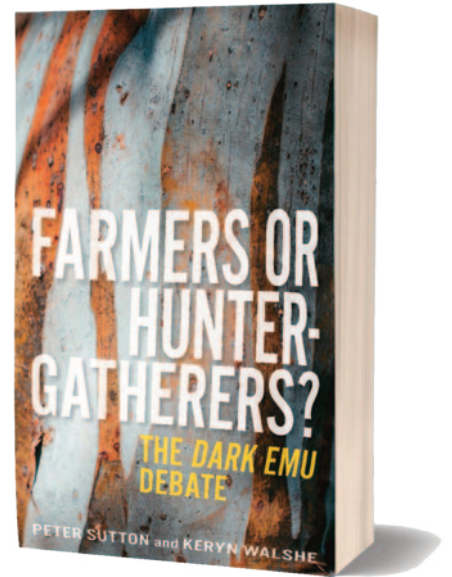
TWO YEARS AGO I reviewed Bruce Pascoe's book *Dark Emu*, which provided evidence that pre-contact Aboriginal tribes showed examples of civilisation and agriculture, with fish traps, cultivated yam fields, extensive aqueducts and large earth-home villages.

Like his predecessor Bill Gamage who in *The Biggest Estate on Earth* revealed that the first settlers found an Australia of park-like landscapes maintained sensitively and aesthetically by Aboriginal burning, Pascoe poured over colonial literature to discover previously ignored recordings of Aboriginal people building dams and digging wells, planting, irrigating and harvesting seed, preserving the surplus and storing it in houses, sheds or secure vessels, creating elaborate cemeteries and building large mud houses in villages for several hundred inhabitants.

The premise being that this proved that Aboriginal society was more "advanced" than we had given them credit for. A trusting soul, I didn't question the evidence but added a warning that Pascoe risked being



Bruce Pascoe.

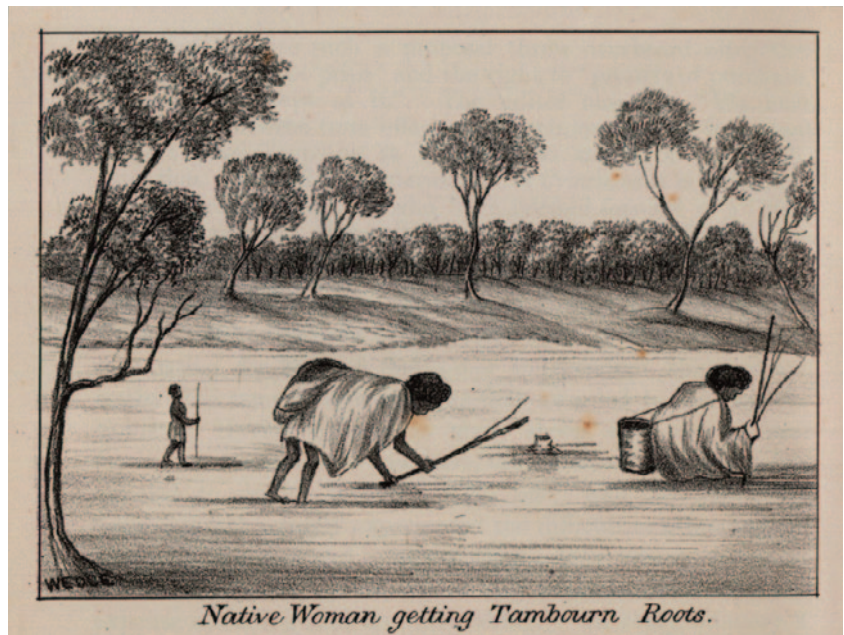


caught in a cultural cringe trap by assuming a pre-agriculture hunter-gatherer lifestyle was not sophisticated. At the time I seemed a voice in the wilderness. *Dark Emu* became a publishing sensation, won several awards and Pascoe went on to become a Professor in Indigenous Agriculture at Melbourne University.

Now, a coalition of highly qualified archaeologists and academics has challenged, not only Pascoe's views but also the truth of his "evidence". A new book by veteran anthropologist Peter Sutton and archaeologist

Keryn Walsche, *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers: The Dark Emu Debate* (Melbourne University Press), argues that Pascoe's book in fact devalues pre-colonial Aboriginal society.

The authors denounce Pascoe: "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."



WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

IT DOESN'T seem so important to Pascoe, who is not an academic but a writer, so questions about the integrity of his research may improve sales of his books, rather than being career-destroying.

In his own words: "We're looking at the same facts and we're having a difference of opinion ... That's not a bad thing. I think Aboriginal people have been wanting to have this discussion for 250 years, so I think it can only be positive."

Apart from the injury it does to true hunter-gatherers, implying that settling down and farming is an advancement by people who, after all, had the same brain capacity and a far longer history to absorb knowledge of their world, it is shocking to see experts and institutions wooed into accepting this argument without question as new "woke" culture.

It's almost embarrassing to think that Pascoe actually misses the point, and that he would rather congratulate the First Nations for achieving a pale imitation of their usurpers than be in awe of the deep and profound intimacy they may have had for their country, environment and, indeed, their place in the universe.



The danger lies in the nuances this brings to wider discussions about society, affecting problems like the cost of home ownership.

Just like the issues of homelessness and Indigenous housing, they are problems government, without admitting it, and willingly shackled by vested interest, cannot solve. Like climate change, they are problems driven by increasing population against a finite resource — land.

Broader society, particularly the arts, have more freedom to explore alternatives. Hence the success of the movie *Nomads-land* in the recent Academy Awards.

Is it necessary to "own" a home? Can we have shelter and security without exclusive possession? Can we be recompensed for improvements if we move on? Why can't

renters have pets? Why won't banks lend to casual workers? How is it that our continent with its vast open spaces has become an "investment" for the already wealthy to the impoverishment of a whole generation?

Analysis of the history of transition from hunter-gatherer to farmer gives perspective to the definition of home "ownership" which may free us from being locked into the present paradigm which is dangerously overloaded, highlighting the tendency of capital, under population pressure, including and most importantly exclusive property, to create a hierarchy with rich at the top exploiting those below. How easily democracy is flipped.

It reminds me of two graffiti I have never forgotten: *Subvert the dominant paradigm;* and *Eat the Rich!*